Richard Hoggart: My father’s legacy

This is an edited and expanded text of a talk given at ‘In the footsteps of giants: Remembering Stuart Hall, Richard Hoggart and John Tulloch’, the annual conference of the Institute of Communication Ethics, held at the Front-line Club, London, on Friday 24 October 2014. The material is largely personal and anecdotal, drawn from a lifetime of conversations, rather than scholarly or academic. However, I have sought to address some broader issues too. These include the various areas of my father’s influence: the effect of the autobiographical writing in _The uses of literacy_; the relative value of his English ‘left-Leavisite’ approach as opposed to cultural analysis influenced by continental, especially late Marxist theory; his various roles in public life and his long-standing mistrust of commercial populism.

Keywords: Richard Hoggart, scholarship boys, Cultural Studies, public intellectuals, Stuart Hall

Two visions

I delivered this talk a week before my father’s memorial at Goldsmiths College, London, where he had been Warden from 1976-1984. A month and a day later my wife and I attended the memorial of my father’s former colleague, Stuart Hall, at the Light, the Quaker meeting house in the Euston Road. Both were, in different ways, extremely impressive and moving events, reflecting the differences in the nature of the two men’s careers. Stuart had died at 82, still writing and thinking. Despite his illness, when I met Stuart for the last time in November 2013, he was as alert, sharp, warm and funny as ever. My father died at 95, and had barely written for a decade, due to the ever-worsening dementia that blighted his final years. Where my father had branched from Cultural Studies into senior administrative posts, participation in public life and finally reflective writing, Stuart had remained engaged in cultural and political analysis and, as far as his health allowed, politically active. The fourteen-year age gap between them meant that they epitomised versions of two different generations’ forms of left-wing idealism.

Always a democratic socialist, never a Marxist, my father was at heart a pragmatist, committed to the so-called ‘post-war consensus’ of the late 1940s and 1950s, believing the system could be reformed from within and doing all he could to reform it. Stuart became a guru for successive generations of activists, including Marxists, who fought for much more radical reform from the late 1960s and 1970s onwards. I believe he engaged with a range of such groups for most of his working life. This contrast was reflected in the speakers at the two events. My father’s memorial included contributions from two life peers, the historian, Peter Hennessy, and the veteran arts broadcaster, Melvyn Bragg. Stuart’s included the former Black Panther associate, Angel Davis, and long-term editor of _Marxism Today_, Martin Jacques. Both my father and Stuart have had considerable and continuing influence on public perceptions of culture and politics, but as I left the Light I reflected sadly that, while never completely defeated, both these forms of idealism have been engaged in long and demoralising rear-guard actions for well over three decades. During that time the academic left has steadily lost public influence and, my friends in universities have told me, room for manoeuvre within the academy itself.

Yet it also seems particularly appropriate to remember these two men now. Since the early 1980s left-wing ideas have been marginalised within mainstream public discourse in the UK by the ascendency of Thatcher-Reaganomics and free-market dogma and the myth that growing social inequality did not matter, because everyone benefited thanks to the magical ‘trickle-down’ effect. Such belief systems can take decades to dislodge or dissolve, yet the 2008 banking crisis created a massive crack in the carapace. Economists such as Thomas Piketty have been prominent in a wave of opinion discrediting the ‘trickle-down’ theory. Last year reports of studies by both the IMF and the OECD indicated that, far from making everyone more prosperous, growing inequality actually damages economic growth.

One senses a mood developing in which the general public may be more willing to question the received wisdoms of the Thatcher-Blair-Brown-Cameron era and may become more receptive to new versions of both my father’s
and Stuart Hall’s approaches to cultural and social analysis. If that is the case, it might be worth pausing to consider the ideas which united these two figures, but also where they diverged.

Observing my father’s footsteps (if not following in them)

My talk to the ICE conference was a preliminary attempt to grapple with some of these issues from my father’s perspective, as I had heard him discuss them throughout my life. After he died on 10 April 2014, three months after my brother Simon and one month before his beloved wife Mary, I started to organise his memorial in conjunction with an immensely helpful Goldsmiths College. The response was remarkable. Everyone I contacted wanted to help. As well as Lords Hennessy and Bragg, speakers included my father’s biographer Fred Inglis, Professors Isabel Armstrong, David Lodge, James Curran and Laurie Taylor with filmed contributions from Stuart Hall’s widow, Professor Catherine Hall, Alan Bennett, Sir Tom Courtenay and the poet Tony Harrison, as well as my father’s surviving cousin Dorothy Denton who knew him as a boy. Sometimes it felt like producing an episode of This is your life or some kind of awards ceremony.

This process made me acutely aware of my father’s impact over the decades through the influence of The uses of literacy (first published in 1957), the foundation of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham in 1964 and through his work as, to use that rather clunking phrase, a ‘public intellectual’. I cannot offer authoritative overviews of the development of Cultural Studies as a discipline, although I did some post-graduate research into popular literature in the late seventies, tutored on the Open University’s Popular Culture course in 1982 and started a raft of Media Studies courses during my years as a teacher in Further Education. Later my work as a television critic and feature-writer constantly brought me up against the issues my father grappled with from The uses of literacy, via the Pilkginton Committee (of 1960-1962) to his spell on the Arts Council. So I have always had at least peripheral awareness of the questions raised by the work of my father and Stuart. I tried to address some of the issues around the fate of the academic left in my first novel, A man against a background of flames, published by Pighog, of Brighton, in 2013. But what I did do throughout my entire life – and this does give me some kind of authority – was talk to my father … a lot. Or rather he talked; I listened and occasionally got a word in. So I do know a fair amount about his private views of all these matters and on that basis I have a few opinions of my own about what he stood for and how those opinions and values have fared over the decades.

Three forms of influence

I would, very roughly, divide my father’s areas of influence into three different ‘zones’, although they clearly overlap and run into each other all the time. The first of these is personal and comes from his writing in the first half of The uses of literacy. I suppose you could call that a sort of Autobiographical Social Anthropology, often written in a style which betrayed his life’s great unfulfilled ambition, for he was, by his own admission, a novelist manqué. (He told me in his late seventies that he felt a failure because he had never become a novelist, an admission I found astonishing, revealing and actually ludicrous, in view of what he had achieved in life.) The second zone arose from the second half of The uses – his attempt to begin to frame an academic mode of analysis for the study of popular culture. This was influence of a very different kind, more important perhaps within academia, but also more problematic. The third zone was my father’s engagement with public life which began with the 1960 Albermarle Report on Youth Services and my father’s evidence at the Lady Chatterley trial also in 1960. He progressed through the Pilkginton Committee on the future of broadcasting (1960-1962) to become a Governor of the RSC (1962-1988), before spending five years at UNESCO (1970-1975). On his return to England, he chaired the European Museum of the Year Award (1978-1984), sat on the General Advisory Council of the BBC and chaired the board of New Statesman (1977-1981). He had a long significant spell on the Arts Council (1976-1981) and even a curious spell on the Appeals Committee of the British Board of Film Classification. Two roles that were particularly close to his heart were his chairing of the Advisory Committee on Adult and Continuing Education (1977-1983) and the Broadcasting Research Unit (1981-1991).

Scholarship boys and girls – you can take the boy out of Hunslet …

It is hard to underestimate the impact of the quasi-autobiographical sections of The uses of literacy. The lives of all three of his children have been punctuated by people coming up to us, sometimes complete strangers, to tell us how much that book meant to them. His description of the awkward transition from
one social class to another, and the trials and insecurities of the ‘scholarship boy’ struck very deep chords. Only last year a former colleague and close friend from my last FE college, with whom I had worked for fifteen years, revealed for the first time that as a young woman she had treasured the book and saw Dad as a hero. I had had no idea. For some reason she had felt awkward about telling me this while we were colleagues. For the rest of his life Dad got letters to this effect from strangers, the last I saw came only two years ago when he was 93 and already deep in his advanced vascular dementia. It was from the MP, Frank Field. The actor, Tom Courtenay, recorded an interview for the memorial about the book’s personal resonance for him. His English master had invited him to tea to meet my father when he himself was a working-class grammar school boy in Hull. Alan Bennett told us that reading the book while in New York performing Beyond the fringe in 1963 had inspired him to start writing creatively about his own background and experiences. Also Leeds born and raised, Tony Harrison co-dedicated a poem to Dad, ‘Them and Uz’ about how his native language was mocked by grammar school masters.

What is more this effect has resonated down the generations. Dennis Potter, possibly the greatest television dramatist of his generation, wrote about how the book helped him make sense of his childhood in the Forest of Dean. Stan Barstow has described how much it meant to him. So has the novelist Tim Lott. The Guardian journalist Stuart Jeffries wrote about how the book made so much sense of his difficulties as a working-class undergraduate at Oxford in the 1980s that it reduced him to tears. In her excellent introduction to the most recent Penguin re-issue, Lynsey Hanley described how it made sense of her own experiences and conflicts being brought up on a West Midlands council estate in the 1980s. (Both she and Tom Courtenay particularly appreciated Dad’s observations about the delight of tinned peaches.) Even people with relatively genteel backgrounds found echoes. When I interviewed Sir Ian McKellen recently about his Broadway Pinter revival, he finished the conversation by telling me how much the book had meant to him when he was young.

For years there was a family myth – perpetrated by myself, as it turns out – that the book had inspired the creation of Coronation Street. I contacted the soap’s originator, Tony Warren recently and he explained my mistake. In fact, he had not heard of the book until they were already making pilot episodes, when a young researcher told him The uses of literacy must have been his ‘Bible’. He duly read it and was, he said, most impressed, but it had not inspired him to write the show. Decades later he was in conversation with his friend and near neighbour L. S. Lowry and asked the painter how he coped with the constant barrage of interviews and the endlessly repeated and inane questions. I paraphrase: ‘I just agree with whatever they suggest,’ Lowry told him. ‘I have a quiet life and they go away happy.’ Warren told me that he had this in mind while he was walking round the market in a northern mill-town, making a documentary about the umpteenth anniversary of the show. When the eager young reporter asked if he had been inspired by The uses of literacy he took Lowry’s advice and agreed. ‘Can you say that again as a statement?’ asked the reporter. Warren did. ‘I was inspired by reading a book called The uses of literacy, he said …’ I saw that documentary, and a family myth was born.

What this also tells us, of course, was that part of the book’s success was that it captured a widespread and growing movement, the same desire for recognition and the right to self-assertion among the working-classes which had swept Attlee to power after the war, a tidal wave of social pressure which did not finally peak and crash until the end of the 1970s. But it was the articulation of a particular kind of personal experience, a description of what it felt like to be on the inside of a shift in social mobility, which resonated most deeply with a growing demographic group. It made people who felt like isolated individuals realise they were part of a much broader group and that their conflicted feelings and awkward experiences were shared by others and were wholly understandable. This, I am sure, is what elicited the intense sense of gratitude which emanates from all those letters.

For my father that sense of dislocation, of being an outsider carving a place in an alien world, brought huge excitement and profound insecurities. This was something he undoubtedly shared with Stuart Hall. It created, I think, an implicit bond during their years as colleagues, though Stuart’s personal socio-cultural journey, involving the class and racial complexities of post-war Jamaica, the legacies of colonialism and encountering brute racism in 1960s Birmingham was even more complex.

It was my father’s ability to capture the texture of a certain very specific time and place in working-class social history that resonated too. In this respect his modern heirs are not so much
... but you can’t take Hunslet out of the boy

My father’s background, upbringing and trajectory through life affected him in many ways, of course. He was brought up by his loving grandmother after he was orphaned and split from his two siblings. She was a quiet, self-effacing woman, according to his cousin Dorothy, who read a lot and loved to discuss books with him. But Dad wrote that she could be rather crude sometimes, and his own sense of humour could be surprisingly rude, and in a rather childish way. He loathed onions for some reason and playing Consequences with the family (a rare enough event) one Christmas the former Assistant Director General of UNESCO invented the worst dish he could think of: ‘Shark’s pizzle in onion sauce’, giggling at his own silliness when it was read out. He once told me about a hostelling holiday he took with my mother in the Lake District before they were married. One night they were the only guests in a hostel, so to ensure there would be no hanky-panky, the woman who ran it actually locked them into separate men’s and women’s dormitories for the night, divided by a wooden partition wall. They found there was a knot-hole through which they could converse like Pyramus and Thisbe in the Mechanics’ Play in A midsummer night’s dream. Dad told me: ‘I said to your mother, “If I’d a penis as thin as a pencil, then where would she be?”’. I resisted the temptation to point out that if that had been the case Mum might have had second thoughts about their future together.

In fact, he could be quite naïve sexually. In a famous exchange during the trial of Lady Chatterley’s lover, Dad had surprised the court by asserting that Lawrence’s writing about sex belonged to an English puritan tradition. The prosecutor Mervyn Griffith-Jones tried to ridicule this by reading a particularly intimate passage and asking if it was ‘puritanical’. Dad stood his ground, insisting it was true to an English puritan tradition of being truthful to one’s conscience. Griffith-Jones apparently knew it was a thinly veiled description of anal sex, but could not say so. My father told me later that he simply hadn’t realised. (I read later that the practice was once a common form of contraception among Nottinghamshire miners.)

He wrote in The uses of literacy about his capacity for unpolished directness, and he could appear brusque and even dictatorial. My brother, Simon, once overheard a woman in a House of Commons bar fulminating about this. Simon never discovered who she was or how she knew Dad, but it was a revealing glimpse of another view of him. Partly this was due to insecurity. He had the opposite of a sense of entitlement, so the thought that he might be wrong could seem intolerable, and having the wrong opinion about something always somehow became a moral issue. It also made him unusually sensitive to perceived slights and put-downs – a waspish remark delivered during an early visit to Cambridge – dismissive remarks about his courses by a distinguished professor at Birmingham and so on. These lodged like burrs and would be recalled resentfully even as the early stages of dementia began to cloud his memory in his late eighties.

Yet he was usually genial and had a lively sense of humour (usually perfectly clean) and many have attested to his generosity and willingness to help those who needed it. In matters of personal morality he was generally open-minded and tolerant, even though his own relationships appeared utterly conventional. He could be shockingly politically incorrect, but was anything but homophobic. I once went into a pub with him in the West End, a handsome Victorian place with ‘snob panels’ over the bar. I recognised at once that it was a gay bar and wondered what the clientele would assume about our relationship. After a few moments sitting at the bar Dad leaned over and said in one of his embarrassingly loud whispers: ‘I don’t know if you’ve noticed, Paul, but this place is full of homos.’ He was deeply irritated by the appropriation of the word ‘gay’. Yet his first book was on Auden who was warmly appreciated remarks. A much smaller category of people delighted in telling me, at least, that he was anything but homophobic. I once went into a pub with him in the West End, a handsome Victorian place with ‘snob panels’ over the bar. I recognised at once that it was a gay bar and wondered what the clientele would assume about our relationship. After a few moments sitting at the bar Dad leaned over and said in one of his embarrassingly loud whispers: ‘I don’t know if you’ve noticed, Paul, but this place is full of homos.’ He was deeply irritated by the appropriation of the word ‘gay’. Yet his first book was on Auden who was warmly welcomed to stay at our house in Birmingham. In Leicester, he lent money to the young writer and broadcaster Ray Gosling and visited him in hospital when he was badly beaten up (I would guess in a homophobic attack), and he had several close gay colleagues over the years whom he spoke of with great affection. It could sometimes seem a curious mix. But all of that was part of the Hunslet package, a carry-over from the experiences described in The uses of literacy and later in the first volume of his autobiography.

Of course, we children did not always hear appreciative remarks. A much smaller category of people delighted in telling me, at least, that they had read the book and it was crap. ‘We call it The uses of shit-eracy,’ giggled a friend at a Birmingham Arts Centre I attended in the 6th Form, forced to study it for A Level in her FE
college. If I bothered to probe, I would usually discover that this was a reaction to the analytical second half of the book. A section on milkbars, in particular, has been repeatedly cited as unsympathetic, judgmental – not ‘getting it’. By the late sixties, anyway, attitudes to popular culture and subcultures had been transformed. Intelligent teenagers pored over the lyrics of their most meaningful musical or sub-culture heroes. Adopting the coolest, deepest style became critical as a badge of identity. When The uses of literacy came out in 1957, almost nobody was writing seriously about popular culture. Ten years later, everyone was at it and the music press, in particular, was achieving stratospheric heights of pretentiousness.

In that sense Dad was out of touch. Unlike his old friend Sir Roy Shaw – also working-class, Yorkshire adult education, later Secretary General of the Arts Council – he did not have much time for popular entertainments. It was my six years older brother Simon who brought rock music into the family home, along with satirical comedy and an interest in popular television. Once in the noughties, when I was working as a television critic on The Times, Dad rang me up and asked if I could furnish examples of shows which were popular but of high quality. He was struggling, he said, the last he could think of was Morecambe and Wise. I provided a short list, but it reminded me, yet again, how little he knew about current popular television.

Yet when he did turn his attention to popular forms or to cultural trends his observations were usually sharp and sympathetic, his judgments were shrewd and true. This is one reason why his writing continued to resonate with so many readers. He got his own round of bonus questions on last Christmas Day’s edition of University Challenge. One referred to a typically fierce denunciation of the mealy-mouthed false flattery of the phrase ‘senior citizens’.

Cultural analysis
Much has been written about this over the years, but the pioneers of what became Cultural Studies were feeling their way in largely uncharted territory and both my father and Raymond Williams were from literary critical backgrounds, largely shaped by F. R. Leavis. So when my father started the CCCS in Birmingham with his newly appointed deputy Stuart Hall (also from a literary background incidentally) they insisted on close textual analysis and Dad made the motley collection of graduate students hone their skills in practical criticism by analysing Yeats’s poems before turning their attention to the latest batch of women’s magazines.

There was an understanding between Dad and Stuart, who Dad knew was far more interested in theory, that their approaches were complementary. They planned their courses and activities in close collaboration, each respecting the other’s talents and strengths. I filmed an interview with Stuart’s widow, Professor Catherine Hall, for Dad’s memorial, and she spoke warmly of the closeness of their working relationship in the early years of the CCCS. I myself recall Dad coming home and talking enthusiastically about some of the texts Stuart was getting them to read and suggesting I read Barthes’s Mythologies. (I thought the first half an amusingly flamboyant Gallic version of the kind of work my father did.)

Yet there were fundamental differences in approach mainly because Stuart was a Marxist and Dad, while open to the possibilities of much Marxist analysis, was definitely not. Gramsci, I believe, did resonate. Are not his concept of ‘consensual hegemony’ and my father’s notion of ‘unbending the springs of action’ essentially describing the same phenomenon? In fact, he had a deep and long-standing mistrust of Marxism which dated back to disputes with CP members in the thirties, many of whom were still apologists for Stalinism. My father had come out of the war desperate to avoid anything that smelled of totalitarianism. He remained committed to the principles of public ownership to his last days of coherent thought, but he was, in the true sense of both words, a Democratic Socialist. He has sometimes been criticised by the left as a pro-nuclear deterrent ‘Cold Warrior’ and an apologist for Israel. Whatever the flaws in these stances, they are explained by that wartime legacy – the fear of the threat of a murderous absolutist tyranny and sympathy for what he saw as a small democratic enclave beset by corrupt and undemocratic neighbours. Of course, this put him in a deeply conflicted position during the campus upheavals of 1968. Stuart was wholeheartedly backing the dissident Birmingham students while Dad was trying to defend his Centre in hostile Senate committees.

This discomfort may have contributed to his decision to leave for UNESCO at the start of 1970. I really couldn’t say. I do know that the prospect of a massive job in Paris, building on his long-standing work in public affairs and
applying his ideas about the purpose and value of culture on a global scale, seemed incredibly exciting. My own view is that whatever his disagreements and discomforts back home, that world was always going to claim him. Of course, after Dad left for Paris, the Centre was transformed by what Stuart Hall referred to as ‘the turn to theory’. Dad had always recognised that Stuart was matchless at making the most abstruse theory lucid and accessible to intelligent readers. Although the very last time I saw him, even he admitted, with his characteristic warm chuckle, that there were passages in Derrida which he found utterly impenetrable!

For me the great unanswered question is what would have happened if my father had remained within British academic life through the early 1970s. Would he, like Raymond Williams, have embraced the new theoretical perspectives, melding them with his own intellectual framework and finding ways of explaining them to bright undergraduates? Or would he have thrown up his hands in horror and angrily rejected the lot like E. P. Thompson? Incidentally in my year tutoring for the OU, the Popular Culture course began with an ‘overview’ in which these three were described in terms that made them sound like the Trevithicks and Stephensons of a discipline which now sped around in sleek continental TGVs and Pendolinos. I imagine my father’s acid test would have been the degree to which a particular theoretical approach could be translated into something that had meaningful resonance for intelligent lay readers, that said something that engaged lucidly with life outside academia, and was not a system for generating pseudo-scientific jargon. I am sure, however, there would have been fireworks. Some have suggested he might have floundered. If so, I am sure it would have been a fighting flounder.

In 1974, the Centre published a paper by Colin Sparks called *The abuses of literacy*, an attack on Dad’s liberal English approach, arguing that the discipline needed the rigour of late Marxist analysis. Other remarks about the patronising intellectual inadequacy of Dad’s ‘Arnoldian liberalism’ filtered back to him. ‘Freud calls it “killing your father”’, he told me ruefully when he read the Sparks paper. Years later, with this type of academic analysis of culture having little or no traction outside universities, I am tempted to ask what good such complex theoretical analysis did in the long run. Whatever their differences in approach, however, on a personal level, my father remained enormously fond of Stuart, proud that he had appointed him as his deputy at the CCCS, took opportunities to collaborate with him and retained his huge admiration for Stuart’s talents.

**Public life**

So when my father returned from Paris, taking up his post as Warden of Goldsmiths College in 1976, he was out of the academic debate, yet very much part of public debate about culture in its broadest senses. He developed an abiding hatred for what he called ‘relativism’, which he saw as a fashionable tendency to avoid any kind of value judgment. In his still Leavisite view you *had* to make value judgments. You could and should argue vigorously about how those judgments should be made, and how they might apply to understanding particular texts, but you should always be prepared to make them because the cultural experiences that are presented to people actually do affect the quality of their lives. They are not neutral events.

My own personal bugbear, watching from the side-lines as we passed through the 1980s, and I know that my father shared these misgivings, was that I became increasingly aware of large sections of the academic left disappearing up its own theoretical fundament. However enlightening the late Marxist, post-structuralist and discourse theories may or may not have been, the fact is that they had the effect of withdrawing academic cultural analysis from mainstream public debate.

I have suggested that this was a massive, historic abnegation of responsibility and left the public field open to the unopposed ravages of free market fundamentalism and the most cynical and ideologically manipulative forms of commercialism. I have always exempted Stuart Hall from this criticism (I gather he later suffered his own ideological attacks at the CCCS anyway) because he offered the most lucid and accessible analyses of politics and culture. In this sense the Open University was the perfect home for his talents. However, his brilliant analytical articles for *Marxism Today* did tend to reassure and bolster the already converted. My father had always rolled his sleeves up and pitched pugnaciously into debates about public policy. At his memorial Melvyn Bragg suggested that his contributions to the Report of the Pilkington Committee had almost saved the BBC at a time of acute vulnerability, and with that, the principles of public service broadcasting. He continued to fight these public battles while gentle academics in England still abed, as it
were, were arguing intensely about how many discourse theorists you could fit on the end of a Lacanian jouissance.

I was made acutely aware of this in the early-2000s, some time after my parents, ageing and struggling to cope with managing their home, moved to Norwich under the watchful eye of my sister Nicola. Newsnight had a debate about whether television was dumbing down. Peter Bazalgette, then best known as the importer of the reality show format Big Brother, and Lord Puttnam were in the studio. Bazalgette was making the usual claims for reality television (he dismissed critics such as my father and Richard Eyre, of the National Theatre, as ‘elitists’). Puttnam, I recall, was quite equivocal. To put the case for the prosecution, my father, in his eighties, appeared from the BBC’s Norwich studio. He looked pale and a little haggard like some Old Testament prophet without the beard, and his knowledge of current developments was clearly sketchy. Why, I wondered, had the producers’ Rolodex lighted on him? Where were the Richard Hoggarts of the next generations?

It has been pointed out to me that there were plenty of accessible cultural commentators on the left, but that they simply could not get a hearing beyond a limited range of sympathetic outlets. I have to admit that is probably true. Others have conceded that there was a tendency to preach to the converted, or to withdraw behind the safety of campus boundaries as the onslaught of free market ideology gathered pace. Perhaps, but working in Further Education as the old democratic idealism of that sector lost its sense of direction and was pushed ever further back by the new managerial Gradgrinds, I began to despair about the lack of voices from the universities, fighting our corner with resilience and resonance in the mainstream public debate. I should add that I am painfully aware that my own writing has been no more effective in this area than any academics’. My father always pitched in when he could, attracting criticism from all sides. He and his old friend Roy Shaw were burned in effigy for implementing unpopular cuts at the Arts Council.

The war on populism
Along with former National Theatre director Richard Eyre, he was accused of being an ‘elitist’ by Peter Bazalgette. Peter Hitchens of all people used the same term of him, regarding it as a compliment! From the Pilkington report onwards he was accused of being culturally patronising. How is it patronising to think that people might be capable of enjoying and appreciating material which is more demanding, yet rewarding than their normal fare? It is an obvious enough point, but if anyone is patronising it is the purveyors of lowest-common-denominator drivel for easy financial returns. At the memorial we played a clip from an early episode of Coronation Street (written by the young Jack Rosenthal) in which Ken Barlow has a rant to this effect which could have come straight from the pages of Uses of literacy.

The book lamented the cynicism of commercial culture and in this the analysis remains as relevant today as it was in the 1950s, witness the staggering amorality of the tabloid press as exposed by the hacking scandals. More interesting is the case of reality TV which Bazalgette himself defended as ‘democratic’, citing the case of Jade Goody after her spat with Bollywood actress Shilpa Shetty during Celebrity Big Brother 5. Where else would someone from her background get a hearing? he argued. But from her first appearance in the third series of Big Brother, Goody had been ‘cast’ to arouse controversy – set up as a sort of sideshow freak, manipulated by a wealthy media outfit for public entertainment. She benefitted financially on an undreamed of scale, of course, but it was about as undemocratic a process as you could dream up. In a panel event before my father’s memorial, Professor Bev Skeggs, of Goldsmiths, described her own research findings suggesting, encouragingly, that working-class women viewers clearly saw a process as you could dream up. In a panel event before my father’s memorial, Professor Bev Skeggs, of Goldsmiths, described her own research findings suggesting, encouragingly, that working-class women viewers clearly saw a process as you could dream up. In a panel event before my father’s memorial, Professor Bev Skeggs, of Goldsmiths, described her own research findings suggesting, encouragingly, that working-class women viewers clearly saw a process as you could dream up. In a panel event before my father’s memorial, Professor Bev Skeggs, of Goldsmiths, described her own research findings suggesting, encouragingly, that working-class women viewers clearly saw

A lantern on the stern
In An imagined life (1993), the last volume of his autobiography, my father quotes this phrase from Coleridge to describe the way the light of our experience illuminates the waves behind us for those who follow. Even now, only nine months after his death, I feel I see that lantern still shining in the distance. What illumination can I draw from his life and career? That my father was right about everything? Of course not. That the specific analyses of Uses of literacy still hold water? Some do; some certainly do not. No, my sense of his value is much broader than that. What we seem to have lost today is the kind of drive, belief and optimism that motivated him and so many like him during that so-called ‘post-war consensus’, a belief that social justice and equality of...
opportunity are achievable, and that we should not allow ourselves to be constantly brow-beaten by the threat of global markets.

Above all it is a belief that the acquisition of the kind of critical literacy my father believed in so fervently is actually a right, that ‘ordinary’ people as well as academics can and should make considered and informed judgments about the value of the cultural material they encounter and should always be encouraged to do so. That is democratic. Setting people up to fight each other like insects in a matchbox in order to line your own pockets isn’t. Literacy of every type still needs to be used, not abused.

Note on the contributor
Paul Hoggart was educated in Hull, Leicester and Birmingham where he attended King Edward VI’s Boy’s School. He read English at York University, undertook research into popular literature at Leicester University and tutored for the Open University while lecturing in English and Media Studies in London colleges of Further Education. In the 1990s he moved into freelance journalism, including a long spell as a television critic, columnist and feature-writer for The Times. He has also written for the Observer, the Guardian, the Independent, the Telegraph, Broadcast magazine, Radio Times, the Stage and Newsweek. His first novel A man against a background of flames, was published in 2013.