

Stuart Hall

On Monday 10 February, Stuart Hall, one of the University of Birmingham's most distinguished academics, died at the age of 82. Hall was a pioneer in the field of cultural studies, though his political interventions also saw him become one of the chief intellectual critics of 'Thatcherism' - indeed, he coined the phrase even before she became Prime Minister.

Hall was first appointed to the University in 1964, as a Research Fellow in the English department at Richard Hoggart's new Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. This pioneering venture, funded in part by Penguin in recognition of Hoggart's star performance in the *Lady Chatterly's Lover* trial, committed itself to the study of everyday forms of popular culture, using skills drawn from literary scholarship. Hall, with his background in the New Left political debates of the 1950s and as the co-author of *The Popular Arts* (with Paddy Whannel), was ideally placed to assist in the research into youth cultures, the press, film and television.

Hall brought to his work a sophisticated theoretical grounding that marked the Centre as the institutional origin of cultural studies. For Hall, cultural studies was never a discipline in itself, but a field of enquiry, a mechanism to understand the broader structures that shaped our everyday lives. His most famous works while at Birmingham included analyses of how meanings are transmitted and received in the media ('encoding' and 'decoding') as well as how our identities based on age, class, race and gender intersected with dominant ways of seeing.

But beyond his own insights, Hall's work at Birmingham was distinctive because of the practices of research and collaboration he instigated. Inspired by the political fervour of the rebellions of 1968 and the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, Hall sought out new working practices for teachers and students that broke down conventional hierarchies and resulted in forms of academic collaboration that, on the face of it, looked more like the sciences than the arts. What made Birmingham University famous in the 1970s were a series of co-written books, articles and 'working papers' that explored a variety of topics such as subcultures (*Resistance Through Rituals*), race and the law (*Policing the Crisis*) and the theoretical aspects of cultural inquiry (*Culture, Media, Language*).

Many of Hall's graduate students never got round to submitting their PhD theses, so busy were they in publishing joint ventures with their peers and teachers. Such was Hall's intellectual generosity that, unlike almost every other leading intellectual working in the arts and humanities, he never published a monograph on his own. His ideas were there to stimulate and provoke; to join a conversation that others would take up. So when the University of Birmingham launched its Blue Plaques in 2011 the work of the Centre was marked by a collective memorial. This underplayed Hall's own key contribution to its work, but it reflected perfectly the spirit of inquiry and debate that Hall injected into his and his colleagues' work.

Hall's troubled relationship with the University ought not to be glossed over. The Centre - and Hall in particular - were key leaders at a student sit-in on campus in 1968. This marked Hall's card for many years and ensured he would never be promoted. It also contributed to the lack of investment in the Centre throughout the 1970s - what is perhaps most incredible is that the tremendous outpouring of empirical research and theoretical reflection in this period was achieved with a permanent staff of just 2 or 3 lecturers. Hall got the best out of his colleagues and raised the bar for what could be achieved by graduate students.

Hall left the University in 1979 to take up a post at the Open University where his publicly available lectures on the BBC inspired an even wider group of students. His achievements at Birmingham were finally acknowledged with the award of an honorary doctorate, though relations were soured again in 2002 when the then Department of Cultural Studies and Sociology was closed by the University. In recent years, though, Hall had become an active supporter of the creation of an archive of the work of the CCCS and many of its leading figures. This is currently being created in the University's [Cadbury Research Library \(/facilities/cadbury/index.aspx\)](#) (fittingly housed in the basement of the Muirhead Tower in which, on the 8th floor, Cultural Studies resided for many years) and will be added to by Hall's own papers. Hall's achievements, influence and legacy - bound up as they are with the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Studies for a crucial part of his career - will also be debated at an international conference being hosted by the University, in June of this year, to mark the 50th anniversary of the Centre's foundation.

Professor Matthew Hilton & Dr Kieran Connell, Department of Modern History

The Stuart Hall Project, a documentary about Stuart Hall's life by award-winning film-maker John Akomfrah, will be screened at the University on Thursday 20 March. For more information [check our events pages \(/events/arts-and-science/arts-and-science-2014/Screenings2014/The-Stuart-Hall-Project.aspx\)](#).