Eric Hobsbawm - or, rather, E.J. Hobsbawm as I first knew him - was unavoidable from the moment I had any ambition to think seriously about history. I bought *Industry and Empire* - Eric’s crystalline economic history of Britain from the industrial revolution to the mid-twentieth century - at the very start of my sixth form career and it was supplemented, inevitably and quickly, by *The Age of Revolution*. But it was another 20 years before I met Eric. I had recently arrived at Birkbeck College as a history lecturer, excited by the department’s connection with the Hobsbawm name. By then, Eric had retired from teaching but he was still a regular presence in the department, collecting mail, chatting to the secretaries and gathering company for lunch in the College canteen.

It was immediately clear that Eric inspired affection as well as respect. This was interesting. Grand old historians, in my experience, had turned a more rebarbative face to the world. Eric was a model of how to grow old well. His interests remained omnivorous. Lunch conversation would usually begin with him asking something like, “What are you working on these days?” I would tell him. Invariably, Eric would set off, convinced he knew just as much, or more, about the subject as I did. Invariably he was right. He was quiet on just one occasion. I had been looking at nineteenth-century non-conformist Christianity. “That’s not something I ever much looked at,” he replied. And we left it at that. The history of nationalism marked the limits of Eric’s sympathy but not of his interest, and he wrote with insight on the subject. The history of religion, perhaps, marked the limits of both sympathy and interest for him.

In 2003 Eric was awarded the Balzan Prize for his work on the history of Europe in the twentieth century. The honour gave him almost £250,000 to spend on a research project of his own choosing. Eric chose as his subject the reconstruction of Europe in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War and he asked Mark Mazower and me to direct the project. I remember meeting Eric for a drink and his insistence that we examine the process of physical reconstruction: the bricks, mortar, steel and concrete. This was easier said than done. That sort of economic history is less practised now than 50 years ago. More colleagues now write about the history of citizenship, culture and identities - what Eric would once have called the superstructure - than about the history of material life. Yet this was a moment when Eric was admirable. Above all, there was his principled and clear-sighted historical vision. For Eric the research project was important, because it would explore how communism as much as capitalism contributed to the re-creation of Europe from the ashes of war. There was also his insistence, both obstinate and luminous in the face of intellectual fashion, on the importance of economic history. And, equally apparent, was Eric’s consideration and curiosity. He had made his intellectual point, and Mark and I respected it as much as we felt able. But it did not limit us and Eric never protested. He was an ideal presence: appreciative, engaged and ready to intervene sharply at the workshops and conferences we organised.

I had not always revered Eric in the way I came to regard him over these last two decades. Having read him in the sixth form, in my first term as an undergraduate ‘Hobsbawm’ was there again. I had to write an essay on the living standards of workers during the industrial revolution. Eric was at the heart of a dispute which combined an ideological charge with an approach that, at the time, I found dry and excessively technical. As a graduate student I encountered Eric in person for the first time, albeit across a room. Living in London I sometimes attended his seminar at the Institute of Historical Research. One particular afternoon I remember. The paper was given by Raphael Samuel and the sight of Eric and Raphael side by side, and my angle of vision from the corner of a packed room, led me to wonder why it was both these Marxist historians had

A distinctive and magnificent historian

Professor Eric Hobsbawm (1917–2012) displayed principled and clear-sighted historical vision. Professor David Feldman describes these insights and recounts his experiences working with one of history’s greatest intellectuals.
adopted extravagant versions of the Bobby Charlton comb-over.

Eric, then, was inescapable, but in common with many others of my generation I was attracted to the work of more romantic Marxist historians such as Edward Thompson. In recent decades, as the appetite and capacity of historians to account for change in the long term has diminished, Eric’s contribution has appeared all the more distinctive and magnificent. The degree of austerity, the refusal of sentimentality, all of which I had found a little off-putting when a student, now appear among his great strengths as a historian. As he acknowledged in his 1993 Creighton Lecture, as a Communist he was on the losing side of history. Movingly he tried to recuperate as a historian what had been lost politically. Winners, he suggested, rarely asked the interesting questions. How could they? Their victory so often seemed right or inevitable or both. In his last decades, when I knew him, having lost, Eric was able to ask how it was things turned out the way they did.

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David Feldman is Professor of History at Birkbeck, and Director of the Birkbeck-based Pears Institute for the study of Antisemitism.
In the National Portrait Gallery hangs a picture (above) of the historians of *Past and Present*, the journal which more than any other transformed historical research in this country and beyond. In the 1999 painting, by Stephen Farthing, all the giants assembled in a book-lined study are looking intently at the viewer – except Eric Hobsbawm. Standing, characteristically, on the far left, Eric has his head slightly turned: he is talking on the phone – appropriately, because Hobsbawm the great communicator – was always connected. In fact, you might say that he created a wireless connection between past and present.

Much has been written about the role of the inter-war crisis in the making of Eric as a historian, not least by Eric himself. In my view, it is equally important to pay tribute to the qualities that kept him going and sustained him at this unsurpassed level for the last half-century of what was a uniquely creative life. Three characteristics, I believe, came together: a sense that history mattered and needed to be communicated as widely as possible; an openness to the world; and the literary as well as intellectual talent to connect individuals and

Professor Eric Hobsbawm was a much-loved, inspiring and inquisitive colleague. Professor Frank Trentmann pays tribute to his intellect and collegiality.
their lives to the ‘big’ forces of history.
I first met Eric when I was an undergraduate, at a seminar in 1988 at the Institute of Historical Research, a stone’s throw from Birkbeck, performing alongside Reinhart Koselleck, the German doyen of conceptual history. The contrast between those two masters could not have been sharper; I did not know then that their relationship went back all the way to 1947, when Eric interviewed Koselleck and other returning German prisoners of war. Koselleck began with a highly analytical paper on ‘crisis’. Then came Eric. He talked freely but with clarity, vigour and direction, as if addressing the nation via the BBC, moving effortlessly between periods, continents and classes. To be honest, I was not sure what to make of it at the time. His talk burst the convention of the standard seminar paper. It respected neither the chronological nor national boundaries of my courses. Nor were there any ‘-isations’ or other fancy terms which academics often use to signal who is ‘in’ and who is ‘out’. I felt I had an appointment with history itself.

Over a decade later, good fortune brought me back to London as a lecturer at Birkbeck, with the bonus of an office just around the corner from Eric’s. “So what are you working on?” “What do you make of X?” “What, you think so?” Surely, I felt, he must have something more important to do than to find out what I thought. In fact, Eric did not care whether you were a junior colleague or a student, as long as you took history seriously. History was a mission, not a job, and he did not let his reputation stand in its way. His door was always open, no matter how large the mailbag with prestigious invitations, correspondence, books and off-prints from all over the world. When students asked him to come and talk to them, he would do so, long after retirement. Because the argument, like history itself, never stopped. Talking and walking with Eric was like being whizzed away by the spirit of history, as he outpaced the traffic, with his scarf blowing in the wind, and sometimes flying away.

His gift was to let us into his mind to follow its journey. “The first thing to observe about the world of the 1780s,” he writes in The Age of Revolution (1962), “is that it was at once much smaller and much larger than ours.” Here, in a single sentence, he has pulled us into the world on the eve of the “dual revolution”, before then taking us through it, step by step. The argument was always transparent, giving a reader the chance to weigh the factors at work for themselves before reaching a conclusion. “Nevertheless ...”, he would often conclude – rarely has this word been put to greater effect in historical writing.

It is well to see Eric’s literary talent in relation to his uniquely capacious vision of social history. In the 1960s and 1970s, war in the social sciences spilled over into history, splitting the profession into those who championed ‘big’ forces and structures and those who pressed for a ‘history from below’ with ‘ordinary’ people centre stage. Eric’s achievement was to successfully resist such a division. For me, his work is at its most impressive where he moves between scales. In The Age of Empire (1987) – dedicated to “the students of Birkbeck College” – he takes us from labourers to the bourgeoisie, from local to global, from the Worker Rabbit Breeders to Richard Strauss’ Elektra.

“Men make their own history,” Karl Marx wrote in 1852, “but they do not make it as they please.” Eric took this famous line by a thinker he greatly admired to a higher level. People were not simply victims of modern capitalism, but nor was it wise to treat them in isolation from it. Peasants and workers left their mark on the course of history, even if, like the socialist project itself, they sometimes walked into a cul-de-sac.

To all those who take history seriously, Eric’s legacy is immense. His life exemplified the virtuous chain between teaching, research and writing. It is thanks to him that history books aimed at “the intelligent and educated citizen”, as he put it in The Age of Revolution – note “citizen” not mere reader – became respectable in the profession. Eric showed why critical history and argument were just as important to life and democracy as food and shelter. He explained how people helped make history and thus bore responsibility for it. Today, Government and higher education authorities have the Research Excellence Framework to measure ‘impact’ and ‘key performance indicators’. For Eric, I believe, the entry would have been as simple as unmeasurable: “Hobsbawm: made people think.”

Frank Trentmann is Professor of History at Birkbeck.