

# Obituary

## Asa Briggs, 1921-2016

Asa Briggs died on 15 March, aged 94, leaving a wife and four children. What a pity that he did not live quite long enough to become the first leading historian to reach 100. But he failed at little else that mattered.

He was an historian of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, so notable that some enthusiastic younger historians have now dubbed the long nineteenth century as 'the age of Asa'. A stocky figure behind the noticeable glasses, during the second half of the twentieth century Briggs became one of our best-known historians, at least by name. Born in Keighley, Yorkshire, in 1921, the son of an engineer, he retained throughout his long life a mild Yorkshire accent, more pleasing because it was gentle and usually accompanied by a smile. Aged only 16 when he went to Cambridge, where he secured a double first, at the same time he took an external first-class degree from LSE. Amazing. He was then conscripted into the army, soon to be seconded to Bletchley Park as a code-breaker. He wrote about his secret war-work only in old age.

In 1945 he might have stood as a Labour candidate for a safe seat at the general election, but he chose instead to join the academic world at Worcester College, Oxford, where he later served as Provost (1976-91). At Oxford he was quickly recognised as a rising star, with freshmen from all its colleges (including the present writer) being sent to hear his lectures. In 1955 he switched to the provincial university world, to become Professor of Modern History at Leeds University. Not that he spent much time in his department there, for he was an inveterate traveller, at home and abroad. Indeed, in *Who's Who* he gave 'travelling' as his recreation. Hugh Trevor-Roper, an Oxford contemporary and rival once quipped that if Asa saw a Concorde in the sky he would wonder why he wasn't on it. Certainly, Briggs was always very busy, coming and going and writing – books, articles, letters, reviews. It is said that his secretary regularly took letters for him to sign on the platform at Leeds City station before he boarded a train to London. Also that he even wrote a book review only half-an-hour before he went into his own marriage ceremony.



In 1961 he left Leeds to play a leading part in setting up the first of the new universities of the 1960s – the University of Sussex at Brighton. In 1961 his BBC talk on 'A University for Today' became accepted as a guiding text for the whole movement. He served as Vice-Chancellor at Sussex from 1967 to 1976. And his love of music meant that he also became a long-serving trustee of nearby Glyndebourne Opera. Yet characteristically at this same period Briggs was looking beyond the conventional in education, for he was an enthusiast for adult education, formal and informal. He became one of the founders of the Open University, as well as President of the WEA from 1958 to 1967. And not least he was a long-term friend of the Historical Association and a life Vice-President. In 2010 to mark the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Medlicott Medal, we were proud to make a special award to Lord Briggs alongside that year's Medlicott Medallist Peter Hennessy.

Despite all of this activity at home and abroad, for over 60 years he produced a steady stream of books and articles. No single descriptive adjective can be attached to his writing overall – 'social', 'political', 'local', 'Labour' – for he ventured into all of those fields. Especially notable and popular were his three widely-read

titles on the Victorian world – *Victorian People* (1954), *Victorian Cities* (1963) and *Victorian Things* (1988). He said in old age that this last was his own favourite among all his books. The three titles have certainly made a lasting contribution, for they show how the Victorians were living people, not 'Victorian' in a stuffy remote sense. And his overall textbook, *The Age of Improvement* (1959) became a best-seller.

What else? Asa's awareness of the relevance of local history meant that one of his early books was the official history of *Modern Birmingham* (1952). And down the years he maintained a productive relationship with Labour historians, without quite becoming one of them. He edited, for example, *Chartist Studies* (1959). Media history also greatly interested him, and he was an obvious choice to write the five-volume history of broadcasting in the United Kingdom (1961-95). These latter volumes were criticised in Asa's *Guardian* obituary as reading too much like reference books. Certainly Asa's writing style can be characterised as workmanlike rather than polished. Even his 1990 festschrift admitted as much. This means that we read Briggs's books for their content rather than their style.

Recognition at the highest level came in 1976 when James Callaghan, the Labour prime minister, gave Briggs a life-peerage. Asa's *Guardian* obituarist remarked that the now 'Lord Briggs' revelled in being invited into the great houses of top people. When in 1984 he attended Lord Spencer's 60<sup>th</sup> birthday ball at Althorp, another guest was the waspish diarist, Alan Clark. Clark noticed the presence there of what he called 'fashionable dons'. These, he noted, included 'grotesquely pedantic, Professor Asa Briggs'. This slur was of course typical of Clark and grossly unfair. In rather more moderate and yet striking words, the *Guardian* has suggested that Briggs displayed 'a positively Pooterish joy in mingling with the powerful'. Maybe. But notwithstanding any such harmless and perhaps Keighley-related weakness, we can still conclude that Asa Briggs was a notable historian and an equally notable personality. It was a pleasure to know him, and we mourn him deeply.

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