

## 4. WHAT IS SOCIAL HISTORY . . . ?

*A new form of antiquarianism? Celebrating experience at the expense of analysis? The sort of history Socialists write? Mobilising popular enthusiasm? A portmanteau term? Or offering the best opportunity for writing total history? What is social history?*

Raphael Samuel

Ever since its elevation to the status of a discipline, and the emergence of a hierarchically organised profession, history has been very largely concerned with problematics of its own making. Sometimes it is suggested by 'gaps' which the young researcher is advised by supervisors to fill; or by an established interpretation which, iconoclastically, he or she is encouraged to challenge. Fashion may direct the historians' gaze; or a new methodology may excite them; or they may stumble on an untapped source. But whatever the particular focus, the context is that enclosed and esoteric world in which research is a stage in the professional career; and the 'new' interpretation counts for more than the substantive interest of the matter in hand.

Social history is quite different. It touches on, and arguably helps to focus, major issues of public debate, as for example on British national character or the nature of family life. It mobilises popular enthusiasm and engages popular passions. Its practitioners are counted in thousands rather than hundreds – indeed tens of thousands if one were to include (as I would) those who fill the search rooms of the Record Offices, and the local history rooms of the public libraries, documenting family 'roots'; the volunteer guides at the open-air museums; or the thousands of railway fanatics who spend their summer holidays acting as guards or station staff on the narrow gauge lines of the Pennines and North Wales. Social history does not only reflect public interest, it also prefigures and perhaps helps to create it. Thus 'Victorian Values' were being rehabilitated by nineteenth-century enthusiasts for a decade or more before Mrs Thatcher appropriated them for her Party's election platform; while Professor Hoskins' discovery of 'lost' villages, and his celebration of the English landscape antici- pated some of the animating sentiments which have made the

conservationist movement a force for planners to reckon with.

As a pedagogic enthusiasm, and latterly as an academic practice, social history derives its vitality from its oppositional character. It prides itself on being concerned with 'real life' rather than abstractions, with 'ordinary' people rather than privileged élites, with everyday things rather than sensational events. As outlined by J. R. Green in his *Short History of the English People* (1874) it was directed against 'Great Man' theories of history, championing the peaceful arts against the bellicose preoccupations of 'drum-and-trumpet' history. In its inter-war development, represented in the schools by the Piers Plowman text-books, and in the universities by Eileen Power's *Medieval People* and the work of the first generation of economic historians, it evoked the human face of the past – and its material culture – against the aridities of constitutional and administrative development. The *Annales* school in France called for the study of structure and process rather than the analysis of individual events, emphasising the grand permanencies of geography, climate and soil.

Urban history, pioneered as a cottage industry by H. J. Dyos in the 1960s, and labour history, as redefined in E. P. Thompson's *Making of the English Working Class*, was a protest against the routinisation and narrowing of economic history, together with (in the case of Thompson) sideswipes at the invading generalities of the sociologists.

Social history owes its current prosperity, both as a popular enthusiasm and as a scholarly practice, to the cultural revolution of the 1960s, and reproduces – in however mediated a form – its leading inspirations. One is dealing here with homologies rather than influences or, in any publicly acknowledged sense, debts, so that any coupling is necessarily speculative and might seem impertinent to the historians concerned. Nevertheless, if only as a provocation and as a way of positioning history within the imaginative complexes of its time, some apparent convergences might be suggested.

The spirit of 1960s social history – tacking in its own way to the 'winds of change' – was pre-eminently a *modernising* one, both chronologically, in the choice of historical subject matter, and methodologically, in the adoption of multi-disciplinary perspectives. Whereas constitutional history had its original heart in medieval studies, and economic history, as it developed in the 1930s and 1940s, was centrally preoccupied with Tudor and Stuart times (the famous controversy on 'The Rise of the Gentry' is perhaps representative), the 'new' social history, first in popular publication in the railway books (as of David and Charles) and later in its academic version, was apt to make its historical homeland in

Victorian Britain, while latterly, in its enthusiasm for being 'relevant' and up-to-date, it has shown a readiness, even an eagerness, to extend its inquiry to the present. Methodologically too, in ways presciently announced at the beginning of the decade in E. H. Carr's *What is History?* the new social history was hospitable to the social sciences, and much of the energy behind the expansion of *Past and Present* – the most ecumenical of the social history journals, and the first to be preoccupied with the inter-relationship of history and 'theory' – came from the discovery of historical counterparts to the categories of social anthropology and sociology: e.g. 'sub-cultures', social mobility, crowd psychology, and latterly gender identities.

One way in which numbers of the new social historians made themselves at home in the past was by projecting modernity backwards, finding anticipations of the present in the past. This seems especially evident in the American version of social history, where modernisation theory is a leading inspiration (Eugen Weber's *Peasants into Frenchmen*, a celebration of the allegedly civilising process, is an accessible and influential example). It can also be seen in the preoccupation with the origins of 'companionate' marriage and the modern family, a work pioneered in a liberal-humanist vein by Lawrence Stone, and in a more conservative one by Peter Laslett and Alan Macfarlane. Keith Thomas' magnificent *Man and the Natural World*, like his earlier *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, though finely honed and attentive to counter-tendencies, might also be said to be structured by a version of modernisation theory documenting the advance of reason and humanity.

The plebeian subject matter favoured by the new social history, corresponds to other cultural manifestations of the 1960s, as for instance 'new wave' British cinema, with its cockney and provincial heroes, 'pop art' with its use of everyday artefacts, or the transfiguration of a 'ghetto' beat (Liverpool sound) into a national music. Similarly, the anti-institutional bias of the new social history – the renewed determination to write the history of 'ordinary' people as against that of statecraft, could be said to echo, or even, in some small part to be a constituent element in, a much more widespread collapse of social deference, and a questioning of authority figures of all kinds. In another field – that of historical conservation – one could point to the new attention being given to the preservation and identification of vernacular architecture; to the spread of open-air 'folk', and industrial museums, with their emphasis on the artefacts of everyday life; and on the retrieval and publication of old photographs, with a marked bias towards the representation of scenes from humble life. The democratisation of genealogy, and the remarkable spread of family history societies – a 'grassroots'

movement of primary research – could also be said to reflect the egalitarian spirit of the 1960s; a new generation of researchers finds as much delight in discovering plebeian origins as earlier ones did in the tracing of imaginary aristocratic pedigrees.

Another major 1960's influence on the new social history – very different in its origins and effects – was the 'nostalgia industry' which emerged as a kind of negative counterpart, or antiphon, to the otherwise hegemonic modernisation of the time. The animating sentiment – a very opposite of Mr Wilson's 'white heat of modern technology', or Mr Macmillan's 'winds of change' – was a poignant sense of loss, a disenchantment, no less apparent on the Left of the political spectrum than on the Right – with post-war social change. One is dealing here with a whole set of transferences and displacements in which a notion of 'tradition', previously attached to the countryside and disappearing crafts was transposed into an urban and industrial setting.

Automation, electrification and smokefree zones transformed steam-powered factories into industrial monuments. Property restorers, working in the interstices of comprehensive redevelopment, turned mean streets into picturesque residences – Victorian 'cottages' rather than emblems of poverty, overcrowding and ill-health. The pioneers here were the railway enthusiasts who, in the wake of the Beeching axe and dieselisation, embarked on an extravagant series of rescue operations designed to bring old lines back to life. A little later came the steam traction fanatics; the collectors of vintage fairground engines; and the narrow-boat enthusiasts and canal trippers, bringing new life to disused industrial waterways. Industrial archaeology, an invention of the 1960s, followed in the same track, elevating relics of the industrial revolution, like Coalbrookdale, to the status of national monuments. In another sphere one could point to the proliferation of folk clubs (one of the early components of 1960s 'counter-culture'), and the discovery of industrial folk song, as prefiguring one of the major themes of the new social history: the dignity of labour. Another of its major themes – solidarity – could be said to have been anticipated by that sub-genre of autobiography and sociological enquiry – Hoggart's *Uses of Literacy* (1957) was the prototype – which made the vanishing slum a symbol of lost community.

So far as historical work was concerned, these sentiments crystallised in an *anti-progressive* interpretation of the past, a folkloric enthusiasm for anachronism and survival, and an elegaic regard for disappearing communities. 'Resurrectionism' – rescuing the past from the 'enormous condensation' of posterity, reconstituting the vanished components of 'The World We Have Lost' – became a major impetus in historical writing and research. The

dignity of 'ordinary' people could be said to be the unifying theme of this line of historical enquiry and retrieval, a celebration of everyday life, even, perhaps especially, when it involved hardship and suffering.

The general effect of the new social history has been to enlarge the map of historical knowledge and legitimate major new areas of scholarly inquiry – as for example the study of households and kinship; the history of popular culture; the fate of the outcast and the oppressed. It has given a new lease of life to extra-mural work in history, more especially with the recent advent of women's history to which social history has been more hospitable than others. It has built bridges to the popular representation of history on television. In the schools it has helped to produce, or been accompanied by, a very general turn from 'continuous' history to superficially project and topic-based learning – a change whose merits the Minister of Education, as well as others, are now challenging. It has also produced a number of 'do-it-yourself' historical projects, as in local history, labour history, oral history, woman's history, which have taken the production of historical knowledge far outside academically defined fiefs.

The new social history has also demonstrated the usefulness – and indeed the priceless quality – of whole classes of documents which were previously held in low esteem: household inventories as an index of kinship, obligations and ties; court depositions as evidence of sociability; wills and testaments as tokens of religious belief. It is less than a century since a distinguished scholar remarked that no serious historian would be interested in a laundry bill. The publications of the Historical Manuscripts Commission and the patrician collections of 'family' papers which adorn the County Record Offices testify to the representative character of this bias. It is unlikely that even so determined a critic of the new social history as, say, Professor Elton, with his belief that history is 'about government', would want to repeat it today.

Despite the novelty of its subject matter, social history reproduces many of the characteristic biases of its predecessors. It is not difficult to find examples of displaced 'Whig' interpretation in 'modernisation' theory; or the 'idol of origins' in accounts of the rise of the Welfare State or the development of social movements. Social historians – proceeding, as Stubbs recommended a century ago, 'historically' rather than 'philosophically' – are no less susceptible than earlier scholars to the appeals of a commonsense empiricism in which the evidence appears to speak for itself, and explanation masquerades as the simple reproduction of fact. Many too could be said to be influenced, albeit subconsciously, by an aesthetic of 'naive realism' (something to which the present writer pleads guilty) in

which the more detailed or 'thick' the description, the more authentic the picture is supposed to be. Social historians are good at amassing lifelike detail – household artefacts, time-budgets, ceremonial ritual: they leave no conceptual space for the great absences, for the many areas where the documentary record is silent, or where the historian holds no more than what Tawney once called 'the thin shrivelled tissue' in the hand.

Social history has the defects of its qualities. Its preference for 'human' documents and for close-up views have the effect of *domesticating* the subject matter of history, and rendering it – albeit unintentionally – harmless. The 'sharp eye for telling detail' on which practitioners pride themselves, the colloquial phrases they delight to turn up, the period 'atmosphere' they are at pains faithfully to evoke, all have the effect of confusing the picturesque and the lifelike with the essence of which it may be no more than a chance appearance (much the same defect can be seen on the 'background' detail of historical romance and costume drama). Whereas political history invites us to admire the giants of the past and even vicariously to share in their triumphs, its majesty reminds us of the heights we cannot scale. Social history establishes an altogether intimate rapport, inviting us back into the warm parlour of the past.

The indulgence which social historians extend towards their subjects, and the desire to establish 'empathy' – seeing the past in terms of its own values rather than those of today, can also serve to flatter our self-esteem, making history a field in which, at no great cost to ourselves, we can demonstrate our enlarged sympathies and benevolence. It also serves to rob history of all its terrors. The past is no longer another country when we find a rational core to seemingly irrational behaviour – e.g. that witchcraft accusations were a way of disburdening a village of superfluous old women; or that printers who massed cats were engaging in a surrogate for a strike.

The identifications which social history invites – one of its leading inspirations and appeals – also have the effect of purveying symbolic reassurance. It establishes a too easy familiarity, the illusion that we are losing ourselves in the past when in fact we are using it for the projection of ideal selves. Recognising our kinship to people in the past, and tracing, or discovering, their likeness to ourselves, we are flattered in the belief that as the subliminal message of a well-known advert has it, underneath we are all lovable; eccentric perhaps, and even absurd, but large-hearted, generous and frank. Our very prejudices turn out to be endearing – or at any rate harmless – when they are revealed as quintessentially English. The people of the past thus become mirror images – or primitive versions of our ideal selves: the freeborn Englishman, as

individualist to the manner born, acknowledging no man as his master, truculent in the face of authority; the companionate family, 'a loved circle of familiar faces', living in nuclear households; the indulgent and affectionate parents, solicitous only for the happiness and well-being of their young. These identifications are almost always – albeit subliminally – self-congratulatory. They involve double misrecognition both of the people of the past and of ourselves, in the first place denying them their otherness, and the specificity of their existence in historical time; in the second reinforcing a sentimental view of ourselves. The imaginary community with the past can thus serve as a comfortable alternative to critical awareness and self-questioning, allowing us to borrow prestige from our adoptive ancestors, and to dignify the present by illegitimate association with the past.

Social history, if it is to fulfil its subversive potential, needs to be a great deal more disturbing. If it is to celebrate a common humanity, and to bring past and present closer together, then it must take some account of those dissonances which we know of as part of our own experience – the fears that shadow the growing up of children, the pain of unrequited love, the hidden injuries of class, the rankings of pride, the bitterness of faction and feud. Far more weight needs to be given, than the documents alone will yield, to the Malthusian condition of everyday life in the past and to the psychic effects of insecurities and emergencies which we can attempt to document, but which escape the categories of our experience, or the imaginative underpinning of our world view, 'Defamiliarisation', in short, may be more important for any kind of access to the past than a too precipitate intimacy. Perhaps too we might recognise – even if the recognition is a painful one – that there is a profound condensation in the notion of 'ordinary people' – that unified totality in which social historians are apt to deal. Implicitly it is a category from which we exclude ourselves, superior persons if only by our privilege of hindsight. 'There are . . . no masses', Raymond Williams wrote in *Culture and Society*, 'only ways of seeing people as masses'. It is perhaps time for historians to scrutinise the term 'the common people' in the same way.

*John Breuilly*

Social history is more difficult to define than political or economic or military history. Whereas those terms apply to the history of distinct kinds of activity, the term social covers virtually everything. In fact there have been three very different views about the nature of social history.

The oldest view of social history was that it was the history of manners, of leisure, of a whole range of social activities which were conducted outside political, economic, military and any other institutions which were the concern of specific kinds of history. One problem with this rather residual view of social history was that its domain shrank as historians of women, the family, leisure, education, etc., developed their own fields as distinct disciplines. There was also the danger that these histories could become trivialised by the exclusion of politics, economics or ideas from the activities they were investigating.

In a reaction against this some historians have gone to the other extreme and argued that social history should become the history of society: societal history. The idea is that political, economic, military and other specific types of history each study only one aspect of a society. It is necessary to bring these various types of history together into a single framework if that whole society is to be understood. This is the task of societal history.

There are many difficulties with this view of social history. First, the whole approach is based upon the assumption that there is a society to study. But when we use the term society we do not normally mean a distinct social structure, but rather the inhabitants of a certain territory or the subjects of a particular political authority. It remains to be established whether there is a distinct social structure which shapes the way these people live their lives. There is a danger that this assumption of a single society will be imposed upon the evidence. Thus the assumption that English society was becoming industrial during the nineteenth century, along with various ideas about what a pre-industrial and an industrial society are like, can distract from the proper task of the historian. Instead of describing and analysing specific events, the historian is lured into categorising various elements of 'society' according to where they are located on the path from pre-industrial to industrial. This 'evidence' is then cited in support of the original assumption. The argument is unhistorical, circular and empty of real meaning.

A much more promising way of bringing the different branches of history together into a single framework is to distinguish between different dimensions such as the political, the economic and the ideological. Then one tries to relate these different levels together. Marxist history is the best example of this kind of enterprise. But equally the tradition associated with Max Weber can lead in the same direction although with important differences. In both cases, however, the central concern is no longer with 'society' but rather with other concepts such as 'mode of production' or 'types of legitimate domination'. It makes little sense to call these approaches examples of social or societal history. There may still be the

assumption that the ultimate purpose is to understand 'society as a whole' or a 'social formation', but this assumption is not an essential element in these types of history. What is essential is how the different dimensions are defined and then related to the evidence and to one another.

A third view of social history is that it is concerned with experience rather than action. One might argue that people who are wage-earners, parents, citizens, consumers and much else besides must possess some sense of identity which underlies all these particular roles and must experience the world in ways which extend beyond these roles. The job of the social historian is to provide a general understanding not at the level of 'society as whole' but at the level of the individual or the members of particular social groups.

But there are problems with this. All the historian can do is study the records of people's actions in the past which still exist. The temptation to go 'behind' those actions to the 'real' people can lead to unverifiable speculation. It can lead away from the concern with specific events which is the essence of history. Finally it can lead away from the social into the psychological. The recent upsurge of interest in the history of 'everyday life' has sometimes demonstrated these weaknesses when it has sought to go beyond the rather antiquarian pursuit of bits and pieces of 'ordinary life'.

These three views of social history — as a residual history of assorted social activities, as societal history, and as the history of social experience — seem to lead nowhere. Confronted with much of what calls itself social history one might feel inclined to settle for this negative conclusion. But I think that at least for modern history there is a further point to be made.

Modern history has witnessed a dramatic increase in the scale of human activity with the growth in size and importance of markets, firms, states and other institutions. People relate to one another in these institutions with little in the way of a common sense of identity or personal knowledge of one another. The studies of these institutions tend, therefore, to omit a consideration of the ways individuals understand their actions within the institutions. But in the end those understandings determine how the institutions perform. By 'understanding' I do not mean some experience 'behind' what people do, but rather the thinking that directly and immediately informs their actions. It is this which should always be related to the performance of the institution as a whole. For example, the historical study of the 'adaptation' of rural immigrants to urban-industrial life cannot work either at the level of impersonal analysis (how far people adjust to certain 'imperatives' of modernisation) or at the level of individual experience (what it is like to be a

rural immigrant). Rather one should look at distinct actions such as job-changing, absenteeism, patterns of settlement and housing use. Then one should ask what sort of thinking it is which gives a sense to these patterns of action as well as what this means for the institution concerned. This is hardly the province of a special sort of history. Rather it involves making every kind of history explicitly confront the social nature of action and institutions. Social history is not a particular kind of history; it is a dimension which should be present in every kind of history.

J. C. D. Clark

What is social history? The question used to be asked differently: what is history *tout court*? Philosophers laboured to defend the viability of 'historical explanation' as such against the claims of the natural or social sciences. Yet practising historians know that history is not one thing, but many things. University history faculties are battlefields where different sorts of history compete for space, each sort equipped with a different methodology and value-system. Social history is a natural loser in such a contest: its nature isn't obvious. In rough but useful terms, politics generates political history, war outlines military history, churchmanship identifies religious history. But 'social history' seems a portmanteau term: 'social' action is too general to define an academic genre. So the debate is partly semantic (shall we call *this* or *that* sort of history 'social'?), partly a search for a Holy Grail (is there a holistic social history which transcends and incorporates everything else?). Despite Harold Perkin's impressive achievement, this last idea hasn't been generally persuasive, any more than Leavis' attempt to turn literary criticism into *the* holistic study in the arts.

Social historians are still divided. So what is the semantic debate? What are the divisions? I must answer for my own field, England between the Restoration and the Reform Bill. First in time, but still influential, were the Fabians and Marxists of the pre-1945 generations: the Webbs, the Hammonds, Wallas, Cole, Laski, Tawney and their modern successors. For them, social history was small-scale economic history: standard of living, enclosures, transport, public health, poor law, the economically-generated categories of 'class', municipal matters, drains. It was worthy, but now seems desperately Attlee-esque. And why was this different from economic history as such? On the basis of their reductionist methodologies, no distinction was possible. Nor was it possible in the work, secondly, of subsequent cohorts of New Left historians writing on radicalism, popular protest, riots, crime, prisons, revolution, 'social control'.

The structure of the argument was the same: Roy Porter's concept of social history in *English Society in the Eighteenth Century* is identical to Christopher Hill's concept of economic history in *Reformation to Industrial Revolution*. R. W. Malcolmsen's *Life and Labour in England 1700-1780* still touches its forelock to Marx and Engels. One sense in which this work approaches the holistic is that social history is made to seem the sort of history that socialists write.

The third party in the semantic debate seeks to break this closed shop by building its research on a non-positivist, anti-reductionist methodology. Emancipated from its servitude to economic history, social history might be reformulated as the historical sociology of power, ideology and belief, of structure, cohesion, allegiance, faith and identity as well as of innovation and dissent. If politics and ideology (rather than economics) are used to provide a framework for social history, three things, conventionally ignored, would be placed at the top of the social historian's agenda in 1660-1832: religion; the aristocracy and gentry; the monarchy. Social structure, seen in non-positivist terms, highlights England as an *ancien régime* state, with a dominant Church, a clerical intelligentsia, an élite defined in cultural, not economic, terms, and as a polity from which 'liberal(ism)' and 'radical(ism)' as political nouns were appropriately absent. Too often the period still takes its chronology from economic history: 1660-1760 is a desert; 1760 onwards is dominated by a reified Industrial Revolution (with invariable capitals), a category discredited by the 'new' economic history. Church history is still a neglected specialism, like military and naval history; the universities are ignored until the era of reform; studies of the aristocracy and gentry are still mainly studies of landownership.

We all know (after all, J. H. Plumb's generation said so) that England from 1688 was secular, contractarian, Lockean, a world made safe for bourgeois individualism. The 'new' social history will replace this model with an England distressingly different in its priorities from those of the 1960s intelligentsia, so bridging the adjacent achievements of Laslett, Schochet, Thomas, Perkin, Moore. It seems easier for outsiders, free from our parochial commitments: Alan Heimert, Bernard Semmel, Gordon Schochet, Alan Gilbert, Rhys Isaac on religion and society put their English colleagues to shame. Is this social history? Partly the question is semantic, but more is at stake in the clash of materialist and idealist methodologies, and the cultural hegemonies that academic debates echo. Semantic debates matter little; methodologies, which set the agenda, matter greatly. In respect of the social history of 1660-1832, Englishmen are still burdened with a world-view appropriate to the days when cotton was spun in Manchester, ships built on Clyde-side, and coal mined for profit in South Wales.

## Keith Hopkins

A recently published papyrus from Roman Egypt, dating from the first or second century AD, contains an appeal by a slave-owner to the authorities for compensation from the careless driver of a donkey, which had run over and seriously injured a young girl on her way to a singing lesson. In her plea, the appellant wrote: 'I loved and cared for this little servant-girl, a house-born slave, in the hope that when she grew up she would look after me in my old age, since I am a helpless woman and alone'.

This trivial but fascinating fragment encapsulates many of the problems we face in constructing a social history of the Roman world. First, status fundamentally affected every Roman's life-style and experience. It made a huge difference to be slave or free, rich or poor, young or old, male or female, a solitary widow or the head of a large household. Our consciousness of these status differences should undermine easy generalisations about the Romans as a whole. In this scepticism, I include the generalisations which follow.

Secondly, the whole of Roman society was bedevilled by high mortality, endemic illness and ineffective medicine. The young slave girl, incurably maimed, and the helpless widow were symptoms of a general experience of suffering and violence, against which many Romans defended themselves with a mixture of magic, cruelty and religion. The huge differences between typical modern life experiences and typical Roman experiences of life point up the difficulties of using empathy as a tactic of historical discovery. We cannot easily put ourselves in Roman sandals.

Thirdly, the opening story presents a paradox. The old slave-owner loved her slave; the young slave-girl was taking singing lessons. Both the emotion and the behaviour recorded violate our expectations. Surely that was not how Roman slave-owners normally felt or normally treated their slaves. Probably not. But we should be cautious about imposing our own prejudices and categories on to other societies. That way, we miss half the fun of studying history; that way we look into the past and see only ourselves.

Finally, as with the opening story, most of our evidence about Roman social life is fragmentary. Surviving sources provide only illustrative *vignettes* of daily life. Statistics, which are the bread and butter of modern social and economic history, are missing or, if they do survive, can rarely be trusted. The large gaps in our records highlight the social historian's obligation to reconstruct the past with imagination, even with artistic creativity, but constrained from flights of pure fantasy by the authenticating conventions of scholar-

ship. Imagination is needed, not merely to fill the gaps in our sources, but also to provide the framework, the master picture into which the jigsaw fragments of evidence can be fitted.

Social history is not, or should not be, a blindly accumulated pile of facts (whatever they may be). It should not even be a quilt of testimony, however cunningly devised, each piece cut from abstruse sources. Social history has to be thought out, as well as artfully presented, as a story, a moral tale, a *belle-lettre* or an essay in intellectual adventure. It has to be thought out, because we interpret the past to the present. We cannot confine ourselves to the intentions and perceptions of historical actors. We know what they did not; we know what happened next. We should not throw that advantage away lightly.

We have to identify and to analyse long-term forces, the structures which moulded individual actions, forces of which many actors were often only dimly aware: for example, the growth of Christianity, or the increased costs of defending a large empire against barbarian attacks. And above all, the historian has to choose a topic that interests him and his readers. That is one reason why all history is contemporary history and repeatedly needs to be rewritten. We look into the past and inevitably write something about ourselves.

I began with a triviality – against my better judgement, Trivialities are what social history used to be about: clothes, hunting, sex, weddings, houses, eating, sleeping. For most people, in all periods, major preoccupations; but for serious historians, marginal matters compared with politics, laws, wars and foreign relations. Social history provided mere light relief, the tail-piece for proper history, just enough to convince the reader that the subject matter was human after all.

Fashions have now changed. Social history occupies the centre of the historical stage, thanks to historians like Lawrence Stone, Le Roy Ladurie and Keith Thomas. And, thanks to the work of Norbert Elias, we can see changing habits of eating and love-making, not only as part of the cultural transformation of western civilisation, but also as a reflection of changes in the extent of state power. But that is sociological history, and another story.

### David Cannadine

The most famous definition of social history – always quoted, invariably criticised, and never fully understood – is that of G. M. Trevelyan, who began his *English Social History* by defining it as 'the history of the people with the politics left out'. Thus described and

practised, social history has been much criticised – for its lack of acquaintance with social theory, for being too concerned with consensus and too little with conflict, for being a series of scenes rather than a serious study of change, for being little more than a nostalgic lament for a vanished world, and for selling so well that it was not merely social history, but a social phenomenon.

Yet, although most social historians today implicitly or explicitly reject Trevelyan's definition, and believe themselves to belong to a more professional, more rigorous, more recent tradition, those who read a little further in his book would be surprised by both the catholicity and contemporaneity of his conception of the subject. To Trevelyan, spelling it out in more detail, social history encompassed the human as well as the economic relations of different classes, the character of family and household life, the conditions of labour and leisure, the attitude of man towards nature, and the cumulative influence of all these subjects on culture, including religion, architecture, literature, music, learning and thought.

This is a formidable and fashionable list. Of course, there was not much sign of such subjects in Trevelyan's own works of synthesis, as the necessary research had not yet been done. And it would be unrealistic and ahistorical to credit him with too much clairvoyance. But in drawing attention to such an agenda of research interests, he certainly anticipated the work of such major scholars of our own day as Eric Hobsbawm, E. P. Thompson, Lawrence Stone, Le Roy Ladurie, Keith Thomas and Peter Laslett. Ironically, the last great practitioner of the old social history was one of the first to foresee the scope and shape of the new.

So Trevelyan might well be pleased with the massive expansion in social history which took place in the three decades since the Second World War and the writing of his most famous book. There is a Social History Society and a *Social History* journal (to say nothing of *Past & Present* and *History Workshop*); almost every reputable publisher seems to have a new social history of England in the course of preparation; many British universities offer social history courses at undergraduate and postgraduate level; and it is a highly popular subject in schools, in extra-mural studies, and on television. In addition, a whole variety of allied subjects – urban history, women's history, family history, the history of crime, of childhood, of education – are its near relatives, each with their own societies, journals and conferences.

But growth can be as disquieting as exhilarating. For as social history becomes more vast and varied, it becomes harder to keep up with it all, and more difficult to define it in any way other than descriptively. Some of its critics (most of whom, incidentally, have never tried their hands at it) condemn it for being no more than an

extension of Trevelyan's laundry list, an inchoate amalgam of fashionable fads. Others deride it as a new form of antiquarianism, celebrating 'experiences' but eschewing 'explanation'. In reply, its foremost champions (who are not necessarily its foremost practitioners) defend it as an autonomous sub-discipline, intellectually coherent and organisationally confident, offering the best opportunities for the writing of the total history to which, ultimately, we should all aspire.

As with all debates in 'what is history?', most viewpoints are partially valid, few entirely convincing. The real problem with social history, whether done by Trevelyan or anyone else, is that it lacks a hard intellectual centre. Political history is primarily about power, and economic history about money. So, surely, in the same way, social history is about class? Yes, but *what* is class? And *where* is it? There is no theoretical agreement as to its nature; it can barely be said to have existed, even in the western world, before the Industrial Revolution; and too often, social historians spend all their time looking for it, and do not know what to do with it if they find it. Defining social history is never easy, just as splitting the hairs of Clio's raiment is hard to avoid. In the halcyon days of the 1960s and early 1970s, expansion, proliferation and subdivision were the order of the day, in history as in most other subjects. And of this development, social history was the prime beneficiary. But now retrenchment is upon us; in history as in everything else, amalgamation and rationalisation are in the ascendant; and there are fears that social history, having gained most in the era of expansion, will now suffer most in the age of austerity.

It seems possible, yet unlikely. For social history is surely easier to defend than to define. And in any case, the best social history, whatever it is, is always more than merely that, and its most illustrious practitioners rightly spend more time doing it than defining it. Considering the fate of Trevelyan's misunderstood definition, one can hardly blame them. We would be well advised to follow their example, and get on with it.

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## 10. WHAT IS THE HISTORY OF POPULAR CULTURE?

*Another note towards a definition of culture? The history of leisure? True insights into the 'mind set' of an age? The study of anecdotalism and ephemera collecting? The history of the excluded? The history of modes of communication and perception? The study of the opium of the people? What is the history of popular culture?*

Asa Briggs

It is easier to participate in, to enjoy, to deplore, or to explore popular culture than it is to define it. This is not simply because there are difficulties in relating *popular* culture to culture (and sub-cultures) or to *folk* culture – some of these difficulties are of the historian's making, particularly the Marxist historian's – but because of the inherent difficulties in defining 'culture' itself. It was not because of his particular political or cultural stance that T. S. Eliot chose to collect 'notes towards a definition of culture' rather than to offer a definition of his own.

I seldom use the term 'popular culture' myself, although I am deeply interested in its history and in the various meanings attached to it. The language of 'mass culture' has appealed to me even less, although I have tried to trace its history too. I have found some of the detailed American studies of selected aspects of it extremely stimulating, particularly those with a sense of fun. I like the attempt too to evaluate as well as to analyse and interpret. This has its origins in literature rather than in social studies. Story-telling counts.

Leaving on one side the terms, the field of popular culture has attracted me for a number of reasons. I approached it first through the history of broadcasting, going on to explore the neglected history of entertainment in a pre-broadcasting age. I was interested from the start not only in the institutions which acted as providers, but in the 'output'. The BBC's concern with 'popular culture' was slow to develop under Reith and after him never complete, but it was revealing at every stage in its history to compare both the institutional shell of the BBC and its programming with those of American media agencies, including the cinema, and I was for-

tunate enough to spend nine interesting years at an interesting time as Governor of the British Film Institute.

BBC output by itself was wide enough to draw me into a study of the history of almost every facet of twentieth-century culture, including sport and popular music, subjects the history of which had interested me even before I turned to broadcasting. Indeed, I was completing a kind of circle in my own research when I studied them in a broadcasting context. It was not so much research, however, that encouraged re-evaluation and re-orientation but the input from current popular culture itself, sometimes exciting, often disturbing. Inevitably I became concerned, too, with the history of leisure and the different attitudes towards it at different times.

Charting went with exploration, and I felt and still feel that the problems of periodisation are as interesting as those of structures. The two are in fact, directly related. I pushed my own interests back before the industrial revolution and encouraged researchers to do the same. The cultural 'side' of the industrial revolution, not least the popular cultures of steam technology, began to interest me more than the economic 'side', although I have always been sceptical about cultural studies which leave the economics out.

It is on the basis of specific studies that I have developed a general sense of what the history of popular culture is and should be. Like the exploration of culture itself, it must be concerned with content as well as context, with work as well as play, with place as well as time, with religion as well as technology, with communication as well as with expression, with provision and participation as well as performance, with the visual and the musical as well as the verbal.

All these figure in my own notes towards a definition. Present work in progress includes work on publishing history (which links the history of popular culture with education), on nineteenth-century music (which links the history of popular culture with the history of 'high culture') and on Victorian artefacts (including photographs). The last of these topics has received less attention than the first two. The concept of 'material culture' certainly brings in both the economics and the psychology, not to speak of many of the fashionable ideological preoccupations of recent years. The interdisciplinary nature of all studies of popular culture is obvious. That to me is one of its greatest attractions. Another is that I genuinely like ephemera.

*Peter Burke*

We may think we know what we mean by the term 'popular culture'. At any rate, we thought we knew what we meant by it

when we discovered – in the early 1970s in my case, as in so many others – that it had a history. We decided that we would study the history of the excluded, the dominated, the subordinate groups and classes (whom we refused to call ‘the masses’) and not only their standard of living but their culture as well. Readers will have noticed that this defines popular culture by what it is not. A positive definition is much more difficult, because the phrase contains two serious ambiguities. Both ‘popular’ and ‘culture’ are problematic terms.

Firstly, who are ‘the people’? Are they the poor? the powerless? the uneducated? These are negative terms again. And in any case, since all children are brought up by adults, what does ‘uneducated’ mean? Do different subordinate groups – male and female, young and old, urban and rural – share the same culture and in every society?

Secondly what is culture? My favourite definition is in terms of shared attitudes (meanings, values), expressed (embodied, symbolised) by artefacts and performances. Where high culture has ‘art’, popular culture has ‘artefacts’: not only images but tools, houses, the whole man-made environment. Where high culture has ‘literature, drama, music’, popular culture has ‘performances’, a term designed to include not only rituals and songs but any kind of talk or action directed to any audience, however small. This is, as definitions go, far from narrow, but I have sometimes been criticised for not widening it still further, to include what is sometimes called ‘cultural practice’; the attitudes and values expressed through the act of living one’s day-to-day life. It is hard to say what is not ‘culture’ in this sense of the term. It is also hard to say what is not ‘popular’, for popular culture is not exclusive like high culture. It is open to all, like the tavern and the marketplace where so many performances traditionally took place. Can we even exclude the social and political élite? They might have a closed culture of their own but this has not always prevented them from taking part in Carnival, singing ballads, reading chap-books. And who today doesn’t watch television?

These problems of definition will not go away and cannot be put on one side if one is trying to do research. They are not unique but they are especially acute in the study of any unofficial, informal, open system. Add to this the notorious problem of ‘contaminated’ sources: the need for historians of all ages before the tape-recorder to study the oral through the written, and popular attitudes through records made by and for élites – and one may be forgiven for sighing occasionally for a well-defined but limited topic, such as the Parliament of 1614.

I don’t sigh for very long, actually. These problems are a challenge

and historians of popular culture are in the middle of working out new strategies for creeping up on their quarry. One strategy is to concentrate not on ‘the people’ as such, or even any group within it, but on the interaction between learned and popular cultural traditions. A recent collection of essays (*Understanding Popular Culture*, ed. Steven Kaplan, 1984) makes interaction its central theme, and one of the contributors, Roger Chartier, argues that we should study culture ‘as appropriation’, searching not for exclusively popular literature (say) as for the different ways in which learned and popular writers and readers used the common material.

I have tried to do this myself in the past and my current research, on modes of communication and perception in different parts of Italy in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, begins with media and messages and goes on to discuss who was communicating what to whom via these different channels and codes. The media discussed are the oral (blasphemy, for example), the written (from the love-letter to the ‘defamatory libel’ posted on one’s enemy’s door), the language of gesture, of ritual (such as the ritual of the papal coronation), and of images (such as Renaissance portraits). Illness and conspicuous consumption are both viewed, as an anthropologist would view them, that is as forms of communication.

The phrase ‘popular culture’ may not appear very often in these essays, but the attitudes of ordinary people will not be neglected. The value of a detour is to allow viewpoints inaccessible to those who always take a direct approach.

### Dai Smith

Twenty-five years ago ‘Popular Culture’ was something you popped into a new-fangled holdall bag labelled ‘Social History’. Nowadays it threatens to emulate its early protector by evolving into a separate discipline to be studied with the help of such stern interlocutors as the sisters Sociology and Semiology. One definition of the history of popular culture lends itself readily to this treatment: it is the description and analysis of the popular tastes, customs, folk beliefs, manners and entertainments within any given social order. In short, it is the culture of most of the people as opposed to the culture organised, thought and transmitted by various élites. Matters become more interesting when we refine the definition to account for the ambiguity that will necessarily accompany the history of popular culture if we insist on its prior and continuing relationship to the material formation of society as a whole.

In his rich compendium, *Peasants Into Frenchmen* (1977), Eugen

Weber demonstrated, with a wealth of example, how the rural population comprehended the particularities of their world through the forms of their own popular culture. He also stressed the tortuous relationship between that 'authentic' way of life and the 'artificial' one being created for them in the wake of the urbanisation and industrialisation of France. An earlier process of change in Britain could be dismissed, by some in the 1930s, as the degeneration of a natural, organic culture and its replacement by a mass one which, in turn, could only be purified by a conscious, culturally-equipped minority. The cultural equipment was, of course, possession of an English literary tradition as selected by F. R. Leavis and fellow scrutineers.

Popular culture was, in this way, equated with the mechanical, the vulgar and the masses. More and more it was synonymous with leisure pursuits and mass circulation newspapers, with soccer and seaside-trips, with tinned peaches and pop music and the passive consumption of what was produced for, rather than by, the people. For both the Left and the Right popular culture was conveniently singled out as the new 'Poppy of the Masses'. This species of reductionism had been applied to the history of religion with equally unenlightening results. Popular culture, too, has been more than just a shadow play of reality. Certainly this is why it has been at the centre of the political and the philosophical debate about the precise order and functioning of life in modern, and now post-modern, society. So its history is as much about interrelationship – say, the rise of universal suffrage and the development of spectator sport – as compartmentalisation of human activity.

This is recognised both by historians whose direct subject is a popular cultural activity like sport itself and by those whose study of grass-roots political change is concerned to see political culture in a surrounding context. Those who read Richard Holt (*Sport and Society in Modern France*, 1981) on why rugby football became a passion in the south-west of France in the late nineteenth-century will find it easy to dovetail his history of sport and *sociabilité* into Tony Judt's (*Socialism in Provence*, 1979) analysis of Provençal communality and socialist politics. And in Britain, David Howell's *British Workers and the Independent Labour Party* (1983) meticulously unites a history of working-class evangelicalism (religious and political) with autodidactic fervour (natural science and philosophy) and a regional pace of development. Politics and sport, rugby league and the ILP in west Yorkshire, rugby union and participatory militancy in South Wales are as connected as Eric Hobsbawm once suggested is the social history of the piano and working-class respectability. Commercialism and spontaneity, decision and induced desire, the play of liberation and the framework of utility are,

in modern times, inseparable.

One difficulty, then, in reconstructing histories of popular culture is that the form could not be linear. The familiar narrative of a political history or a biography could not encompass the cultural experience in action. Recently, T. J. Clark (*The Painting of Modern Life*, 1985) has suggested that the search for new forms by Manet and other Impressionist painters – unfinished, strangely at odds with its own desire to be complete – is a refraction of the contemporary tension (post-1860s) between a collective, proletarian presence and a defining bourgeois identity. The battleground is leisure, suburbia, the spectacle of the city and the choice of sides taken by the *petit bourgeois*. In other words *what is to be 'popular' in popular culture?* All of which sounds to me like the problems traditionally confronted by novelists intent on uncovering the meaning of the signs by which we all live through style and form.

Using our simple definition, the history of popular culture is the sociological translation of the readership tastes for, say, Harold Robbins or J. R. Tolkien from 'fantasy' to 'reality'. There is more mileage in examining the proposition that, say, F. Scott Fitzgerald dissected the mass production of popular culture and showed its sway over a whole society in *The Great Gatsby* (1925). He pulled the diffuse actuality of early twentieth-century America into an essential shape through the agency of a style intent on dramatic relief. This is what Fitzgerald's mentor, Joseph Conrad, meant when he wrote (in 1906), 'Fiction is history, human history, or it is nothing. But it is also more than that . . . being based on the reality of forms and the observation of social phenomenon'.

Most historians would now say 'Amen' to that and recognise that the history of popular culture lies not only in its documented existence but also in its contemporary permeation of all literary genres, whether unmediated except by clichés or unexpectedly revealed in an essential form. And just as traditional history, inescapably bent on excluding popular culture beyond 'local colour', mirrored the techniques of naturalistic fiction, so the latter's replacement by the 'magical realism' of contemporary novelists whose work (Rushdie, Doctorow, Marquez) is suffused with historical sensibility may push historians into a subtler understanding of their own representation of reality on the page. Raymond Carr's comment on Richard Cobb – 'the work of a poet as much of an historian' – might then be seen as no more of an oddity than the coupling of those essential words of modern life – 'popular' and 'culture'. Thereby hang all our histories.

## Jeffrey Richards

Cultural history is one of the most complex and demanding branches of historical endeavour. For it requires its practitioners to be equipped not just with the training and tools of the historian but also the analytical skills of the expert in literature and art, the methodological equipment of the sociologist and the conceptual sophistication of the political theorist. The work of the cultural historian, as Raymond Williams argued in his influential book *The Long Revolution* (1975), is to elucidate the meanings and values implicit and explicit in the art, literature, learning, institutions and everyday behaviour within a given society.

Broadly speaking there are two cultures: the high or élite culture and the popular or mass culture. Only in rare instances do the two cultures converge and then but briefly (the 1890s, the Second World War, the 1960s for example). In Britain, Elgar and Kipling are perhaps the last artists of genius to have touched the hearts of ordinary people. For the most part the two cultures are out of synchronisation and sealed off. For the historian concerned with the real spirit of an age, the collective *mentalité*, the popular culture is of greatest value; the high culture often misleads.

For instance, in 1930s Britain the high culture was remorselessly hostile to the public schools and the British Empire, yet these institutions were regularly endorsed by the popular culture and this was an era which saw the landslide election of a largely Conservative national government, joyous royal celebrations like the Silver Jubilee of King George V and a revival of respect and affection for 'Victorianism'. In these circumstances, it is the films of Gracie Fields rather than the poems of W. H. Auden or the novels of Virginia Woolf which give us the best insight into the 'mind-set' of the age. The succinct statement of the eminent medieval historian Lynn White, 'World-views are better judged by what people do than by what they say', applies particularly to the 'silent majority' of a nation's inhabitants. How they choose to spend their money and in particular on which cultural objects can tell us much about their assumptions and attitudes. For much of this century films have been a central part of popular culture. Cinema-going was the principal leisure activity of a large proportion of the British people from the First World War to the 1950s. A. J. P. Taylor called it 'the essential habit of the age', and no historian can afford to ignore this vital aspect of everyday life.

In general, the cinema operates in two ways – to reflect and highlight popular attitudes, ideas and preoccupations, and to generate and inculcate views and opinions deemed desirable by

film-makers. Film-makers select, in the first case, material which they know will appeal to their audience and in the second, material with which they can manipulate their audience and shape its perceptions. It may well be that a film will aim to do both things at once. The cinema can thus operate as a potent means of social control, transmitting the dominant ideology of a society and creating for it a consensus of support. For films provide images of society, constructed of selected elements and aspects of everyday life, which are organised into a coherent pattern governed by a set of underlying presuppositions. The process of selection confers status on certain issues, institutions and individuals – for instance, the police or the monarchy – which regularly appear in a favourable light.

Popular films (and in particular *genre* films such as crime dramas, horror pictures or westerns, which regularly use the same elements, characters and situations), function as rituals, cementing the beliefs and ideals of society, enforcing social norms and exposing and isolating deviants. It is therefore of major importance to discover who controls the production of films and what attitudes and ideals they are disseminating through them. It is equally important to find out what audiences made of them. For the relationship between films and audience is reciprocal. An audience does not accept passively every message that is put across in a film. In the last resort it is positive audience approval, expressed via the box office, that ensures whether a film succeeds or fails financially. So producers' calculations of what will appeal to their audiences inevitably influence what goes into a film.

Direct propaganda rarely works, as the Nazis discovered in Germany. Their first three feature film exercises in promoting the Nazi party were such box-office disasters that Propaganda Minister Goebbels ordered the direct propaganda to be confined in future to the newsreels and he sought to work more covertly on audiences by inserting propaganda elements into 'straight' entertainment films. Audiences the world over go to the cinema primarily to be entertained not to be instructed. But the content of their celluloid day dreams provides the historian with an entry to their minds.

It is the holistic approach to film history which is the most useful for the historian of popular culture. This requires the analysis of the content and structure of groups of films, the elucidation of box-office trends, the assessment of star personalities and their appeal, the investigation of contemporary reviews and reactions, the reconstruction of the production context (censorship, government policy, company attitudes) and the location of all these elements firmly in their political, social and cultural setting. By doing this, the historian gains insight into the changing social and sexual roles of

men and women, the concepts of work and leisure, class and race, peace and war, the determinants of change and continuity in the real world. It is in this way that films in particular and popular culture in general can extend our understanding of recent history.

### Stephen Yeo

In the beginning, the words. In this case there is a lot to cut through to get at my own concerns. Popular? Dominant meaning: consumed by many people, most people (but usually not 'the best people'), often by 'the masses'. Example: 'popular music'. Culture? Dominant meanings: either an attribute or possession of 'the best people', or a whole way of life. An example which slides between these alternatives: 'Viennese culture at the turn of the century was the cradle of the modern'. If one wanted to refer to what most Viennese people were like or liked one would have to add: 'Viennese popular culture at the turn of the century was . . . .'

These are dense thickets. Raymond Williams' work, from *Culture and Society 1780-1950* (1956) to *Writing in Society* (1984) has been extraordinarily helpful (though not yet used enough) to historians of popular culture. He defines his practice as that of a cultural materialist, intending to transform cultural practice, and thereby a whole society. He shows how crucial cultural relations, conflict and struggle are to what we now think of as 'production' and how crucial relations of production are to what we now think of as 'culture'. History, or the way things (relations) change, is the substance or base in which 'production', 'popular' and 'culture' are represented and will, by socialists, be re-presented.

So, Popular? My meaning here: having to do with what most people like and like doing/making. This is very difficult to get at in the past or the present of a society like ours, unless you regard indices like votes, purchases, or the readership of *The Sun* as adequate. Culture? My meaning here: having to do with *growth*, and with *meanings*. One of my favourite books, *The Culture of Vegetables and Flowers from Seeds and Roots*, by Sutton and Sons (Reading, 18th edition, 1930) uses the word appropriately.

My own interest in this field is mainly in *association* as popular culture. I would like to be able to interpret, and to make available for change, how people have associated in this society over the last five hundred years. Forms of association have been intermittent, as in the case of street life or workshop life: they have also been continuous, as in the case of the largest nineteenth-century working-class organisations, the Friendly Societies. Anyone interested in popular culture in Britain would be well advised to look through obvious cultural artefacts such as the novel, to less obvious

ones, but central in Britain, such as the meeting, the banner, the rule-book, the newspaper. In her Introduction to *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (1975), Natalie Zemon Davis put it well:

It [research] was also a matter of recognizing that forms of associational life and collective behaviour are cultural artefacts, not just items in the history of the Reformation or of political centralization. A journeyman's initiation rite, a village festive organization, an informal gathering of women for a lying-in, of men and women for storytelling, or a street disturbance could be 'read' as fruitfully as a diary, a political tract, a sermon, or a body of laws.

Miners' trade unionism provides a contemporary instance, ripe for 'reading' historically. A formidable cultural achievement by millions of people currently unpopular, it is well-suited to an historical approach interested in 'popular culture'. The achievement of a single Federation in the late nineteenth century, against the grain of regional and economic differences among miners: the invention of forms like block votes within the Union and between it and political allies: festivals: home and family, gender and community culture in their complicated relations with the trade and the Union: the way in which miners have brought the details and the novelties of large-scale democratic practice into critical relations with a culture which has collapsed democracy into 'Parliamentary Democracy As We Know It': the lives of individual miners like Jack Lawson, *A Man's Life* (1932): miners' sense of craft, inheritance and responsibility for places, industries and ways of life (not just 'jobs') . . . all these are material for answering the question, 'what is the history of popular culture?'. To make such connections authentically, I would recommend history-from-within like R. Fynes, *The Miners of Northumberland and Durham* (1873). The connections will never be made without recognising that class conflict, or the struggle between rival clusters of potential, goes on *within* the 'popular' as well as between it and not-popular (élite?, dominant?, high?) culture.

Finally, in the making of history of popular culture, forms of publication and authorship matter, as well as the objects of study. A popular culture without the inverted commas, without dense thickets of class meaning to cut through, will indeed be one in which the objects of study (e.g. miners) become their own subjects. This is why the Barnsley Women Against Pit Closures' book, *Women Against Pit Closures* (1984), the Oxford Miners Support Group's book, *The Miners Strike in Oxford* (1985), and the London Co-op Political Committee's book, *Here We Go! Women's Memories of the 1984/5 Miners Strike* (1985), are such good examples of modern history.

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## 11. WHAT IS DIPLOMATIC HISTORY . . . ?

*The record of what one clerk said to another clerk? The history of what men think they are doing? The tittle-tattle of Embassy underlings? The history of relations between states? The story of the decisions that make war and peace? What is diplomatic history?*

D. C. Watt

The practice of international history, that is of the history of relations between nation states, began in the nineteenth century with the publication, first, of the great series on international treaties, and then of national diplomatic documents pioneered by the British official blue books and followed by the national publication of documents on the origins of the Franco-Prussian war and on the war of 1914-18. Most historians of nineteenth-century Europe were, even in the early 1950s, essentially historians of European diplomacy, rather than, as today, historians of the domestic developments of one or two European countries. The first Chairs of international history in Britain were founded at the London School of Economics and Chatham House in reaction against the development of nationalist historiography. Their holders, Sir Charles Webster and Professor Arnold Toynbee were prohibited, in the cause of world peace, from teaching history from a national viewpoint, a prohibition as resolutely ignored by the former as it was practised (save in the case of the Palestinians) by the latter.

Webster was primarily a historian of British foreign policy. Since his retirement in 1952, however, the subject he taught has developed greatly, alongside more traditional studies of British foreign policy, from the history of European diplomacy in the national sense to that of international relations in the much larger sense, comprehending not merely diplomatic relations outside Europe but also the strategic, economic and sociological aspects of international developments. More recently the great outburst of theoretical work on international relations in the United States between the mid-1950s and the mid-1960s has been adapted to the study of international relations in general, and of international crises in the Far East by (in particular) Christopher Thorne at Sussex University. In Leeds, studies in the use of, and institutionalisation of propaganda in the