



Henry Pelling (1920 - 1997)

Authors(s): Stuart Macintyre

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Obituaries

Henry Pelling (1920 - 1997)

Henry Pelling, who died late last year, was probably the least fashionable of British labour historians. By background and temperament he was utterly removed from the labour movement and all radical enthusiasms. He was born at Birkenhead in 1920, the son of a stockbroker. He was educated at private schools and Cambridge, and apart from war service in the Royal Engineers spent his entire professional career in the comfort of Queen's College, Oxford, and St John's College, Cambridge—so removed was he from the ordinary exigencies of life that on Sundays, when the college servants were at rest, it was as much as he could do to boil an egg.

He was a dry, sometimes acerbic man who liked most of all to catch other historians out in errors of fact. A.J.P. Taylor was one of his victims, and he pounced on the slips in Taylor's *English History 1914-1945*. Taylor rejoined that 'Mr Pelling is a master of precision', a statement that Pelling then reproduced as a blurb on the dustjacket of his own works. He also won ten guineas in a *New Statesman* competition with his parody of Tayloresque prose. In seminars at Cambridge he took particular pleasure in baiting Maurice Cowling, that stern naysayer and admirer of Margaret Thatcher. Equally, he liked to take the rise out of earnest leftists. Once, when I gave him a copy of a seminar programme featuring a brace of Young Turks (Geoff Eley, Dave Blackbourn, Bob Holton, etc.), he observed that there appeared to be a typographical error. Pointing to my name he said 'Surely that should read 'Stu'.

Henry Pelling supervised my doctoral thesis. This was not an arrangement in which I had any say: rather, I applied in 1971 to study at Cambridge and was informed by post that I should be a member of St John's College under the supervision of Dr Pelling. At that time he was a very active supervisor, and in keen demand: he had chosen me because he liked my masters thesis on John Strachey. My own reaction to this news was far from enthusiastic: Pelling's writings, unshakably temperate and obstinately atheoretical narratives were about as far removed from my literary and political aspirations as it was possible to imagine; he seemed to exemplify what Gareth Stedman Jones had recently arraigned as 'the poverty of English empiricism'.

As a supervisor, furthermore, he failed utterly to engage with my project, which was a study of British Marxism. We met every five or six weeks in his college rooms over tea and jaffa biscuits. He would return drafts with marginal annotations on my syntax and emendations of my solecisms. Where he recognised a figure in my gallery—Raymond Postgate, for example, or Maurice Dobb—he would provide an anecdote. The secondary sources were of particular interest, and he gave a running commentary on the careers, standing and idiosyncrasies of the scholars I cited. But the argument, the methodology and the conclusions simply passed unremarked. That is not to say he was unaware of my underlying doubts and anxieties. He took great care to arrange that I would be examined by two appropriate scholars, Eric Hobsbawm and Royden Harrison. He encouraged me to get into the archives, and found funding to assist me to do so. He befriended my partner and the two daughters who were born during the candidature. He intervened with the college administration to provide better accommodation for us, treated two impecunious

young Australians to lavish restaurant dinners, bought the copies of the *Morning Star* that I pressed upon him, marked my birthday with telegrams, sponsored my election to a college fellowship, and accepted my relinquishment of it to return to Australia with puzzled resignation.

As I came to know him as a friend, I appreciated the paradoxes of a shy bachelor don who took such warm interest in his students and their families. He was unworldly and shrewd, especially in dealing with publishers. He liked a political wager and usually won. When he returned to study after war service he had pocketed several hundred pounds on a bet that Labour would win the 1945 election—I asked him how he was so confident of the result, and he explained that he had inquired of his batman who proposed to vote Labour. He himself was a member of the Labour Party but never a partisan supporter, and on occasion (such as 1974 when I canvassed him for the Communist Party) he voted Liberal. He was retiring in manner and enjoyed gossip. He was undemanding yet fastidious, conventional but liked to shock—on a visit to London he took me to his club, the Reform Club, and noticing several members in post-prandial slumber he demonstrated the gong used to summon members on formal occasions.

Pelling's pre-war studies were in Classics but he turned to modern history after the war. For his postgraduate research he chose the early history of the Labour Party. The resulting monograph on *The Origins of the Labour Party* (1954) displayed his distinctive approach, an unheroic, sceptical and mildly revisionist account based firmly on the organisational record. As he put it, the book had 'a good deal to say about the social, religious and economic environment of Socialist and working-class politics', but was 'primarily a study in the development of new political structure'. The same qualities are apparent in his *Short History of the Labour Party* (1961) and *A History of British Trade Unionism* (1963), both of which quickly became standard works and passed through many editions. In contrast to his contemporaries on the left, especially those associated with the Historians Group of the Communist Party in the post-war period, Pelling treated labour history as a branch of political history. He eschewed class analysis for details of organisation and representation. He was concerned to show how the trade unions and Labour Party forged institutional forms, and through them affected state policy. His explanation of the labour movement's formation and evolution was highly contingent, and he saw Labour's supersession of the Liberal Party as a complex interplay of circumstances and tactics. While these emphases were distinctly unfashionable in the 1970s and 1980s, it gave him wry pleasure that the later editions of his two standard works prepared by Alastair Reid in the 1990s put even greater stress on the radical-liberal nexus. He thought his erstwhile leftist collaborator possibly too soft on Tony Blair and New Labour.

Pelling's moderate predilections were apparent in the study with Frank Bealey of the fledgling Labour Representation Committee, *Labour and Politics 1900-1906* (1958), and even more so in his critical account of *The British Communist Party* (1958). While recognising the local appeal of revolutionary politics in inter-war Britain, it stressed the subservience of King Street to the Kremlin. Again the method is organisational and hierarchical: Pelling excelled in revealing the subterfuges of Palme Dutt and his acolytes on the central committee, and triumphantly refuted their retrospective falsifications of party history, but communism as an ideology and lived commitment remained unintelligible to him.

Yet Pelling's plain, unvarnished style could be applied to sharp analytical purposes. From the vast accumulation of spirex notebooks covered in his spidery handwriting, he produced works of synthetic creativity. *The Social Geography of British Elections, 1885-1910* (1967) drew on an encyclopaedic knowledge of regional and local characteristics to perform a pioneering exercise in historical psephology. His collection of essays, *Popular Politics and Society in Late Victorian Britain* (1968), shot down many hallowed speculations: the labour aristocracy, the prewar social unrest, the popular support for the welfare state. It was dangerous to underestimate Henry: he could deflate the most plausible generalisations with the sharp point of a contrary instance.

He was no narrow specialist. A visit to Wisconsin in the early 1950s resulted in a book on *America and the British Left from Bright to Bevan* (1956), and a later history of *American Labor*. When I met him he had just completed a study of *Britain and the Second World War* for a series on the history of war and society: his pride that his was the first title in the series to appear increased annually with the non-appearance of the companion volumes.

Henry lived a life of scholarship, took little interest in administration and happily reduced undergraduate teaching when he returned to Cambridge in 1966. The torrent of publication—a dozen books in little more than a dozen years—slackened after he suffered a severe stroke in 1971, but he completed a shrewd and commercially very successful biography of Winston Churchill and followed it with several studies of the postwar Attlee and Churchill governments. In his later years decreasing mobility forced him to move from his set of rooms to others closer to the fellows' combination room and dining hall, and with less space. The piles of books and papers became more chaotic. Eventually he depended upon an electric buggy and series of ramps around the College's courts to get around, but he continued to work and converse.

A Cambridge colleague observed that with Pelling all facts were equal but some were more equal than others. His election to the British Academy in 1992 was a belated recognition of a pioneer of labour history before that genre existed. His scholarship was singular; he did not propose any particular approach to the subject and fostered no school. Yet with the abandonment of reductionist and essentialist approaches to labour history, his work is seen to have an augmented significance. In a recent issue of *International Labor and Working Class History* (Fall 1994), Ira Katznelson called for a return to the political and took Pelling as an exemplar of the institutional form of labour history. He observed that Pelling had 'escaped the embrace of both teleology and fashion' through his concentration on the labour movement's relationship with the representative state within a broadly liberal framework of rights and citizenship. There was 'no single body of work as accomplished as Pelling's', Katznelson claimed, 'that takes seriously a relational approach to the ties between the state and the working class via an analysis of the institutions'. It was characteristic of Henry that he did not know of the tribute until I reported it to him.

University of Melbourne

STUART MACINTYRE