

Social History and Agricultural History*

By ALUN HOWKINS

SOCIAL history, as David Cannadine pointed out in a review of these volumes in the *TLS*, has come a long way since Trevelyan or the old saw that it is 'history with the politics left out'. We have a Social History Society, two internationally-recognized journals devoted to the area and several other publications, pre-eminently *Past and Present* and *History Workshop Journal*, whose subject matter is frequently seen to be 'social history'. Yet in all this, there is a remarkable lack of an agreed sense as to what social history actually is. To many, particularly those outside the academy, it is still what was called in the 1950s 'the history of everyday things', and that has many virtues as a definition. Most however would follow, consciously or unconsciously, a notion derived from its more recent origins and conclude that social history is somehow a kind of historical social science – after all much of our funding comes from the ESRC! In this view social history is a question of methodology as well as subject matter. Put simply it is concerned not only with everyday things but with particular ways of looking at them. In his editorial preface to these volumes Thompson is well aware of this when he writes 'social historians draw widely on concepts from historical demography, social anthropology, sociology, social geography and political science, as well as from economics'.¹ This is of considerable importance for how social history is written in that it determines the way in which questions are asked and what materials and problems are the subject of inquiry. Yet this creates a different set of difficulties. Sociology or anthropology have set rules and theoretical structures which appear more or less coherent. When transferred to history this apparent coherence is seldom questioned by historians. More often, as Tony Judt has argued with great vigour, they are accepted as giving a 'scientific' value to language, and structures, and methods which are at best weak and at worst downright misleading. The uncritical use of concepts like 'modernization' or 'urbanization' or the wholesale adoption of 'systems' of explanation

derived from the social sciences not only make for 'bad history' but mark, for Judt, 'a complete loss of faith in History'.² Similarly, many social historians seem oblivious to the critiques by sociologists, like Ken Plummer, of the limitations of quantitative methods as applied to sociology,³ and continue to search with computer and data for the philosopher's stone of the ultimate 'series' which will provide a scientific proof. Yet, as Lawrence Stone wrote nearly twelve years ago, 'economic and demographic determinism has collapsed in the face of the evidence...Structuralism and functionalism have not turned out much better. Quantitative methodology has proved a fairly weak reed which can only answer a limited set of problems'.⁴

But social history in some of its forms clearly has enormous strengths. Plummer advocates a 'humanist' and qualitative social science, not the abandonment of the social sciences. In a different way Stone points to its enormous appeal, especially outside the 'profession', because of its subject matter which is 'concerned with the masses rather than the elite. [It is] more "relevant" to our own lives than the doings of dead kings, presidents and generals'.⁵ It is this facet of the subject which has also 'politicized' social history. Feminist history, radical and socialist histories are often centred on social history precisely because of their interest in those who had no voice in the normal historical texts. Nor would all historians accept the strictures of Judt or Cannadine. Keith Snell, in a characteristically robust review of the *Agrarian History of England and Wales*, Volume VI, 1750–1850, berates many of its contributors for ignoring precisely the kinds of work, both in quantification and in other aspects of the social sciences, which Judt or Stone criticize.⁶

This point is particularly important for agrarian

* A review article of F M L THOMPSON, ed, *The Cambridge Social History of Britain 1750–1950*, CUP, 1990. 3 volumes: Volume 1, *Regions and Communities*, xv + 588 pp, £45; Volume 2, *People and their Environment*, xv + 373 pp, £40; Volume 3, *Social Agencies and Institutions*, xiii + 492 pp, £40.

¹ Vol 1, p xiii

² Tony Judt, 'A Clown in Regal Purple: Social History and the Historians', *History Workshop Journal*, 7, 1979, pp 66–94. For a similar view from a very different perspective see David Cannadine, 'British History: Past, Present and Future?', *Past and Pres*, 116, 1987, pp 169–191

³ Ken Plummer, *Documents of Life. An Introduction to the Problems and Literature of a Humanistic Method*, 1990

⁴ Lawrence Stone, 'The Revival of Narrative: Reflections on a New Old History', *Past and Pres*, 85, 1979, p 19

⁵ *Ibid*, p 15

⁶ K D M Snell, 'Agrarian Histories and our Rural Past', *Jnl Hist Geog*, 17, 1991, pp 200–201

history. Agrarian history has lived for many a long year under the umbrella of economic history. This obviously has many strengths, which are shown time and again in the pages of the *Review*. Not the least of these is rejection of the seductive power of nostalgia which is all too present in much 'country writing' which often passes for social history. Yet is also has many weaknesses. It has an intellectual arrogance which denies the qualitative and the non-schematic any place in historical explanation. There is seldom a human face seen in a subject which often describes the complex and varied experience of farm labour as a 'factor of production' or, all too often, equates wage rates with the standard of living.

I want, therefore, to address these volumes primarily from the point of view of a social historian of the rural areas. From this viewpoint it has to be said immediately that as a whole these volumes are much weaker here than they are for the urban areas. It could be argued that this approach is unfair, since much social history has been urban in direction, and agrarian history has not been 'social'. Yet, at the most basic level for at least half the period covered, Britain was a rural nation. In terms of localities even the 'classic' areas of industrialization like Lancashire, Yorkshire or the north-east contained substantial and complex rural societies. One would expect, therefore, that the social history of the countryside would figure large even if it did not dominate the texts.

Much of the obviously 'rural material' is concentrated in Volume 1, *Regions and Communities* in the regional surveys, and in Alan Armstrong's sixty-eight page chapter, 'The Countryside'. The regional surveys are, with the exception of those on Wales and Scotland, very weak indeed, looked at from the point of view of rural social history. For a start, much of rural England is simply not covered. The West Country, the Midlands or East Anglia are not covered in separate chapters, and as a result great areas simply vanish, I assume because they fell between the areas of interests of particular writers. Yorkshire is not in the index of Volume 1 at all, nor is Lincolnshire or Cumberland. Norfolk occurs under 'Towns and Cities' via its duke who lived in Sussex, and one reference to its population which is anyway in the section on the countryside. Even where counties are looked at, as with Northumberland, they are often discussed with practically no reference to rural social history. Indeed, through the whole of the volume economic history seems to control the text in a very familiar way. Thus, we get pages of discussion of 'growth', of 'output', of 'machinery', of 'trade cycles', but practically nothing on rural social structure, the family farm, hiring practices,

regional variations in farming structures, discussions of settlement patterns in relation to social structures, or most of the questions which would be basic to a social history of rural areas. In the three 'English' regional chapters totalling about 190 pages there are less than twenty on the rural aspects of those regions.

In contrast, the chapters on Wales and especially Scotland are excellent. The Welsh chapter by D W Howell and C Baber begins with a sixteen-page survey of the social history of rural Wales up to the 1930s which stresses the diversity and complexity of Welsh rural society. Although much of the material and the general interpretation is familiar from Howell's earlier work, it is nevertheless a very useful introduction which is what, in a way, one looks for in this kind of book. Equally important, key social institutions for Wales, like nonconformity and the Welsh language, are dealt with in both urban and rural contexts. Scotland gets two chapters, the first covering the period up to 1850 by Rosalind Mitchison, the second by T C Smout taking the story up to 1950. Both are aware of social history's debt to other subject disciplines in a way none of the other regional chapters are. Discussions of economic growth are here, as they have to be, but so are discussions of 'clanship', crofting, and the social structural difference between highland and lowland, especially in Mitchison's chapter. Smout gives more weight to the urban experience, which is not surprising given his period, but never loses sight of the central importance of the rural to the Scottish experience. These three chapters come near to what I would expect such a book to contain. They survey the literature and arguments carefully and impartially; they stress social structure and social relations at the expense of the economic and political, but never degenerate into simple listing of quaint social facts. I would give them to any undergraduate student or beginner in these areas to introduce them to the subject without any fear that the reader would come away with a simplistic sense of history.

Rural social history is the central concern of Alan Armstrong's chapter on the countryside. The general tenor of Armstrong's account will be familiar to many readers of this journal through his work on farmworkers and his contribution to the *Agrarian History of England and Wales*, Volume VI, 1750-1850, as indeed will the criticism of this position. As a result it is difficult to come to this cold. The questions of enclosure and of social conflict in the eighteenth century get short shrift, and these, along with the crisis of the 1820s and 1830s, are discussed in terms that will do little to placate Armstrong's critics. In all these discussions

there is little sense of the growing complexity of the nature of rural disorder which some historians have seen in this period. The millenarianism of Bossenden Wood; the belief in lost rights which fuelled support for Cobbett as well as gave legitimation to wood stealers; the residual power of the customary economy; the persistence of ideas of the right to relief or work long after the end of the Old Poor Law; and the black-faced rioter who looks more like a folk-lore performer than a revolutionary find little space here. Swing is written about largely from the economic and therefore easily-criticized work of Hobsbawm and Rudé, which will soon celebrate its silver jubilee, the Old Poor Law from the standard essays of the 1960s and 1970s, enclosure largely from Chambers and Mingay. That these books and articles are old is not necessarily a criticism – but there is newer material which at least casts doubt on some of these arguments.

As a general survey the material on the mid- and late nineteenth century is difficult to comment on. It is woefully short of regionality, but if that was supposed to be elsewhere in the book one can hardly blame Armstrong for its neglect. At times the account is breathless in its coverage and in the linkages made from one area to another but, as someone who has also tried to write a 'general account', he has my sympathy here. Yet again, there are extremely odd moments. Arch's Union is given the same space as the dockers' attempts to unionize the farm labourers of the Home Counties in the 1890s, and both are seen as somehow outside and 'disrupting' influences, whereas recent work shows that many of the unions of the 1870s were deeply local, even if they were aware that they were breaking what the elite saw as sacred bonds. Later trade unionism, especially during and just after the Great War, gets better coverage; indeed, much of the material on the 1930s and 1940s is extremely useful as it is not easily available elsewhere. As always, and how often do we need to say it, there is very little here on women as workers, be they servants, labourers, members of the productive unit of the small farm, or, given that this is social history not a history of labour, half the human race. An aside on gangs and a few lines on dairying are simply not adequate to the huge amount of material produced in the last ten years, even on the rural areas.

The second volume, *People and their Environment*, is based around topics or themes like demography, the family, religion, work, and looking at them over the period and the country as a whole. For the rural social historian these chapters are a bit of a curate's egg. As one would expect, the chapters on demographic change by Michael And-

erson, the family by Leonore Davidoff, food, drink, and nutrition by D J Oddy, and leisure and culture by Hugh Cunningham are models of their kind, presenting their material clearly and well, while also stimulating a wish to follow up ideas and arguments. Yet all show how detailed work is shaping general perceptions in an almost random way. Davidoff's chapter, for instance, shows just how little we really know about the social history of the family once we move beyond broad generalities. This is especially true of the middling ranks of artisans, tradesmen, and for the rural areas farmers and even, rather surprisingly perhaps, the gentry. This is no reflection on Davidoff; rather it shows the way in which the subject has been studied until now. Putting on the hat of a rural historian I am less happy with the chapters on housing by M J Daunton, and work by Patrick Joyce. Daunton, like many contributors, effectively ends the rural with the beginning of the nineteenth century. Again, this maybe defensible in some ways, but it is very disappointing in a 'general' history. This is even more true of Joyce's chapter. Like all his work, it is tense, sophisticated and always intellectually challenging. He presents in his 'introduction' a fine picture of the complexities of the labour market which was produced by the 'diverse and irregular development of industrial capitalism over the period'.⁷ Yet its very brief discussion of agricultural work, while more revealing in two pages than many a survey at ten times the length, is really not adequate to the subject.

The third volume is entitled *Social Agencies and Institutions*. As a collection I found this more useful, perhaps because its subject matter is more clearly defined. Institutions, however described, do have more or less clear boundaries. Again familiar names produced excellent surveys. Pat Thane and José Harris cover the state and society in two chapters, Thane up to 1914 and Harris after. Gillian Sutherland does the same for education and Virginia Berridge for health and medicine. James Obelkevich provides an excellent chapter on religion, though again those interested in the rural world should also go to his earlier work on Lincolnshire. More than that though, parts of this volume show social history at its creative and prickly best. V A C Gatrell produces a provocative account called 'Crime, Authority and the Policeman-State', which transcends the urban nature of much of its source material by offering a powerful and general argument about the changing nature of crime, criminality and the forces of law and order.

In a different way the chapters by F K Prochaska

⁷ Vol 2, p 148

and R J Morris also demonstrate the real strength of social history. Prochaska creates in his contribution on 'philanthropy' a new way of looking at very diverse social 'acts'. Bringing together the bonding of neighbourhood with the powerful structures of deference on the one hand and charitable societies on the other, he shows how a notion of social form and structure can illuminate historical materials by simply bringing them into a relationship. This is also true of R J Morris's piece on 'Clubs, Societies and Associations'. Morris shows how 'as society became more complex'⁸ different groups created a huge range of organizations separate from the family, neighbourhood, household, firm, and work group. Again this approach of taking a social form and looking at its different manifestations shows the real strengths of social history. It is also worth noting of this volume, and to a lesser extent of Volume 2, that the amount of space given to women and women's activities is much greater than in Volume 1. This may have something to do with the subject matter, though I cannot see why, but it is perhaps cynical

to note that four out of the eight contributors to Volume 3 are women while all the contributors to Volume 1 are men.

It has been suggested that these volumes mark social history's 'coming of age', or at least its acceptance as a 'proper' subject. If that is so then I am a bit worried. It seems to be male, urban and still reliant on its economic history father for much of its support. It also lacks, in many essays in these volumes at least, a cutting edge. Social history in its youth was a rebel, enraged, and angry at the history it uncovered, a history largely of poverty and waste. With one or two exceptions, particularly Gatrell's chapter, that is not true of these volumes at all. Indeed several contributors go out of their way to remove class and conflict from their accounts altogether. Yet there are good things here. I have already used some of the articles in my own writing and my students have benefitted from more. No doubt many others will find the same. But, to return to my original point, it is still a loss that with agrarian history so firmly wedded to the economic these volumes offer relatively little to balance the books. We still have to wait for a full social history of rural Britain.

⁸ Vol 3, p 395