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MEMOIR, SOCIAL HISTORY AND COMMITMENT: ERIC HOBSBAWM'S *INTERESTING TIMES*

By James E. Cronin

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Social history is today a rather anxious pursuit. By some measures it is the norm for historical research and understanding and the basis on which all serious historians proceed. Its assumptions about the proper subject matter of history—about who and what matters and ought to occupy historians' attention—and its assertion of the primacy of the "social" and of the need to work "from the bottom up" have been widely accepted and constitute the conventional wisdom of the field. Textbooks almost uniformly reflect the fact that social history defines the dominant way of talking about the past and so, increasingly, do the prescribed curricula for the teaching of history in schools. And if there is a master narrative that governs the telling of modern history, it is social-historical in character.

And yet, practicing social historians know that their privileged position within the discourses of historians is precarious and, put simply, that it rests on a research base that is not expanding. While research students pay homage to social history in a vague manner, their projects are increasingly informed by perspectives that have very different agendas and theoretical foundations. Work on gender and race, for example, can be considered part of social history in a very broad sense, but it is typically embedded in a framework dominated by questions of identity that do not sit comfortably within social history. Those questions, moreover, are often answered with either of two opposing claims that are inconsistent with the guiding assumptions of social history. One asserts the primacy of ethnic, racial or sexual identities over and despite social location; the other insists on the fluidity and constructed character of identities that, again, are not fixed by the social. In either case, the social is less important, less determining than the "cultural," and "agency" or choice more clearly at work than "structure." In these and other areas of specialization social history does not appear to be setting the agenda of new scholarship; and it is increasingly regarded as established and perhaps even as 'old', with all that designation implies.

That impression is reinforced by the undeniable fact that the most distinguished social historians belonged to a generation whose most luminous figures have either passed from the scene or are approaching that point. Fernand Braudel, Edward Thompson and Lawrence Stone are dead; their contemporaries and collaborators typically retired and heard from less often and less forcefully than before. An exception is Eric Hobsbawm, who at 85 is still at work and who seems as intellectually vigorous today as he was half a century ago when he invented the "crisis of the 17th century" and argued its importance in the pages of the new journal, *Past and Present*.¹ He has just published a memoir, *Interesting Times: A Twentieth-Century Life*, that is meant to be read alongside his last big, book, *The Age of Extremes*, his history of the "short twentieth century."² The appearance of Hobsbawm's autobiography is a major intellectual event, at least for historians.³ It is first of all a compelling personal story told with grace and wit.⁴ It is also, and of necessity, a sustained engagement with one of the