GENEALOGIES OF SOCIAL HISTORY

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So, the Social History Society is turning forty, and returning for its anniversary meeting to the place of its birth. Lancaster was the first university to establish a professorial chair in social history: Harold Perkin's in 1967. And although others may lay claim to being the institutional home of the subject in the UK – Warwick, where the Centre for the Study of Social History was set up under E. P. Thompson in 1968, or Hull, from where the journal *Social History* was founded in 1976 and from where it was edited for many years – Lancaster is the site to which the pilgrims flock, especially now the annual conference meets in spring and not in the post-Hogmanay hangover of early January.

As this panel reminds us, the Social History Society enters its middle age facing as many questions about its origins and identity as ever. 'What is social history' remains the most perplexing of all the challenges in the 'what is history' box. Did it begin, like sex and the Beatles, in 1963 with the publication of Thompson's *Making of the English working class*, or further back in 1946, with G. M. Trevelyan's *English social history*? Is it, as an older generation put it, history with the politics left out, or history with the sociology and economics put back in, or history informed more generally by the social sciences? Or is it simply the history of society, or of the ways in which the 'social' has been constructed as it became in the 1970s ? Or is it the now vogueish history of the ordinary and everyday life? Can it be all of these things, or none ? The Social History Society's own journal registers some of the confusion. Started up in 2004, it is actually called *Cultural and Social History*. Adding another theme – culture – to the mix, is not without its own methodological problems, as Peter Mandler pointed out in a typically uncompromising article in the new journal's first issue.

Hitherto, much of the debate about the origins of social history in Britain has focused on developments in the university world with which most of us are familiar. The novelty of the panel comprising the three papers we have just heard is that it takes the discussion outside the academy to look at a diffuse range of social histories across a variety of media. We travel from antiquarianism and heraldry to romanticism and the picturesque; from the Women's Institute and folk museums to the BBC; and through the new left networks (and marriages) of the 1960s and the 1970s. There are common themes across the three papers – first, the role of women; secondly, what might be called the history of the emotions, or the 'self', as an undeveloped

aspect of both the content and the method of social history; and thirdly, a concern with the changing audience for social history. Later, I will address these wider issues, and suggest some ways in which they may take forward the question of 'what is social history'. Let me begin, however, by looking at each of these fine papers individually in turn, for they all raise some specific points of their own. I will pose one question for each panelist to consider, conclude by returning to those common themes, and then we can throw the discussion open.

Rosemary Mitchell's 'The origins of social history: (e)merging on the margins?' shows us the deep roots of some of the most popular forms of social history: family history, local history, and what might be called historical or even costume drama. Of course, none of it was categorized as such at the time, but there seem to be obvious links between antiquarian interest in the built environment and in the lineages of local elites back in the 18th century, and the 'who do you think you are' and heritage culture of our own times. Building on her wonderful 2000 book, *Picturing the past*, Rosemary also demonstrates the close connections between social historical detail and literature in the work of late romantic novelists, prefiguring the very strong overlap between the two (history and literature) that emerges in academic social history in the mid-20th century – think of R. H. Tawney and the late Asa Briggs, for example. And finally her paper touches on the best-selling work of social historians operating outside of the academy in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, many of them women, or formidable historian couples such as the Hammonds. My own favourite is Rosamund Joscelyne Mitchell (1902-1963) – no relation I assume – who in 1931 co-produced the three volume *English people of the past: an introduction to social history*. Rosemary ends her paper back in the academy – at the LSE – and that made me wonder whether the turn of the 19th into the 20th century is one of those moments when professional history seeks to define itself against the amateur popular tradition of social history. In her introduction she mentions William Stubbs, the regius professor of history at Oxford who did so much to apply an exacting empirical approach to the history of medieval England (notably the Magna Carta) at a time when more literary treatments were common. Does each wave of resurgent academic expertise send popular social history back to the margins, or do they feed off one another in more symbiotic ways?

Laura Carter's 'Populist social history in Britain, c. 1918-69' makes a powerful case for a strand of social history, emergent in the interwar years, that was never really related to developments in the academy at all. Through a survey of regional museums, popular best-selling memoirs such as *Lark rise to Candleford*, and BBC radio broadcasts, she shows how the history of everyday life and the history of the imagination combined to create a 20th century equivalent to the sort of social historical detail that romantic novelists had achieved in the mid-19th century. Here, we are partly in the world of G. M. Young, the doyen of amateur Victorianists (and BBC-man and British Museum

trustee to boot), whose dictum 'history is not what happened, but what people felt about it when it was happening' has tended to be given a wide berth by professional historians. But as Laura argues, this was a world of historical literature pretty much dominated by women. And the realm of 'feeling' was more easily inhabited by women than by men. I think this is a very important point. Academic social history has always struggled to get a grip on *mentalité* or popular belief. From the Annales school in France (and its British exponents) through to more recent work on Mass Observation, oral history and life-writing, professional social historians have agonised over what is the best methodology for accurately reconstructing what people thought or sensed. Yet here in this rather different tradition described by Laura – of exhibitions, radio re-enactment and memoir – attempts were being made early on to be as authentic as possible about individual lives in social historical terms. Which leads to my question: has the BBC always had the upper hand over the academy? Nowadays BBC programming dominates popular taste when it comes to social history. We assume this is the Schama effect, that is to say, the 'new' style of talking-head history TV stemming from the 2000 *History of Britain* series. But perhaps it has always been the case that the media has shaped a common-sense idea of social history with which academics can never compete?

Finally, Alex Campsie's 'How people live as ideas: British social history, the left and the politics of selfhood, c. 1957-1991' brings us closer to the present day, almost to the front-door in my case, since my former PhD supervisor has a starring role. Just when we thought there was no more to be said about E. P. Thompson and the new left and their contribution to the making of social history, it turns out that a large segment of the story has been missing. Alex argues that central to the dispute between Thompson and his new left critics was not class or theory – the weapons chosen by Tom Nairn and Perry Anderson in their famous demolition of Thompson. Rather, it was Thompson's complete neglect of the 'self' as a component of historical experience. I was largely convinced by Alex's account of how feminism and also counter-cultural movements of the 1970s introduced the 'self' back into social history, most notably in the work of Gareth Stedman Jones. I also liked his emphasis on how the environment of Ruskin College encouraged collaboration and exploration. As historians, we don't spend enough time thinking about the space or habitat from which our work is generated. Presumably, in a fuller version, he can explain how Stedman Jones' 1983 *Languages of class* (the formative text of social history for my generation) bears the imprint of these developments. Lacan is dropped into the story too, and so I wondered about the impact of psychoanalysis on this cohort of social historians. But my question to Alex is what happened next? New left history – whether informed by feminism or not – never enjoyed the enduring popularity of Thompson's work (as the book's 50th anniversary in 2013 attested), or even crossed over into a more diluted form of social history. Why not?

Let me conclude my comments by coming back to the themes that unite the panel, of which I spoke at the outset. First, all three papers establish that women have been left out of the history of social history in the UK, both as writers and as actors. There is a very large body of history-writing between the 1870s and 1950s, produced outside the academy, by women. Some of it appeared in an institutional context, the Victoria County History for example, or in educational text-books for the London School Board and the University of London around the turn of the century, or in school text books in the 1930s and 1940s. And women, especially as bearers of emotions, have not been considered properly as historical subjects, although they feature strongly as such in the novelists described by Rosemary and in the memoirs looked at by Laura. Secondly, Rosemary, Laura and Alex show how we now need a history of social history that recognises the part played by the history of the emotions. On the face of it, social history seems preoccupied with outward structures and with external forms, with tangible people, with real lives and events. In fact, the aim of much social history has always been to get inside the heads of people in the past. Has populist social history made a better job of this than its academic counterpart ? Finally, I think it is fair to make the bold assertion that unlike many other historical disciplines, the development of social history has largely been driven by audience demand from outside the academy, for example, in the historical novel boom of the Walter Scott era, or in the expansion of citizenship through education in the years around the Second World War, or in the growth of adult education in the 1950s and 1960s (after all, the Workers' Educational Association was the breeding ground for Thompson's *Making*). That unique moment between the late 1960s and the late 1970s, which we are now celebrating in this anniversary meeting, may turn out to be the only time when the academy has successfully wrested social history from the margins, and from its populist nest. I appreciate that is not much of a birthday greeting for such a historic occasion as today. It is aimed at provoking a response, and not meant to poop your party in any way!

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