

THE CAMBRIDGE SOCIAL HISTORY OF BRITAIN 1750–1950

Whilst in certain quarters it may be fashionable to suppose that there is no such thing as society, social historians have had no difficulty in finding their subject. The difficulty, rather, is that the advance of social history into every sphere of human activity and experience has occurred through such an outpouring of research and writing that it is hard for anyone but the specialist to keep up with the literature or grasp the overall picture. In these three volumes, as is the tradition in Cambridge Histories, a team of specialists has assembled the jigsaw of recent monographic research and presented an interpretation of the development of modern British society since 1750, from three complementary perspectives: those of regional communities, of the working and living environment, and of social institutions. Each volume is self-contained, and each contribution, thematically defined, contains its own chronology of the period under review. Taken as a whole they offer an authoritative and comprehensive view of the manner and method of the shaping of society in the two centuries of unprecedented demographic and economic change.

Volume 3, *Social agencies and institutions*, discusses the institutions which affected social conditions and influenced values and attitudes. Social policies were made for the most part by the comfortably off and those in power for the supposed good of the less fortunate. Contributors to this volume examine these initiatives with regard to, amongst others, the development of health care, philanthropy and the voluntary sector, the police and crime, professional associations and unions. The reaction of the populace to the authorities' measures is also assessed to examine both the disparities and the similarities between the social beliefs of those in power and the opinions of those governed.

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OF BRITAIN 1750–1950**

**VOLUME 3
Social agencies and institutions**

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Edited by

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Editorial preface

The historian's job is to find out about the past and make it intelligible and accessible to the present. Such an apparently straightforward task is by no means as simple as it may sound. Finding out what happened and interpreting it in patterns and designs which make sense of the past are complicated and demanding processes, requiring scholarship and expertise of a high order, but their value remains limited unless the results are communicated in a language and form which reach beyond the restricted circle of fellow-specialists. Communication is particularly important for social history, a field whose contours and boundaries have altered out of all recognition in the last generation, a subject which is bubbling with the vitality of an outpouring of monographs and journal articles, and a young discipline which lacks the settled framework of a conventional orthodoxy or a received interpretation within which or against which new departures or open rebellions can be placed or assessed. The old stand-bys – constitutional history, political history, diplomatic history, ecclesiastical history, for example – all have these established frameworks which define their subject matters and enshrine explanations of the course of history. These are widely familiar, although often misleading or mistaken; this means that the terms of debate are well understood, that revisions are easily recognised as revisions, and that the iconoclasm of overturning entrenched views does not go unnoticed. Economic history, while much younger than these other subjects, has nevertheless established its rules of enquiry, its methodologies, and its canons of debate, even if it has never succeeded in staking out a territory with sharply defined and stable boundaries. Some might say that it has dug a groove for itself which succeeds in shutting out adequate consideration of factors of central importance, for example the nature and operation of demand and of consumption, in which social history can be illuminating and supportive.

Social history derives its appeal and fascination in no small measure from its open-endedness, its freedom from the constraints of a formal tradition, its eclectic habits, and stands in no need of being rendered into an authorised version. This is just as well, for orthodoxies are not created by editorial decree and if perchance they are fashioned by bands of disciples then the three volumes of this series are in little danger of becoming a Cambridge gospel, for the authors do not belong to any one single camp and do not have a common axe to grind. That is not to say that they are a particularly disputatious or dogmatic bunch, but simply that they are a team of individualists each of whom has been invited to bring their own scholarly judgment to bear on the task in hand. That task is to communicate the fruits of recent writing and the most recent research in social history to the wider audience of students who are curious to know what the specialists have been doing and how their work fits into a general picture of the whole process of social change and development. There are two ways of producing a synthesis: single-handed combat, in which one author takes on the whole field and produces a digest and interpretation of a large slice of history; or a team effort, in which the field is sliced up among contributors according to their expertise and the overview is a co-ordinated package of separate authoritative elements. As with individual sports and team games, tennis and cricket or golf and football, each approach has its own attractions and disadvantages, for players and spectators alike, and each has its partisans. There are several examples of solo syntheses on offer in the field of modern social history, notably from Penguin, Fontana-Collins, and Hutchinson. As the author of one of these it is not my purpose to decry their merits. No doubt their main strength comes from the coherence and unity which a picture of an entire landscape may have when seen through one pair of eyes and painted by one hand, and their main weakness from the inability of a single pair of eyes to see everything or to be well educated and well informed about the structure and meaning of all the features in that landscape.

Such virtues and vices are neatly balanced by the collaborative synthesis, in which each major feature is given critical appraisal by a leading specialist, while the landscape as a whole is left to look after itself in the expectation that an impression will form in the mind of the beholder. It would be unwise to try to compensate for this by raising an overarching superstructure over the individual contributions in these volumes, for that would come close to courting a disaster

akin to those which customarily visit university buildings designed in committee. The design of this, the first enterprise to marshal the resources of the multi-author technique to view the entire sweep of modern British social history, does, however, call for explanatory comment and description.

In the last generation or so social historians have been casting their nets wider and wider, into waters previously unnoticed and unexplored by historians as well as into those formerly fished with the conventional equipment of the political, administrative, or trade-union historian. So far has this gone that it is sometimes said that all history which is not concerned with the technicalities of high politics, diplomacy, or econometrics has become a kind of social history. This social history has moved a long way, in its intellectual approach as well as in its subject matter, from the 'history with the politics left out' which still served as a definition of social history in the 1940s. There may not be a 'new' social history in the same way that there is a 'new' economic history as a school of thought applying econometrics and models drawn from economic theory to the understanding of historical economic phenomena; but social historians draw widely on concepts from historical demography, social anthropology, sociology, social geography, and political science, as well as from economics, and are well aware of the importance of quantification. Social historians operating in this conceptually eclectic and experimental fashion do not have the methodological certainty, unity, or rigidity of 'new' economic history, and deal in conclusions which are probable and plausible rather than directly verifiable.

This social history has generated many vigorous controversies and debates on topics within the period covered by this series: on the standard of living, class formation, the labour aristocracy, or social control, for example, and more recently on gender roles and women's emancipation. These issues have not been picked out for separate treatment in these volumes. The debates are best followed in the original exchanges, or in the several admirable surveys which are available, and references can be found in the bibliographies here. The issues, moreover, are best understood when placed within the framework of the conditions, customs, and institutions that shaped the way in which the people lived. Hence questions of class, social relationships, gender differences and roles, and social conflict are discussed in the context of a series of particular themes which constitute the main elements in that framework. The thematic structure means

that much matter of interest is left out, because it chanced to fall into one of the oubliettes between themes; but while there is no attempt at a literally complete coverage, taken together the chapters add up to a comprehensive and balanced account of the complexity, and diversity, of the interactions between continuity and change which have determined the development of British society in the two centuries since 1750.

The series, indeed, provides three social histories of these two centuries, each one complete in itself at a level of partial coverage. That is to say, the volumes themselves are not divided chronologically, but into three broad thematic clusters: regional communities; social environment; and social institutions. Much of the recent pioneering work in social history has advanced through intensive study of particular localities and communities, and Volume 1, *Regions and Communities*, draws on this approach by presenting a series of chapters on the social histories of distinctive regions. This is not an attempt to parcel up the whole of Britain into a number of regions, which could run the risk of reducing social history to a sub-branch of local history. It is, rather, a collection of studies of regions – if Scotland and Wales can forgive the label – whose separate identity is clearly established by their distinctive national, institutional, legal, and administrative histories, and of those of undisputed significance as examples of immense social and economic change (the north-west), concentration of power and wealth (the metropolis), and violent changes in fortune (the north-east). The obvious geographical gaps in this disposition are bridged by two chapters, on the countryside and on the city, whose ‘regions’ are not localities with fixed boundaries but shifting social territories defined by environmental, occupational, and cultural criteria. Regional communities, their social cohesion, disintegration, and reformation, are strongly influenced by regional economies, and this volume, therefore, is more directly concerned than the following two with the links between economic history and social history, and with explicit confrontation of the interaction of economy and society.

Where questions of social structure and class relations are raised in the setting of specific localities in Volume 1, in Volume 2, *People and their Environment*, they are approached, using national data and national patterns, through a collection of studies of the living and working environment. The family and household, the social implications of demographic change, domesticity and the separation of home and workplace, housing and the changing meaning of the home,

the working environment and employer–worker relationships, nutrition and patterns of food and drink consumption, and leisure and popular culture are the themes of this volume. Together they show how the social order was shaped, reproduced, and changed through the processes of getting, spending, and staying alive, through family, marriage, home, work, consumption, and leisure. These agencies both generated and mediated social tensions, but the more explicit, institutionalised, efforts to protect the social order, to control or suppress conflicts, to influence attitudes and behaviour, and to manipulate social conditions are reserved for Volume 3, *Social Agencies and Institutions*. Much of the running was made by those in power and authority, and the chapters on government and society which explain the changing impact of government on people’s lives and the changes in popular expectations of what government could and should provide, as well as the chapter on crime and policing, are central to this theme. Most socialisation, however, took place through voluntary and non-official institutions that were largely generated from within a social group and not imposed upon it. These are the subject of chapters on philanthropy and voluntary associations; while education, religion, and health were in a half-way position, partly the province of official and often coercive action, partly a sphere of voluntarism, self-help, and self-determination.

Each volume is self-contained, with its own set of bibliographies, and with each chapter carrying its own chronology of the 200 years. Together the three volumes, with their three different and complementary angles of approach, are designed to offer an integrated and well-rounded social history that is exciting and challenging, as well as being as up-to-date as the contributors, who have written at different times within the last five years, can make it.

F. M. L. THOMPSON

Government and society in England and Wales, 1750–1914

PAT THANE

The theme of this chapter is the manner in which Government influenced the lives of citizens of England and Wales, their behaviour and conditions of life according to which principles and with what effects. A central assumption – widely shared for a substantial portion of the period, most fully developed in the ideas and actions of Peel and Gladstone, though with earlier roots, and most dominant from the 1840s to the 1870s – was that the government's role was at most strictly limited, that it not only should not but could not determine the structure and working of society. Rather its role was to provide a firmly established and clearly understood framework within which society could very largely run itself.

Even in the mid-Victorian period the reality of government action did not wholly match this ideal, but it was widely enough shared at all social levels for government transgression of it long to require justification against challenges. It had distinctive institutional effects. In contrast with most other societies of the period in England and Wales, many of the functions performed by central government elsewhere were, throughout the period, performed by groups of self-governing citizens either on an elective, but unpaid, official basis, as in the various institutions of local government, or through voluntary associations. Though Britain certainly possessed highly effective central government institutions, unlike other European countries she did not develop in the nineteenth century a strong bureaucratic stratum with powerful interests of its own, a strong set of popular expectations of the role of the state or a sense of popular identification with it. Victorian central government involved itself in the lives of its citizens in many ways and had a clear vision of its role, but its methods of, for example, taxing and policing the population were, compared with other societies of the time, indirect and discreet. A range of buffer institutions, both official and voluntary, developed between this

central state and the citizen such that by the 1880s the only agent of the central state whom the provincial citizen could regularly expect to encounter was the benign post office clerk.

Such a system of government was both a product and a reinforcement of a relatively homogeneous and stable society. England in the later eighteenth century had the advantage of being linguistically and geographically far more homogeneous than other European states. After the Act of Union Scotland was increasingly integrated into the British whole. Improved roads, postal communications, an expanding press furthered this integration. The system of government did not emerge without challenge and Victorian society was by no means free from conflict, though compared with much of continental Europe tensions were muted and contained. The flexibility provided by a system of government which was not rigidly centralised or bureaucratized left space for negotiation and rapid adaptation, within limits, in periods of conflict or crisis, such as war.

This approach to government emerged from the somewhat different circumstances of the eighteenth century, and from the 1880s the visible power of the central state grew, as did demands for further growth, although the dominant ideas of the immediately preceding period retained significant force until at least 1914. The state in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries went, as it had in previous times, through a continuing process of change and adaptation, not usefully characterised as progress. What was the nature of these changes and how did they come about?

I

Characterisation of the eighteenth-century state is taking on a new but yet not wholly distinct shape in a period which historians are at last bringing excitingly to life. Current interpretations range from its description as: 'an *ancien régime* state, dominated politically, culturally and ideologically by the three pillars of an early modern social order: monarchy, aristocracy, church'¹ to emphasis not only upon its decidedly powerful character but also upon its increasing accommodation to structural change (including rapid population growth, the capitalisation of agriculture and industrialisation) and to the

¹ Publicity handout for J. C. D. Clark, *English Society, 1688–1832* (Cambridge, 1985), quoted in Linda Colley, 'The Politics of Eighteenth-Century British History', *Journal of British Studies*, 25 (1986), p. 369 n. 26.

associated, changing needs and demands of assertive social groups among the prosperous and confident gentry, financiers and other business people, and among the lower orders.

New interpretations are reactions against an older perception of the eighteenth-century state as limited in ambitions and activities, such that 'the work of the British government was virtually restricted to preserving the constitution (which meant doing nothing in home affairs) and conducting foreign policy';² domestic affairs (such as maintenance of law and order, relief of the poor) being seen, in this view, as largely delegated to the local responsibility of landowning elites, in contrast to their conduct by armies, police forces and bureaucracies as in continental autocracies.

It has long been hard to understand how so modest a state could so effectively have achieved victory in a succession of eighteenth-century wars, extended its empire (if with a major loss in North America), acquired extraordinary economic and political power in international terms and maintained domestic harmony in a period of considerable structural change. Assessing the exact nature and extent of the activities of the eighteenth-century state is complicated by the lack of good institutional histories, for example of the influence of the crown or of the House of Lords. But it is clear that in the eighteenth century Parliaments met more frequently and for longer periods than before 1688 and were increasingly, as the century went on, considering more items of national domestic legislation than before, in addition to the local and private bills with which its time has previously been assumed to have been absorbed; that the army was trained and dispersed with the maintenance of order at home at least as much in mind as winning victory abroad (with considerable success on both counts); and (an important indicator and reinforcement of its power) the British state could extract more taxation, more regressive in its incidence, whilst arousing less opposition from its citizens than could its more openly authoritarian European peers. In the 1760s Britain succeeded in appropriating about 20 per cent of the nation's output in taxation, almost twice the comparable French figure.³

The amount of revenue which a government can raise through taxation strongly influences the range of activities it can undertake without risking debilitating debt. The means whereby the British government maximised its revenue through taxation, in comparison with its major

² Colley, 'The Politics of Eighteenth-Century British History', pp. 372–3.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 359.

European rival, is instructive about its methods of government and its relationship with society more generally. Between the mid-eighteenth century and 1810 Britain was able more effectively and flexibly to appropriate an increasing share of rising national income even than Napoleon following his administrative and institutional modernisation of the French state. Yet taxation was a cause of major political crisis in France as it was not in Britain. In Britain direct taxes, including land taxes, were paid by all social groups with no privileged exemptions; they were paid by landowners who passed them on to tenant farmers, labourers, artisans and other tenants in rents and other charges, a form of tax payment which was 'invisible' to the lower orders as direct taxes were not to the independent, *taille*-paying French peasantry. They were levied and assessments made locally by unpaid representatives of the taxpaying gentry and magistracy. This amateur administration minimised corruption and evaded the resentment aroused by the professional collectors backed by the more openly severe legal powers prevalent in France. It was a method of amateur, decentralised but effective administration widely employed by the British state.

Indirect taxes were levied on a wider range of goods in France, directly upon the household by officials with strict powers of enforcement, at levels of incidence which varied regionally. In Britain also officials with strict enforcement powers levied customs and excise duties, which provoked skirmishes on occasion and frequent evasion. But the tax was upon a narrower range of goods, was nationally uniform and levied not upon the purchaser but upon the manufacturer or importer, who passed it on to the consumer for whom, again, the tax was 'invisible' and involved no direct contact with officialdom. The result was a higher tax yield in Britain than in France, efficiently collected by means which strictly contained potential points of conflict.⁴

Nor did British governments risk trouble over matters of taxation by overstepping the limits of consent in this highly sensitive area. The income tax, introduced in 1799, to help pay for the war, which evolved during the war into a reasonably efficient and equitable tax, was summarily ended by Parliament in 1816, against the preference

⁴ P. Mathias and P. O'Brien, 'Taxation in Britain and France, 1715-1810: A Comparison of the Social and Economic Incidence of Taxes Collected for the Central Government', *Journal of European Economic History*, 5 (1976), pp. 601-50.