Introduction

I am not sure what makes some people historians. But I have concluded that there are those predisposed to think historically and inclined to take an interest in the past. It is, often, a matter of environment and the stimulations of family and surroundings. Readings are encouraged and things old are layered in meanings, invested with intrinsic value rather than calculated in terms of market considerations.¹

With others this attraction to history can seem almost *sui generis*. Brought up in a house without books, by parents whose educations were either truncated by dropping out of high school or being streamed into practical, gendered employment and living in what could have been considered a suburban retreat from any traditions that connected the present and its antecedents, my privileging of the historical was not so much learned as it was resourced, held as a kind of antidote against what I came instinctually to regard as a barren, philistine upbringing. So I suppose I was always a historian, at least in terms of basic inclinations.

But what *kind* of historian one becomes is what really matters. This has less to do with instincts and much more to do with industry. Yet there is also more than a bit of the accidental in this production of orientation. This labour of becoming is inevitably about time, place and happenings of various kinds, of influences in part serendipitous. The context in which sensibilities are forged, paths started down and tendencies taken up is always, in some ways, fortuitous. And then possibilities harden into outcomes.² The consequences of consequences lead us to where we end up, a process in which we have made our personal histories, but never exactly and only as we might have chosen – if choice was ever a simple, clear-cut option. It is all reminiscent of a passage from William Morris’s *A Dream of John Ball* (1888):

[M]en fight and lose the battle, and the thing that they fought for comes about in spite of their defeat, and when it comes turns out not to be what they meant, and other men have to fight for what they meant under another name.³

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1 Stedman Jones 2001.
2 See the exchange on ‘deciding to be a historian’ between Michael Merrill and E.P. Thompson in Abelove et al., 1983, p. 13.
What is crucial in this Morris quote is not just the chance outcome that results from a series of decisions and actions, but the importance of conflict, of a clash of thought, a struggle of positions.

Or so it has been with me. My childhood interest in history came of a certain age in the 1960s, although I was still too young to consider becoming a historian. Then, after largely missing the turmoil of 1968 – I was barely 17 at the time and lived in a medium-sized Canadian city not galvanised by youthful rebellion – I was drawn to the radicalism of the New Left, and from there into a variety of causes and a course of reading. My apprenticeship in Marxist history commenced in the late 1960s and intensified in the 1970s, originating in non-academic encounters with theories and texts as well as mobilisations and movements. All of this unfolded as I dropped out of university in Canada after only one year, and lived for a time in the heady atmosphere of New York City. There I tested the waters of dissidence, as what had once been the headline-catching Students for a Democratic Society imploded. Crashing lecture halls at the New School (where I was not officially enrolled and was eventually asked politely to leave by Robert L. Heilbroner, whose chapter on Marx in *The Worldly Philosophers* from 1953 I considered scandalous), immersed in late-night study and affinity groups, arguing with all manner of leftists in a radical educational experiment known as Alternate U (where Murray Bookchin and Revolutionary Youth Movement II leaders debated the nature and meaning of the Russian Revolution and American slavery), struggling unsuccessfully to read Hegel and spending a part of every day either working in or frequenting bookstores, was more of an education than I would later receive in any formal university setting. There were leaflets to prepare, protests to organise and demonstrations to attend. But there was always time to pore over books. I first read historians such as Moshe Lewin, W.E.B. Du Bois, E.P. Thompson, C.L.R. James and Eugene Genovese, not to mention Marx, Engels, Lenin, Mao, Stalin, Gramsci, Luxemburg and Trotsky, as well as writers like Kate Millett, Shulamith Firestone and Malcolm X, in the intellectually and politically intoxicating atmosphere of the aftermath of May ’68. Inebriated discussions often broke out in dug-out cellar bars of the East Village, now almost all gone, such as the Frog Pond; to this day I remember fiercely contested clashes in which anarchism, Maoism and Trotskyism were argued through, often with allusions to historical events. My ‘classrooms’ had no formally credentialed professors and involved no grades; positions seldom involved ‘sucking up’ to any credentialed authority.

When, after an exhilarating year of this, I decided to return to my hometown of London, Ontario, and complete the undergraduate degree I had abandoned with my departure for New York, sitting in staid lectures, prodding through the syllabus and writing term papers seemed rather anti-climactic. Fast-tracking