The histories of Edward Palmer Thompson (1924–1993) and Raphael Elkan Samuel (1934–1996) can be said to run in close parallel with each another, in more ways than one. Both former members of the Communist Party of Great Britain, the two men subsequently made substantial and pioneering contributions to the study of politics in popular culture – history from below – in late twentieth-century British historiography. Thompson approached this through his iconic book *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963) and in subsequent essays written during his time at the University of Warwick, Samuel through the History Workshop, *History Workshop Journal* (1976–), and his book *Theatres of Memory* (1994). Yet despite the close association there were stark differences between the two men, not least in their view of one another’s work. In Thompson’s eyes, Samuel and the Workshop verged towards ‘evacuating large territories of established political and economic history’ with their ‘microscopic’ approach to the histories of everyday life and popular culture. For Samuel, the Workshop was, in part, an attempt to escape the ‘grand terrain’ of Thompsonian history by focusing on the lives and experiences of ‘ordinary people’.

Whilst this tension is often explained with reference to the generational difference between the two men, this paper draws upon the intimate lens offered by biography to explore another perspective. It argues that their respective backgrounds and professional trajectories, in conjunction with their generational positioning, provided much of the basis for the critical differences in their politics and practices of history. Not only does this have repercussions for understanding the two men and their relationship to contemporary British historiography, it also shows how the biographical approach poses important methodological questions to intellectual history as a field of research.

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