

*The Making of a Great Power: Late Stuart and early Georgian Britain 1688-1721*  
(London, 1993, 207 pp.)  
with Daniel Sprong, *The Age of Discovery: Pre-Industrial Britain 1582-1714*



WILLIAM HOSKINS

## William George Hoskins 1908–1992

W. G. HOSKINS was a distinguished economic and social historian of early modern England, but in a much wider world than the academic one he will be remembered, first and foremost, as the master and populariser of landscape history. He was not the first to explore this subject, but he above all others revealed its great untapped potential, showing how much of our land and its features were man-made, waiting to be investigated, and their origins explained. In the words of Joan Wake, the county archivist of Northamptonshire, ‘he opened a new world to us’, and he opened it not simply to bookish scholars, but to everyone with eyes and the curiosity to walk over our countryside and through our towns, asking the right questions. Two of the most enduring visual memories of him derive from his Landscape Series on television in 1976, showing him standing ankle-deep in water, picking up waste fragments from an old iron bloomery near Cowden in the Weald of Sussex, while on another occasion, insufficiently clad for such rough weather, he stood at the head of a remote dale running out of Ullswater in the Lake District, pointing to the unshaped stones of a ‘statesman’s’ house, as heavy snow fell steadily across his face. These programmes for television, when he was nearing seventy years of age, totally exhausted him, whereas his viewers watched them several months later from comfortable armchairs in a warm home.

Hoskins’s gift as an exponent of history to everyman was recognised in his earliest days at Bradford Technical College, when he was praised for his success in capturing the interest of young ‘salesmen and

© The British Academy 1995.

travellers' attending evening courses there. His larger public following appeared with his book in 1955 on *The Making of the English Landscape*, but to many his name had already become familiar through radio talks on the Third Programme. Two series of television programmes on the landscape then brought him much wider fame in 1973 and 1976.

Interest in landscape history seems now to be so much in tune with our time as to be taken for granted, but in fact, as a subject of public interest it matured slowly, and Hoskins might have made far less impact had he not had the right voice for radio in the 1950s and 1960s, and the right face in the 1970s at the time when the television set was becoming a piece of standard furniture in almost every home. His voice and verbal style were friendly and conversational, quickly involving his listeners in an experience which they felt they could share. Probing the history of landscape with Hoskins as the guide seemed to call for ordinary powers of observation, ordinary imagination and ordinary common sense. His face was the rubicund, weathered face of a countryman, genial, benign, more often smiling than solemn. When he sat on a bench outside an Exeter tavern at the end of his last television series, he did not look in the least like an erudite professor; he was a very ordinary man in the street. Smoothly and easily, therefore, his message passed through his books all over Europe, to North America, Australia, and Japan, and his influence is clearly visible in many countries which he himself never visited, for he was not a great traveller abroad. The landscape is nowadays routinely studied as an historic document.

William George Hoskins was the son and grandson of Exeter bakers, born in 1908, the eldest of four sons. The Hoskins family had lived in Devon for some five hundred years, and his fierce pride in his descent from Devon yeomen was one of the strongest forces shaping his personality. It had been nurtured by a childhood in Exeter, schooling at Hele's school in the city, and visits to relations on Devon farms in the holidays. Since the Devon scene is distinctive, with its deep winding lanes, high hedges, small fields, and scattered settlements, it is not difficult to understand how his perceptions of landscape were further sharpened in manhood when he moved to a teaching post in a different countryside, first in Yorkshire and then in Leicestershire. But he himself always spoke of his interest having been awakened around the age of fifteen, and we may reasonably wonder about the influences of his schooling upon him. The year of his birth, 1908, saw the publication of the first volume in a series of local histories, designed for boys and girls of 12–14 years, prompted by the fact that the Board of Education

had recently allowed teachers to spend twenty hours a year teaching 'by observation in the country'. This meant visits to historic sites in the vicinity of schools, and this is what the author of the first county volume had organised for his pupils in Berkshire.<sup>1</sup> Did such initiatives impinge on the curriculum at Hoskins's school in Exeter? We cannot know the answer to this question. But Hoskins's interest in local Devon history was already evident at the age of sixteen, and it showed clearly as soon as he completed his B.Sc.(Econ.) degree at the University College of Exeter in the summer of 1927, aged only nineteen. He went straight ahead to complete, at the age of twenty-one in 1929, a thesis for the M.Sc. Econ. degree on 'The Rise and Decline of the Serge Industry in the South-West of England'.

After teaching at Exeter for a year, and one year's teaching at Bradford Technical College in economics and commercial subjects for the B.Comm. degree, Hoskins was appointed to an assistant lectureship in Economics in the Department of Geography and Commerce at Leicester University College, a post to which he went in the hope of having some time for research. (One of the unsuccessful candidates for this post was R. S. Sayers, later Sir Ernest Cassel Professor of Economics at the London School of Economics.)<sup>2</sup> Much later he revealed that he found the teaching of economics distasteful and arid, and hopelessly wrong-headed. But a different, and doubtless unforeseen, opportunity also presented in Leicester of teaching to evening students a subject which engaged his interest far more deeply. Leicester had a Vaughan Working Men's College, established in the late nineteenth century, which had become an extra-mural department of the University College. Here Hoskins taught from his very first term in Leicester commercial subjects and then more congenial courses on 'The Antiquities of Leicestershire' and 'The Archaeology of Leicestershire'. While at Bradford, he had attended Arthur Raistrick's lectures on local archaeology, and the Vaughan College courses show him developing this dimension of landscape history, while finding his own style in other respects, taking his students on visits after work and at weekends to the Leicester Museum or into the country for fieldwork.

The College and the county also had other great assets, which

<sup>1</sup> E. A. Greening Lamborn, *School History of Berkshire*, Oxford, 1908. Nine county volumes appeared between 1908 and 1915, though these did not include one on Devon.

<sup>2</sup> See the obituary of Richard Sidney Sayers, 1908–1989, in *Procs. of the British Academy*, 76 (1991), 545–61.

perfectly met Hoskins's needs. The county had a flourishing archaeological society, to which Hoskins was elected in 1935. Here he made friends with longstanding residents like S. H. and Florence Skillington, amateur local historians and experts on the documents of the county's history. Better still, the College had a remarkable collection of books on local history which had been donated by a farsighted benefactor, Thomas Hatton. These included the splendid eighteenth-century *History and Antiquities of the County of Leicester* by the antiquarian publisher, John Nichols (in eight volumes), and another work of dedication by a local historian, George Farnham, *Medieval Village Notes* (in six volumes, 1929–33), extracting and calendaring many records from the Public Record Office. Hoskins became immersed in the history of Leicestershire and Rutland, and in fifteen years from his arrival in Leicester published sixteen papers in the *Transactions of the Leicestershire Archaeological Society*.

Hoskins had been appointed at the University College in 1931 for a probationary period of three years, and in 1933 he married Jane (Frances) Jackson, a Leicester girl, who helped him settle into a more tranquil life. In 1934, despite satisfactory reports from his professors, he received a steely letter from the Registrar declining to make the post permanent. He was advised in his own interests to seek an appointment with better prospects elsewhere, although the post was renewed for one further year. The College evidently changed its mind in 1935 for he was given another three years' job security, and in that year he initiated a diploma in public administration. Meanwhile he had decided that a further higher degree would improve his prospects, and by 1937 he had completed a Ph.D. thesis on 'The Ownership and Occupation of Land in Devonshire, 1650–1800'. By 1938 he was responsible at Leicester for the greater part of the teaching in the department for two degrees, the B.Sc. Econ. and the B. Comm. The workload had doubled, but he was still on the minimum salary and could not afford to contribute to a superannuation scheme. His post still rested on three-yearly renewals, the last being granted in 1938. In 1941 the college failed to secure his deferment from military service, though he was by that time the single-handed teacher in the department, as well as lecturing to students of King's College of Household Science, then evacuated from London to Leicester. A special case was argued for him, as he had also been recruited by Nuffield College, Oxford, as a statistician and chief local investigator, into the 'Social Reconstruction of the East Midlands Area'. 'No one else could be found in this area to

do the work if he were called away,' wrote the Registrar. The appeal failed, however, and the Department of Economics was closed down.

In July 1941 Hoskins was called, at forty-eight hours' notice, to the Board of Trade in London, to work as a statistician with the Central Price Regulation Committee in Grosvenor Gardens. In a letter written before the month had ended he wrote of having 'been kept working for long hours ever since'. Two months later, in a thoroughly characteristic outburst of fierce indignation at the economic injustices of the world (decades later his book on the reign of Henry VIII was entitled *The Age of Plunder*) he wrote to the Principal at Leicester saying, 'we shall be running our own concentration camps for profiteers in the near future, no doubt. Personally, I'd like to see some of the gentry we are concerned with brought into our basement and tortured to death; but our Chairman feels that this might be exceeding our powers at the moment.'

Hoskins detested London, and so it never aroused in him any desire to write about its history. But many ideas for future lines of research plainly matured at this time. He worked over his notes, read much local history, and far more widely still. From second-hand bookshops he built up a respectable library of books and prints, had some limited access to scholarly books and so browsed through calendars and volumes of records. Sometimes he spent his lunch hour transcribing documents in the Public Record Office. As a result, he published steadily during the war short pieces and longer articles in *Devon and Cornwall Notes and Queries*, the *Transactions of the Leicestershire Archaeological Society*, and twice in the *Economic History Review*. Volume 22 of the *Transactions of the Leicestershire Archaeological Society* for 1944–5 was a remarkable volume, containing three long articles by Hoskins, all of which showed the originality of his approach and the breadth of his documentary findings, from wills, probate inventories, poll tax and subsidy lists, and feet of fines. One essay on the deserted villages of Leicestershire appeared at the same time that Maurice Beresford was uncovering them in Warwickshire. These two historians together placed deserted village sites at the head of the agenda of landscape history for several decades, and brought archaeologists and historians to co-operate closely with one another, discovering in the end over two thousand of them throughout England. Another of the articles of 1945 on 'The Leicestershire farmer in the sixteenth century' revealed clearly the possibilities of assembling a detailed picture of the farming, the housing, and the material life of peasants, by studying the inventories of

their goods, listed at death. English agricultural history, and what came to be known as vernacular architecture, took a great leap forward with this revelation.

At the same time, Hoskins found his own distinctive style of writing. Work for the Civil Service had given him more self-confidence than before—he was remembered at Bradford and by a neighbour in Leicester as a quiet, rather shy person—and it taught him also to write well and more quickly than was his natural pace. In the articles of 1944–5 he used poetic language to set the scene, while vivid phrases or anecdotes brought some of the people to life. And fierce, frank words were used to condemn the trends of our time, like these sentences about the small farmer: ‘We live in times in which the extinction of “the small man” in all walks of life is accepted as axiomatic. Judged on purely economic grounds (which are the only ones we recognise today) he is inefficient and he must go, to be replaced by a great impersonal super-trust which knows the price of everything and the value of nothing.’

In 1945 Hoskins debated alternative careers in the Civil Service, which promised a sufficient salary, in local government, or in teaching. He had occasionally visited R. H. Tawney during the war, and was encouraged to consider a scholarly career, though he toyed seriously with the notion of a post in educational administration. But when he received an invitation to return to Leicester, he accepted, and in January 1946 resumed his teaching there. He was still seen in the College primarily as an economist and statistician, for the Principal in a testimonial described local history and archaeology as his ‘academic hobbies,’ while commending him also as ‘a conspicuously successful lecturer’ in the extra-mural department.

Before the war Hoskins had become depressed by the tedium of his Leicester post, and had seen no way forward. By 1947, however, plans for the expansion of higher education had dramatically altered prospects for the teaching of history at Leicester. Jack Simmons was appointed to head the Department of History in 1947. At the same time Hoskins cemented a warm friendship with the Principal, F. L. Attenborough, who had originally been an Anglo-Saxon historian, was a fine photographer, and greatly relished days which he spent with Hoskins exploring and photographing the Midland countryside. In 1947 Attenborough seems to have been responsible for the highly imaginative proposal of setting up a department of English Local History, of which Hoskins was to become the head and, for the time being, the only member. The intention was to release him from heavy teaching duties, and give him a

chance to develop his research. He was already publishing books and booklets to guide explorers in the Midlands, and he was an obvious choice of author when plans for the Festival of Britain in 1951 included the publication by Collins of an 'About Britain series'. For this he wrote *Chilterns and the Black Country* and *East Midlands and the Peak*. His books were now carrying his research into new regions of the country.

Some of the most exhilarating and perhaps most satisfying years in Hoskins's academic life spanned the period 1947–51, when he commanded the only department in the country concerned to establish local history as a respectable academic discipline. He had the warmest support of Professor Jack Simmons, who was in charge of the department of History, for although Jack was a colonial historian, he was also a Devon man, had wide historical interests in landscape and buildings, and in railways too, though the latter subject never captivated Hoskins.

Another friendship was forged at this time which infused different elements into Hoskins's perceptions of buildings and landscape. A letter containing an historical enquiry arrived in May 1947 from Hope Bagenal, an architect already aged fifty-nine years, and an eminent expert on the acoustics of buildings, who had stumbled on Hoskins's *Heritage of Leicestershire* (1947) when giving lectures at Leicester's School of Architecture. Thus opened a life-long correspondence between these two kindred spirits, debating the same topics from very different angles of vision. Building stones would send Bagenal's mind wandering to the awesome volcanic activity which had produced such materials in the first place. New landscapes inspired him to write evocative, descriptive letters which Hoskins read, re-read, and preserved as treasures. Bagenal's way was meditative and leisurely, whereas Hoskins saw himself as 'impatient and swift'. He would have liked to see from Bagenal's pen *A Handbook for Slow Travellers in England*, and accepted cheerfully Bagenal's chiding words, restraining him from expressing over-impetuous prejudices. Above all Bagenal saw quality in common things, and thought this 'the essence of civilisation itself'. So he sat in Yeovil churchyard in 1963 listening to its wonderful peal of bells, amid flowerbeds, listening to 'ancestral overtones'. He passed on something of this philosophical approach to Hoskins, who often expressed his debt to this remarkable man who saw the Greek classic orders even in Rutland barns.

Hoskins was a splendid writer of letters, and so his correspondence with Hope Bagenal, Jack Simmons, and many others conjures up the man more effectively than any reported speech. Though he was a most



witty and amusing conversationalist, he was inclined to reveal his thoughts more candidly in writing. The questions put by Hope Bagenal in his letters, for example, seem to have hardened the connection in Hoskins's mind between trends in the economy and architecture, for in 1948 he registered early thoughts about 'the remarkable rebuilding all over England' between about 1580 and 1620, which finally emerged in one of his path-breaking articles on 'The Rebuilding of Rural England, 1570–1640' in 1953. But Bagenal had yet another influence on Hoskins's work; he was a most poetic writer, and his poetic lines and phrases struck another sympathetic chord for which Hoskins expressed appreciation when he later dedicated his large volume on *Devon* to Bagenal, calling him *Poet and Topographer*.

Hoskins's letters between 1947 and 1951 glitter with the zest of an adventurous spirit pursuing innumerable different projects in local history. A scheme inspired by Jack Simmons for a series of county histories, to be published by Collins, committed Hoskins in 1947 to write the volume on Devon, and sent him in search of another author on Cornwall, though he would have liked to write that too since he believed the county to be 'inexhaustible in its interest'. He was negotiating with the Institute of Historical Research in 1947 to re-start the Victoria County History of Leicestershire, of which he then became the editor. The appointment of a city and, for the first time ever, a county archivist, required diplomatic interventions; he was improving the local history collection in the college library by buying books new and second hand; and he was planning, again in alliance with Simmons, a new look for the *Transactions of the Leicestershire Archaeological Society*, resulting in one volume being entirely devoted to agrarian history. This included an essay by Hoskins on the crop returns of 1801, a national documentary source that was then hardly known. In the introduction he dwelt on the task of rewriting English history, which now depended on recognising and investigating the distinctiveness of its many regions. Norman Scarfe then joined the History Department, and became another partner in furthering local history, undertaking to write the county history of Suffolk. The excitement of the challenges facing the trio at Leicester, Scarfe, Simmons, and Hoskins bubbled up in their efforts to buy up the remaining publisher's sheets of C. F. Innocent's *Development of English Building Construction*, a book which Bagenal regarded as his bible, and to which he had evidently introduced Hoskins.

From 1948 onwards Hoskins spent part of every vacation in Devon,

working in the archives and visiting every one of Devon's 450 parishes. He relied for transport mostly on buses or local trains, but also walked long distances on foot, for he never learned to drive a car. Walking was not usually a hardship, however; rather he regarded it as a 'feast of solitude', though he did not enjoy having to wade across rivers. He had heart problems already in 1947 and intermittently thereafter suffered from bouts of sheer exhaustion. Yet the pace of his labours accelerated in 1948: he hoped to set up a Record Society for Leicestershire (though this did not materialise); he found he was working on five books simultaneously, and bought a larger table for his house; and he was appointed first secretary of the research board at the College, for which he had to draft a paper on aims and objects. With Jack Simmons he assisted in the launching of a County Magazine; he urged the Leicestershire Archaeological Society to prepare a report on the state of church monuments, and in July went again to Devon, managing to 'dash round parishes' and see twenty-nine in twelve days.

In 1949 Hoskins was planning a series of well-illustrated county volumes on country, not town, landscapes, and F. L. Attenborough was seen as a photographer. In 1950 his books for the Festival of Britain were written. He was also concocting with Simmons a plan for a book on *Ten English Towns*, though after some of the manuscript was assembled, the publisher rejected the proposal. He was planning to apply for money from the Clapham Committee to set up a research fellowship in his Department for the study of agrarian history, an opportunity which resulted in the appointment of Joan Thirsk in 1951 to make a study of Lincolnshire that he had long wanted to see. But through 1949, 1950, and 1951 he became increasingly fretful and finally exasperated with committees, the tedium and frustrations of their meetings, and the thankless burdens of editorship. He failed to get the Devon VCH restarted, despite strong hopes and well-laid plans, thus finding cause for further disenchantment with committees.

At this moment of mixed pleasure and pain the esteem of Hoskins's academic colleagues was made known to him when he was invited to take up the Readership in Economic History at Oxford, vacated by Reginald Lennard. He accepted without hesitation, and so moved into an entirely different academic atmosphere. Henceforward, he had golden facilities in the libraries for research, and the greatest freedom to choose themes for his seminars. But the well-established curriculum in the Faculty of Modern History could not make room formally for local history in the undergraduate course, and no tradition of field work

existed in the History School (though it was well established in the School of Geography). At his seminars Hoskins gathered undergraduates as well as graduates, and over the years inspired many disciples who, in their turn, became distinguished teachers of local history. But Hoskins's letters revealed, within a short time, his discontent with the Oxford experience, though this was subsequently diluted by the satisfaction he got from supervising increasing numbers of research students of high quality. His greatest misfortune was that he never had the chance to understand college life from the undergraduate and college tutor's point of view for he was not offered a fellowship at any college. Instead, he was made a member of the Senior Common Room at All Souls College, where he could eat and sleep, if he wished, but could have no part in its governance. He missed half the Oxford experience, as well as being cut off from routine, everyday contact with colleagues working in the same field, something which is taken for granted in campus-centred universities.

So while Hoskins's good humour made the strongest impression on those who met him briefly, it concealed a darker side of melancholy and dissatisfaction with his situation. He was immensely introspective, and while self-examination can be a positive virtue, it led in his case to alternating moods of depression, and then to elation, when he worked excessively hard and fast, and planned more grand publishing schemes, which did not always materialise. The dissatisfactions with himself and his life had been generally concealed when he was younger, but they emerged conspicuously as he grew older. He showed increasing impatience with officialdom and bureaucracy; he fretted at the sight of the crowded city of Oxford; he chafed at the deeply-rooted traditions of the University, which savoured to him of entrenched privilege. Doubtless, these were more obtrusive at All Souls than they would have been if he had been attached to an undergraduate college.

Some alarm for his own health, the practical problems and isolation of village life for his family, coupled with a restless unease in Oxford, and the desire to press on more quickly with his research in Devon were mixed considerations which induced him to move house from the village of Steeple Barton, fourteen miles north of Oxford, to Exeter in 1955. Thereafter, he travelled to Oxford weekly in term time, relaxing more contentedly in Exeter at weekends, and writing intently during the vacations. His wife, Jane, also found life in Exeter more congenial, preferring the liveliness of a town to the extreme quiet of a small village. She had learned to drive while in Oxfordshire, and this

had given the family sufficient mobility to continue living there for four years. But their son, William, completed his schooling in Leicester, and their removal to Exeter was timely in giving their daughter, Susan, the chance of more social activities in the evenings than she would have had in Steeple Barton. Jane Hoskins will always be warmly remembered as the quiet, self-effacing tower of strength in the household, exemplifying remarkable calm and patience; her style was totally different from her husband's. As Hoskins came increasingly to appreciate good food and good wine, she rose to every occasion, and entertained their visitors royally. Entertainment occupied much of her energies in the Exeter years, and included one memorable adventure, devised by Hoskins, for the bulk purchase of wine in the cask from France. With a group of friends it was all bottled in their cellar, where the fumes given off in the course of a day's work befuddled them all.

Despite the frustrations that irked him, the Oxford years between 1951 and 1965 gave Hoskins all the time he sought to complete books long maturing in his head. He was unencumbered by duties in college and on university committees. So he was free to undertake a variety of single-handed enterprises, like broadcasting, public lecturing, and writing his own books, which, next to fieldwork, he found most congenial. These years, then, were his most fruitful period for substantial books, and weighty articles broaching new themes. They brought him wide acclaim.

Among the books appearing in this period was the heroic survey of Devon, published in 1954, which had caused Hoskins to visit every parish in the county personally. The planned series of volumes covering all counties did not in the end materialise, however; it ended with the publication of the next volume on Middlesex, for authors could not be found to match the standard set by Hoskins and Michael Robbins. But he meanwhile had embarked on a different series of volumes on the history of landscape, and, as editor of a whole new scheme for separate county volumes for Hodder and Stoughton, he was already in 1953 editing the completed manuscripts on Cornwall and Lancashire. He had begun to reflect on his own introductory volume in July 1952, but its form was still maturing in his mind in 1953 and in March that year he said he had not yet started to write. It was completed comparatively rapidly, therefore, between July 1953 and the end of January 1954, and was published with the two single-county volumes on Lancashire and Cornwall in 1955. His own contribution bore the title *The Making of the English Landscape*, and was dedicated to his wife Jane. A more precise

explanation of his debt to her appeared in his Shell Guide to Leicestershire, recognising the wife 'whose domestic skill enables the author to live and work in Victorian comfort'.

Whereas at Leicester Hoskins had been increasingly preoccupied with the history of landscape and buildings, and, already in 1949, had laid a plan for a *History of the English Landscape*, his Oxford teaching duties concentrated his mind more specifically on economic and social history. It is significant, therefore, that the book which he was planning before and during the War on Wigston Magna, intending to present it as an account of peasant civilisation from its beginnings to its extinction, finally appeared in 1957, under the title of *The Midland Peasant. The Economic and Social History of a Leicestershire Village*. It followed what has been called 'the ample tradition of economic history of Tawney and Power,' and was actually dedicated to R. H. Tawney, whose work he had used and admired since the 1930s. The buildings of Wigston, which at one stage he intended to make the core of a work on *Peasant Houses and Interiors, 1400–1800*, were in the end relegated to an Excursus at the end of the volume. This sensitive study of peasant society is regarded by some as Hoskins's finest original work of scholarship. It expressed better than anything else the importance he attached to ordinary people of no particular eminence in forming the foundations of a stable society. In it he explored the changing social structure of a whole community over a long period, from the fifth to the end of the nineteenth century. It appeared at a time when the social and economic development of single villages in different regions of the country was attracting young scholars to pursue similar studies, but its chronological range and its impassioned sympathy with some of the simplest basic assumptions of peasant life, 'respect and rest for old age, more care-free happiness for small children, more leisure in the open air for all', put it ahead of all the rest.

Further public recognition came to Hoskins with his appointment in 1955 to the Royal Commission on Common Lands, which, when it got into its stride, occupied him for two days every fortnight and took three years to complete its work. Ultimately, it resulted in another notable book, on *The Common Lands of England and Wales* (1963), written in collaboration with the geographer, Dudley Stamp. Hoskins's contribution consisted of a broad survey of the history of the commons, using some of the findings of the Commission and adding further personal reflections.

More books were in preparation, but the pressure of work in 1957

brought on symptoms of nervous exhaustion, obliging Hoskins, with some apologies, to dictate *Local History in England* to a typist. Vexations, even quarrels with academic colleagues, multiplied in the later 1950s, and he vacillated between impatience with Oxford's constrained teaching opportunities and recognising his good fortune in being able to stand aloof from political frictions in the university. He acknowledged too that his influence over the Oxford undergraduates was becoming more evident when they chose to do research under him.

In 1961 Hoskins became increasingly involved with the newly-established Civic Society in Exeter, and his dismay at the plans for renovation of the Guildhall area of the city led him to stand, and be elected, as a Liberal councillor for the St Leonard's ward in 1963. In his opposition to the re-development scheme, he printed some ill-considered remarks about the planning committee which prompted some of its members to issue a writ for libel. The case was settled out of court, but at a cost to Hoskins which obliged him to sell some of his books to meet the bill.

When in 1964, therefore, the University of Leicester sought Hoskins's advice on filling the post of head of the Department of English Local History at the impending retirement of Professor H. P. R. Finberg, the authorities were surprised, but pleased, to learn that Hoskins himself was willing to return to Leicester. Hoskins's memories of his days in Leicester had mellowed, and he had high hopes of setting up a new teaching regime in the Department of English Local History. He did not appreciate how much he and the University had changed in the intervening fourteen years. Even while negotiating the details of his return, he had some disagreeable arguments with his Leicester colleagues, and, on the brink of leaving Oxford, was provoked into describing his post there as 'the most comfortable academic post in Christendom'. In the event, Hoskins's hopes were cheated on many counts. He was able to appoint the candidates he wanted to posts in his department, and he devised a one-year course for an MA in English Local History. But he had no patience with administrative niceties, let alone sitting on university committees to discuss matters that did not concern him. They obstructed all his hopes for research and publication, and he bitterly complained in 1967 that he had published nothing that year. In 1968, in high dudgeon, or as he put it in his entry in *Who's Who*, 'in despair', he resigned.

Hoskins returned to Exeter determined to resume his research and writing in peace; a short time later he wrote of himself as 'a wonderful

advertisement for Happy Retirement'. He was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1969, and in 1971 was made a CBE. 'for his services to local history', the first time that such a citation had ever been used. His immediate task was to write the textbook on the sixteenth century which had long since been promised as part of a series published by Longman. But other invitations delayed him, and the work on Henry VIII, growing beyond the bounds originally planned, was issued in 1976 as the first of two planned volumes on the century. In the end, Hoskins did not write the second volume, which was the work of David Palliser. No longer involved in teaching, he felt himself losing touch with the latest thinking on the period, and had much more confidence in his grasp over landscape history.

Hoskins devoted much energy at this time to advisory work for the Devon County Council on threatened buildings. He also found himself dealing with a large amount of correspondence from the general public, arising out of his books and television programmes. But he wrote original articles and many book reviews as well, though the documentary side of his work became more cursory and impressionistic, as he concentrated his attention on the evidence of visual things. In 1949 he had exclaimed to Jack Simmons that 'nobody else seems to walk about and use their eyes except us'. Fifteen years later he summed up his main contribution to history as the interpretation of the visual evidence of town and countryside, taking special pride in his work on deserted medieval villages and on buildings. This was far from being a full or just appraisal of his scholarly achievements, but momentarily it represented his own view of himself. A Festschrift in his honour, published in 1974, showed the stimulus he had given to an extraordinarily wide range of research topics in economic and social, urban, demographic, and agrarian history, while the bibliography of his own writings revealed more fully still 'his multifarious interests'.

Hoskins's health began to break down in 1979 when he suffered one of a number of minor strokes, which changed his personality and heightened his irascibility. His last years were extremely melancholy for himself, his family and his friends. He lost interest in local history and preferred to read the classical works of English literature and books on current politics, these last always calling forth an explosive burst of acerbic, but amusing comment in a vein that recalled the sheer fun of conversations with Hoskins in former days. Darker clouds gathered with the tragic death of his son, though he was greatly blessed with a loyal and resilient daughter, who attended to all the needs of her father

and mother and bore ingratitude cheerfully. Hoskins and his wife had moved to a nursing home at Cullompton, when he was again taken ill, and died of bronchitis on January 11, 1992, aged eighty-three years.

The study of history turns many historians into considerable international travellers, but Hoskins was not among their number. He once explained his disinclination to travel, saying he had so much more to see in England. So he declined invitations to go to America, and only comparatively late in his life did he take more holidays in Europe. To the core of his being, he was a very English historian of England, though this did not mean that his vision of the world was narrow, for he read voraciously over a remarkably wide field of English and foreign literature. One of the sharpest insights into his philosophy of life and scale of values is found in the last pages of his second edition of *Local History in England* (1972) when he set up as a model for local historians the sentiments of Jacob Burckhardt, who held it necessary to be a specialist in one field, but to be as well an amateur at as many other points as possible, 'for the increase of his own knowledge and the enrichment of his possible standpoints.' More sympathetically still, Burckhardt was so dedicated to his native city of Basle, despite all its faults, that he returned there at the age of forty, and remained there for the rest of his days, turning down all invitations to move to more prestigious university posts. His example led Hoskins to reiterate yet again his own love for his native city, citing Horace's lines: 'It is that corner of the world, above all which has a smile for me'.

Hoskins was a complex person, inspired from a remarkably early age with a sense of his own destiny, which, despite unpropitious beginnings in a small university college, and many discouragements along the way, he was, marvellously, able to fulfil. It was remarkable to see how successfully he learned to convey his delight in local history to all and sundry, and it is not at all unusual nowadays to hear people averring that their studies of local history have totally transformed their lives. Discovering in the present landscape the history of our past is every day deepening our understanding and our sensibilities, and it has already had immeasurable consequences in shaping current attitudes towards our environment. With justice, then, W. G. Hoskins was named in a *Sunday Times* survey in 1991 as one of 'a thousand makers of twentieth-century opinion'.

JOAN THIRSK

*Fellow of the Academy*



*Note.* I wish to thank Professor Jack Simmons, and John Bagenal and Kate Havinden, children of Hope Bagenal, for allowing me to see their collections of letters from Hoskins. I also acknowledge gratefully the insights afforded me by the memoirs of Hoskins, already published, by Professors Charles Phythian-Adams, Maurice Beresford, Alan Everitt, and David Hey, and by Drs Roy Millward, John Sheail, and David Wykes. Most of all, I thank Mrs Susan Hewitt, Hoskins's daughter, and her husband Colin for their contributions to, and judgment of, this text.