

Hugh Clegg (1920-95), the New 'Warwick School' of Industrial Relations and the Creation of the Modern Records Centre

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Abstract

*The Warwick Industrial Relations (IR) academics, George Bain and Hugh Clegg, were key movers in founding the Modern Records Centre (MRC) & attracting the unique collection of trade union and employers' records. In the late 1960s, after his crucial role on the 1965-68 'Donovan' Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employers' Associations, Clegg was recruited from Nuffield College, Oxford to become a founding professor in what became Warwick Business School. He won SSRC funding to bring the Industrial Relations Research Unit (IRRU) to Warwick, which became the national centre for the field, with a global reputation, at a time when IR was arguably the central UK domestic issue. Leadership of the IRRU passed to George Bain, then Willy Brown. After retirement, Clegg then used the MRC for the final two volumes of his landmark *A History of British Trade Unions since 1889* (Oxford University Press 1985, 1994). Based on interviews with the archivist, Richard Storey, George Bain and other members of the 'Warwick School', my paper will discuss: (1) the formation of Warwick School IR; (2) Bain & Clegg's influence on the MRC; and (3) Clegg's writing on trade union history. In 2003, I co-edited a study of academic IR *Understanding Work & Employment* (OUP) & for the past 20 years I've published widely on Hugh Clegg. My full biography with Routledge is now out.*

Keywords: Warwick University; industrial relations; Hugh Clegg; George Bain; trade union history

The Warwick Industrial Relations (IR) academics, George Bain and Hugh Clegg, were key movers in founding the Modern Records Centre (MRC) and attracting the unique collection of trade union and employers' records. In the late 1960s, during his crucial role on the 1965-68 'Donovan' *Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employers' Associations*, Clegg was recruited from Nuffield College, Oxford to the new Warwick University by the Vice-Chancellor, Jack Butterworth. Until then, Clegg and Allan Flanders had been the two central figures of the 'Oxford School' of IR. In 1967, he became a founding professor in what would become Warwick Business School. By 1970, he had won Social Science Research Council (SSRC) funding to bring the new Industrial Relations Research Unit (IRRU) to Warwick. That year, Clegg recruited George Bain, who became deputy Director of the IRRU. A former Oxford DPhil student of Clegg and Flanders, he had been Professor of IR at UMIST. Leadership of the IRRU passed to Bain in 1974.

Based on MRC and other records, as well as interviews with the former archivist, Richard Storey, George Bain and other members of the 'Warwick School', this article discusses briefly: (1) the formation of Warwick school IR; (2) Bain and Clegg's influence on the MRC; and (3) Clegg's use of the MRC in researching and writing the final two volumes of his classic Oxford University Press history of British trade unions. In 2003, I co-edited a study of the development of academic IR, *Understanding Work and Employment* and for the past 20 years I have published widely on Hugh Clegg, culminating in, *Trade Unions and the British Industrial Relations Crisis: An Intellectual Biography of Hugh Clegg* with Routledge (2024). This article is largely an expansion of my discussion of the MRC in Chapter 10 on the 'Warwick School'.

The Formation of Warwick IR

When the MRC was formed in 1973, IR was the central British domestic political issue. This centred on three inter-linked problems associated with a fragmented, chaotic collective bargaining system: inflation, restrictive practices and unofficial strikes. Labour and Conservative parties both grappled with these. The 1968 Donovan Report was followed by Barbara Castle's 1969 'In Place of Strife' White Paper, then Edward Heath's 1971 Industrial Relations Act, Miner's Strikes in 1972 and 1974, Labour's 'Social Contract' from 1974 and the 1978/9 'Winter of Discontent' public sector strikes. Well into the 1980s, trade unions and IR still seemed central to British politics. Clegg was *the* most prominent academic IR 'troubleshooter' during those crisis years. Large-scale engineering, especially the car industry, was central to the IR problem, as conflictual workplace bargaining expanded, led by shop stewards. Hence, Clegg

moved from one motor manufacturing city, Oxford, to another, establishing the 'Coventry project' of IR research.

Ironically, these severe social problems propelled academic IR to prominence and prosperity as a social science field. Clegg shifted leadership of this field from Oxford to Warwick, creating a national centre, the IRRU, from scratch, which quickly gained a global research reputation. Hence, academic IR was central to the formation of new MRC. Indeed, this was part and parcel of the professionalization of this rising social science by Clegg and Bain, through introducing specialist courses and more sophisticated research methods. I joined the Warwick MA in IR in 1980, when the field was at its strongest and the Warwick founders still there. Clegg's 1979 textbook, *The Changing System of Industrial Relations* was completed just before the election of Mrs Thatcher changed the course of history. Though that was not clear at the time.

Bain and Clegg's Influence on the MRC

George Bain, with Clegg's support, was the principal force behind the formation of the MRC, now the major collection of trade union and management archives in the UK. Supported by yet another grant from Leverhulme (with whom Clegg had links since the 1950s), the centre opened in October 1973. Claims have been for Professor Royden Harrison being the central figure (though not by Harrison himself). He stepped into EP Thompson's shoes as Director of the Centre for the Study of Social History in 1970, and did play a significant role in the MRC's development. However, some Harrison obituaries make no mention of Bain and Clegg. Yet, the founding archivist, Richard Storey, and MRC reports testify to Bain's dynamic central role in drawing up the Leverhulme proposal with the backing of Clegg and the IRRU. Bain, Clegg and Harrison submitted the initial £40,000 bid for four years funding and Bain and Harrison sat together on the 'Academic Committee'. But the first report notes: 'The presence at the University of the Industrial Relations Research Unit, sponsored by the Social Science Research Council, has been a vital element in the success of the enterprise so far'.ⁱ

Doris Crowther, TUC librarian, conducted some early work, then Warwick academics, including Bain, 'drew up proposals which were submitted to the Leverhulme Trust for a search and rescue operation concentrating on sources for the history of industrial relations, but also extending more generally into the fields of political, social and economic history'. When Bain 'one of the moving spirits' left Warwick in 1989, another IR specialist, Richard Hyman, replaced him on the committee. Clegg remained in contact. 'We have to thank a number of intermediaries for introductions leading to deposits, most notably Professor Hugh Clegg in respect of the Engineering Employers Federation'. In 1997, when Richard Storey retired,

he recalled the original focus was ‘records of organized labour...affected by the prevailing political ethos of the 1980s, who saw IR and its history as anachronism’.ⁱⁱ

Clegg's Writing on Trade Union History

Clegg's IR publications bridge contemporary issues and historical analysis (see Bibliography). However, the latter was his personal preference especially for empirical studies, particularly at the start and end of his career. Thus, his first book, in 1950, was a historical study of London Transport IR, while he produced two popular early histories of the General and Municipal Workers Union in 1954 and 1965. Moreover, he engaged in historical controversies at the Society for the Study of Labour History (SSLH) in 1962 and 1968. Clegg et al in 1964 was the first volume of a projected history of British trade unions since 1889, picking up where the Webbs' classic study left off. At the time the MRC was formed in 1973, Clegg was the leading figure in a distinctive strand of pluralist IR history – with others like Alan Fox and Bert Turner taking this in different directions.

From the 1970s, academic IR research became increasingly contemporary and sociological, including Clegg's own collaborative studies. However, he retained and carried forward his original historical sensibility, particularly after retirement. During the 1980s and early 1990s, Clegg became a major user of the MRC, researching and writing the last two volumes of the definitive, Leverhulme funded, *A History of British Trade Unions since 1889* (Oxford University Press 1985, 1994). By the 1980s, MRC annual reports recorded Clegg's personal use of material for his trade union history and further deposits he made. Clegg's antidote to heroic socialist history mapped the progress of collective bargaining up to 1951, stopping just as his own academic IR career began. ‘Professor Clegg has used the Centre extensively for his research into the history of British trade unionism post-1910’.ⁱⁱⁱ

Conclusion

It is important to remember that there were strong ideological divisions in Cold War British academic IR and Labour History, between social democratic *pluralists* and Marxist socialist *radicals*. Clegg was a pioneering figure in the British Universities Industrial Relations Association (BUIRA) and the SSLH. These academic controversies came to a head during the *Warwick University Ltd* controversy that divided EP Thompson and Clegg, who had been together at the same Methodist boarding school, Kingswood in Bath. Such ideological preferences may have shaped subsequent radical memories of the MRC's foundation. Some other Labour History archives, like the Marx Memorial Library or the Working

Class Movement Library, were partisan leftist foundations, close to a Marxist reading of the past.

The fact that the MRC covers the full range of labour movement history owes much to Clegg and Bain's pluralist intellectual tolerance. So does the emphasis on employers' records. For Clegg's pragmatic, empirical trade union histories stress how much the British state and employers had shaped the progress of trade unions and collective bargaining. His is no story of militant workers striking for socialism, in the radical vein. Rather he describes bipartisan political support for collective bargaining, co-operation and compromise between trade unions and employers as well as conflict. This came from a man, who spent his formative years in the British Communist Party, then became a Cold War social democrat; yet still supervised studies of Communist Labour History and made a young radical, Richard Hyman, his first Warwick appointment.

Peter Ackers is Emeritus Professor in the History of Industrial Relations, Loughborough University. His research bridges contemporary social science and historical approaches to work and employment relations. On the contemporary HRM side, he has published widely on Employee Involvement, Voice and union-management Partnership, leading to the co-edited collection: Johnstone & Ackers, *Finding a Voice at Work? New Perspectives on Employment Relations*, Oxford University Press, 2015. He is also a Labour Historian, with an interest in Christian Nonconformity, who co-edited, Ackers & Reid, *Alternatives to State-Socialism in Britain: Other Worlds of Labour in the Twentieth Century*, Palgrave, 2016. Combining these two strands is Peter's research on the history of British Industrial Relations, as both a practical public arena and an academic social science field. A particular interest is the development of pluralist and social democratic ideas, culminating in his *Trade Unions & the British Industrial Relations Crisis: An Intellectual Biography of Hugh Clegg*, Routledge 2024.



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Endnotes

ⁱ See IRRU, 'The First Ten Years, pp.116-7. Harrison obituaries, *The Guardian* 03.07.02 and *Labour History Review*, 68(1), 2003, pp.7-10. For Bain's contribution, see MRC annual 'Report for the Session': 1973-74, p.2; 1988-89, p.3; and 1998-9, p.1. Storey, R and Drucker, J. 'Guide to the Modern Records Centre', University of Warwick Library, Occasional Publications No.2, 1977, pp.5-6; and my interview with Richard Storey, former archivist, at University of Warwick, 13.07.05.

ⁱⁱ Storey and Drucker, MRC 1988-89, MRC 1981-82.

ⁱⁱⁱ MRC 1979-80, p.6, 1980-81, p.2, 1986-87, p.2.