

## **Social History** **by Roy Hay**

In the late 1990s I was asked by the convener of a postgraduate seminar at Deakin University to talk on social history. A revised and edited version of this original effort, which contains some material particularly on Australia which does not appear here, was published as 'Social History', in Graeme Davison, John Hirst and Stuart Macintyre, eds *Oxford Companion to Australian History*, Melbourne, Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. 590-1.

I don't know how Anita does it. She conned me into leading a discussion today on Social History. I ask you, all of social history in its many varieties and different national and other forms. I was about to give up in despair, when I came across an article in the current issue of the periodical *Social History* by Patrick Joyce, entitled 'The End of Social History?' So perhaps there is no more to say. It did have a question mark at the end of the title. But Patrick Joyce is infected by the linguistic turn, he is a post-modern deconstructionist historian, and though he has written good social history in the past, I fear that his recent work is becoming more and more impenetrable and incomprehensible. I will have to come back to it later, but as a very old-fashioned social historian I want to go searching for the origins of social history. I will then follow some of its developments over the last half-century in particular and conclude with some prognostications for its future, for I believe that as Mark Twain said of a report of his own death, It is exaggerated.

Anita asked me to talk about theory and social history. I am not sure that I can deal with such a grand topic. I suspect what I am going to be discussing with you is rather styles of social history, looking at developments over time, changes in fashions, possibly paradigm shifts, and different national approaches to social history. I will spend most of my time talking about British social history, because that is where I began and the area about which I know most, but I will have a few words about the national styles of social history in France, Germany, the United States and Australia. I will be picking out highlights and relying on an idiosyncratic reading. My choices will be arbitrary, but I hope not entirely unhelpful as a result.

Where to start? One could canvass the claims of Herodotus, Thucydides, Julius Caesar, Ibn Khaldun, the Venerable Bede, Ranke, Marx, Maitland, Tawney, and the Webbs as social historians. Certainly all wrote passages of what would pass for social history, but for the most part their purpose was other than that. Arbitrarily I am going to begin with British social history and with Trevelyan, partly because he announced that he was going to write social history, *English Social History*, did so, provided some working definitions, and set a standard for literate and informed prose to which most modern social history does not appear to aspire.

George Macaulay Trevelyan, *English Social History: A survey of six centuries; Chaucer to Queen Victoria*, by the Master of Trinity, Cambridge. Published in 1942, mostly written just before the Second World War, and had sold 95,000 copies by 1945 and goodness knows how many since. Dedicated to the memory of Eileen Power, economic and social historian and one of the female pioneers of the disciplines which I am proud to study and try to teach in 1995. Points to a linkage which we will need to explore in a moment. Named Macaulay after his ancestor Thomas Babington Macaulay, author of a Whig history of England, the famous third chapter of which was a precocious piece of social history.

Trevelyan's pages are full of coruscating prose, 'a history which is also literature', as the Times Literary Supplement remarked approvingly. A later generation was to decry these qualities and to seek a much harder, more quantitative, more theoretically informed approach. But we ought to hear Trevelyan as he maps out his territory.

vii 'Social history might be defined negatively as the history of a people with the politics left out ... Without social history, economic history is barren and political history is unintelligible.' This phrase 'history ... with the politics left out', which Trevelyan carefully indicated was a negative characterisation was used by subsequent radical historians to condemn him out of hand, to the severe loss of those who have thus not read him. Let's return to Trevelyan's mapping out of his territory.

viii 'Disinterested intellectual curiosity is the life-blood of real civilisation. Social history provides one of its best forms. At bottom, I think, the appeal of history is imaginative. Our imagination craves to behold our ancestors as they really were, going about their daily business and their daily pleasure.'

ix And he quotes Carlyle, 'History after all is the true poetry. And Reality (with a capital R, for all you post-modernists and deconstructionists), if rightly interpreted, (Aye, there's the rub. But I suspect Carlyle's stress is on 'rightly', rather than 'interpreted') is grander than Fiction' (also with a capital F).

And then there is this moving passage of his own.

x 'To weigh the stars, or to make ships sail in the air or below the sea, is not a more astonishing and ennobling performance on the part of the human race in these latter days, than to know the course of events that had been long forgotten, and the true nature of men and women who were here before us.' The poignancy of the passage is reinforced as we remember that this was written during the dark days preceding or immediately following the Battle of Britain in the midst of the Second World War.

This is a task which requires skill, training and vision.

p. 4 'Thus the age of Chaucer speaks to us with many voices not unintelligible to the modern ear. Indeed we may be tempted to think that we 'understanden' more than in fact we do. For these ancestors of ours, in one half of their thoughts and acts, were still guided by a complex of intellectual, ethical and social assumptions of which only mediaeval scholars can today comprehend the true purport.' Any reading will not do. It has to be informed by a deep understanding of the period and its cosmology.

For Trevelyan there was a seeking after poetic truth, but he was always aware to the provisional nature of that truth and that the student of history would always fall short.

'Yet even a millionth part of a loaf may be better than no bread. It may at least whet the appetite. If it makes a few people more eager to study the literature and records of the past, this book will have served its turn.' And it triumphantly did, despite its later neglect. And if my mentioning of it today, sends any of you to back to read it, I predict that you will be enriched by the experience.

Trevelyan's dedication of his book to Eileen Power is an earnest of the close links between social and economic history. It recurs in that personalised form in Asa Briggs' *Social History of England*, originally published in 1983 and just reissued in a second edition, who listened to Power as an undergraduate in Cambridge around the time Trevelyan was putting his book together. Throughout Europe in the twentieth century there has been a relatively close relationship between economic and social history. Economic history had the head start in disciplinary terms. As Hobsbawm points out, the journals of the interwar years which paired the areas, e.g. *Vierteljahrschrift für Sozial und Wirtschaftsgeschichte*, *Revue d'Histoire Economique et Sociale*, *Annales d'Histoire Economie et Societe*, were usually dominated by the economic component. The

evolution of the economy and light it threw on the structure and changes in society were the themes which interested practitioners.<sup>1</sup>

A wise and wise-cracking economic historian Michael Moissey Postan once said that his discipline was like the mule. It was descended from two different species but was itself barren and did not give rise to offspring. He also went on to say it was not profitable to speculate which parent was equine and which was asinine. If economic history is the mule, then social history is the mongrel discipline. It has drawn on economics and history, but also on social anthropology, sociology, psychology and demography for its models, its theoretical constructs and its categories. But it also has been enormously fecund, spawning progeny in profusion - oral history, urban history, labour history, feminist history and many more specialised disciplines, sports history, history of leisure and so on.

Social history in Britain, if it was born with Trevelyan, grew by leaps and bounds from the 1950s and 1970s. When Eric Hobsbawm surveyed the territory in 1971 he discussed three senses in which the term had been used.

1 A study of the poorer classes in society and specifically of social movements of the poor.

2 A study of the manners, customs and everyday life. "It formed the unspoken basis of what may be called the residual view of social history, which was put forward by Trevelyan as 'history with the politics left out'. It requires no comment. Such was Trevelyan's dismissal, by one of the most perceptive and wide-ranging Marxist scholars of the day.

3 A study of the relationships between the evolution of the economy and changes in the structure of society, particularly the relationships between classes and social groups.

Hobsbawm saw social history being emancipated, partly as a result of the pursuit by economic history of closer ties with economics, economic theory and quantification. 'Many historians (such as the Marxists) who had previously labelled themselves economic ... found themselves extruded from a rapidly narrowing economic history and accepted or welcomed the title of "social historians", especially if their mathematics were poor.'

Hobsbawm also pointed to the struggles taking place for independence in colonial societies which drew attention of governments, research organisation and eventually of social scientists to 'what were essentially problems of historical transformations.' Hence the historization of the social sciences and in turn the rise to prominence of social history with its repertoire of resources on historical transformations. This stress on present influences on historical studies is interesting. How far is our study of the social past conditioned by the concerns of the present and how far is the discipline driven by an internal dynamic set by the puzzles it sets out to solve. For an attempt to pursue these issues in the case of economic history and the industrial revolution see David Cannadine, 'The Past and Present in the English Industrial Revolution, 1880-1980,' *Past and Present*, 103, 1984, pp. 131-172. I said at the time, this is something we might take up in discussion and it is a matter of ongoing concern.

Hobsbawm concluded his survey of social history in 1971 with an exhortation to social historians to aim at a history of society, which included the political, the economic and the cultural. The work he advocated was already being attempted.

Among the critical texts of that early phase of social history were Edward Thompson's, *The Making of the English Working Class*, Hobsbawm's own, *Primitive Rebels*,

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<sup>1</sup> Hobsbawm, 'From Social History to the History of Society' in Flinn and Smout, *Essays in Social History*, p. 2.

Christopher Hill's work on the English revolution of the seventeenth century, Rodney Hilton on mediaeval England. These works were to give a generation of social history a characteristic Marxist flavour, reflected in the early subtitle to the periodical *Past and Present* founded in 1952, *A journal of scientific history*. This theoretical approach was saved from formalism and dogmatism by being blended with what one might take to be its intellectual opposite, the characteristic British empiricism of traditional historical schools. The stimulus it created across the historical spectrum was exhilarating. Whatever the influence of the present on the past, the timing of this work was right as it coincided with the expansion of University education in these years which simultaneously produced an audience of students and created places in University for young scholars in much larger numbers.

At this point I could lapse into autobiography, since I went back to Glasgow University in 1961 to study Literature and History, took a course in Economic History in second year and finished up going to Balliol with the intention of replicating Edward Thompson's study of the *Making of the English Working Class* for Scotland. Such is the innocence or the hubris of youth. I found after 6 months work that another candidate was camped on the Radical War in Scotland in 1820 and I reasoned that if I did not find enough material in the earlier period I would be unable to extend my study through its natural conclusion. So on the advice of my supervisor I turned to the newly released Treasury Papers in England for the period 1906 to 1914 out of which came *The Origins of the Liberal Welfare Reforms* in 1975, still in print in 2005. After teaching in the University of East Anglia for three years I returned to the Economic History Department in Glasgow, where around this time of the year I would hire a mini-bus and drive 650 kilometres overnight to South Wales with a group of undergraduate students to the Easter Week-End School organised by the Welsh Labour History Society and the South Wales Branch of the National Union of Mineworkers, where we would listen to Raymond Williams, Robin Page Arnot, Gwyn Aelf Williams, Hwyl Francis, Deian Hopkins, Dai Smith among the academics, and the pillars of the Miners Lodges on their experiences of the General Strike in 1926, or the great struggles against Spencer Unions, and the origins of nationalisation. Similarly we would go as a group to History Workshop meetings at Ruskin College and sit on floors listening to a kaleidoscope of papers of enormously varying quality. In Glasgow I taught with Bob Holton (now at TCD and previously at Flinders University in Adelaide) and Keith Burgess (He was at Roehampton in England at the time and sadly died early in 2006) a course on British social movements in the late nineteenth century, which provided the inspiration for *Economic Change and Social Movements in Europe, 1870-1914*, which was later superseded at Deakin by the *End of Old Europe, 1870-1920*, though the underlying format and some of the content was retained.

Social history was not the sole preserve of the left and indeed from the beginning conservative and more middle of the road social history was being produced. Michael Thompson was studying the landed gentry in the 19th century, Bill Rubinstein was beavering away as research assistant to Harold Perkin on the top wealth holders in England. Perkin went on to produce his *Origins of Modern English Society, 1780-1880* which stressed the entrepreneurial and middle class professional ideals and their influence on the character of industrialising England. He also founded the Social History Society with Asa Briggs as President. Bill wrote *Wealth and Wealthy in the Modern World* and came to Deakin via the ANU, where he replicated some of his studies in an Australian context. Jack Plumb edited a social history of Britain, which brought together much of the conservative perspective. Later volumes in the Penguin social history of Britain by Porter, Stevenson, and Marwick show interesting differences in approach ranging from conservative to moderate social democratic perspectives.

In 1986 when the Economic History Society produced its second volume of *Essays in Social History* the editors were drawn from the younger generation of social historians who had carried the discipline forward in the seventies, Pat Thane (now Professor of Social History at Sussex) and Tony Sutcliffe (Professor of Economic and Social

History at Sheffield). Incidentally the volume contains two articles by Deakin University staff, and only Essex in the United Kingdom has similar representation. Thane and Sutcliffe identified four conceptually distinct, though overlapping, varieties of social history: social history as total history, as a branch of the social sciences, as a history of human groups and as an integrating praxis.

The idea of total history is very elusive. By trying to incorporate everything it can trivialise, but in the hands of skilled practitioners it can be enormously stimulating. There is however no British equivalent of the work of Braudel on the Mediterranean in the time of Philip II, or Theodore Zeldin's studies of modern France. Nevertheless the aim, however unrealisable, of a holistic view of society sustained many of that generation of social historians.

As suggested earlier social history did build close if uneasy relationships with social science disciplines in the 60s to the 80s. Conceptions of class, of social control, of social structure were borrowed, refined, rejected or re-exported. Anthropology, particularly through the work of people like Geertz, began to be influential in the 1980s. More fruitful alliances with the demographers, pioneered in France, were taken up yielding new quantitative evidence through family reconstitution.

The continuing interest in human groups was extended in this period beyond the traditional concern with the poor, the working class and the politically active in parties and trade unions. Patrick Joyce's studies of deference and paternalism in the Lancashire cotton industry, Bob Morris and Geoff Crossick's research on the middle-classes and the petty bourgeoisie, Bill's studies of the wealthy and my own and Joe Melling's work on employers filled gaps which had been left. And at the same time provided material for a critique of the dominant frameworks of social history as it was practiced.

The idea of an integrating praxis, drawing on the insights of other disciplines, but bringing the sense of contingency and the unique which comes from historical training and experience, is an attractive aim for social history. It certainly has informed all my mongrel existence in the area, though the dangers associated with eclecticism and tunnel vision at times are all too apparent. When I was exploring the value of the concept of social control in historical explanation I trotted off to seek some enlightenment from my sociological colleagues in the Adam Smith Building of Glasgow University. I remember being told that the whole of sociology was social control, at which point I decided that life was too short to read the whole of sociology, so I would make do with what I could glean from the sources accessible to me at that time.

In the last decade it might be argued that social history in Britain has fragmented. There are several different strands which might be identified. There was a revival of studies on the labour process, in the light of the work of Braverman and others, led by Alastair Reid, Jonathan Zeitlin, Steven Tolliday and Chris McGuffie. There was a strong conservative reaction which coincided with economic historians' reconsideration of the industrial revolution as a Claphamesque slow, gradual and incomplete process, and the political analyses of the Peterhouse School in Cambridge. Jonathan Clark in England outlined the persistence of the ancien regime in British politics and society, Lawrence Stone claimed to have demolished the notion of an Open Elite in English society, and Cain and Hopkins advanced the concept of gentlemanly capitalism, rather than industrial manufacturing as the key to Britain's successful imperialism in the nineteenth century.

The disciplines which had emerged from or with social history, urban studies, social demography, oral history, labour history and feminist history increasingly went their own ways with their own societies, conferences, journals and jargon. Looking back it would have been worthwhile saying a little about on each of these, but time pressed.

Let me turn very briefly now to other national varieties of social history, German, French, American and Australian. What I have to say is very schematic and crude.

German social history can be traced back into the nineteenth century with the concern for what was labelled the 'social problem' - the co-existence of poverty, appalling social conditions and physical deterioration with rapid economic growth and the demands for the defence of an imperial state. In the interwar years the focus shifted more to a concern with the customs, manners and conditions of everyday life, not just of the lower orders but of the middle and upper classes what was referred to a Kultur or Sittengeschichte. (There was a notable lacuna in German social history in the 1930s to 1950s under the influence of Nazism and afterwards a feeling that the Nazi era should not be the subject of academic study. A student Kay Stevens raised the issue in question time). In the 1960s social history was boosted by a rise of concern with domestic rather than foreign policy provoked by the debate between Fritz Fischer and his critics. A group of younger scholars influenced by a mixture of Marxism, American sociology and modernization theory began to re-examine the Bismarckian Reich and its social, economic and political discontents. Included Hans-Ulrich Wehler, Jürgen Kocka, Volker Berghahn. They were concerned with the Sonderweg debate. The idea that Germany had taken a special way to modern society as a result of failed bourgeois revolution. The debate was taken up by another group of scholars including many from Britain and the United States, Eley, Blackbourn, Evans, Bessell. Germans included Hartmut Kaelble with his interest in social structure and demography, Bernd Weisbrod studying the controllers of heavy industry, Alf Ludtke, with a revived interest in social democracy and labour, Ute Frevert, pioneer of women's history. More recently there has been an efflorescence of interest in how people coped under intolerable conditions. The study of everyday life under the Nazi regime for example. This has not been without its critics. Is Alltagsgeschichte trivialising if it fails to keep politics and power at the centre of the agenda?

#### French social history

Probably the most stimulating national variety of social history has been the French, where the Annales School is seen as the progenitor of a whole series of ideas and approaches, sometimes borrowed from the other social sciences but then transformed by the practice of the historians. Others have denied the existence of the Annales School or have downplayed its influence. It can be traced back to the work of Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch between the wars, but became most influential in the 1950s and 1960s. Its interest in demography, family reconstitution, social structures, festivals, social inversions, mentalities fed into work across Europe and the United States. The goal was always a total social history, even the practice fell short. Even today the journal emphasises these broad themes (content of analysis of contents of Annales over the last three years).

#### Postmodernism

Postmodernism requires a modernism for its own self-definition, but the modernism which it proposes is one which social historians find unrecognisable or incoherent or inadequate. The idea that the text is all and that the interpretation of discourse is key procedure is very slippery. For historians the idea that all they have is the text and artefacts as a link to the past is common coin. See E H Carr *What is History?* or even read the introductory booklet on *Theory in Social Sciences* which was prepared for the Imperialism Unit here at Deakin.

The idea that interpretation and the processes of the mind are our only analytical tools can be traced back through Bishop Berkeley to Plato and Aristotle. But the varieties of post-modernism make any critique very difficult. Some versions are solipsistic. Most are too slippery for my mind.

Should social history engage with the post-modernist debate as Patrick Joyce requires in that article on the End of Social History with which I started? His threat is that if we

do not, we are missing out on the intellectual history of Europe of the last fifty years. There are various replies, one of which is that it is not too high a price to pay. I am only joking honestly. Though looking back I wonder if this is still not the right reply.

I'd rather take a different tack and argue that social history will survive, provided it can balance the particular and the general, provided it can retain a political focus and linkages with the economic and sociological, while retaining its unique, contingent and empirical insights. It may borrow from post-modernism if it finds anything of value as it has done with every other style with which it has come in contact. But in the end its truths will be poetic and rhetorical. Which brings me back to Trevelyan, or to Aneurin Bevan, founder of the National Health Service in Britain after the second World War, who was wont to end his talks with, "That is my truth, now you tell me yours."