MICHAEL THOMPSON

Francis Michael Longstreth Thompson

13 August 1925 – 23 August 2017

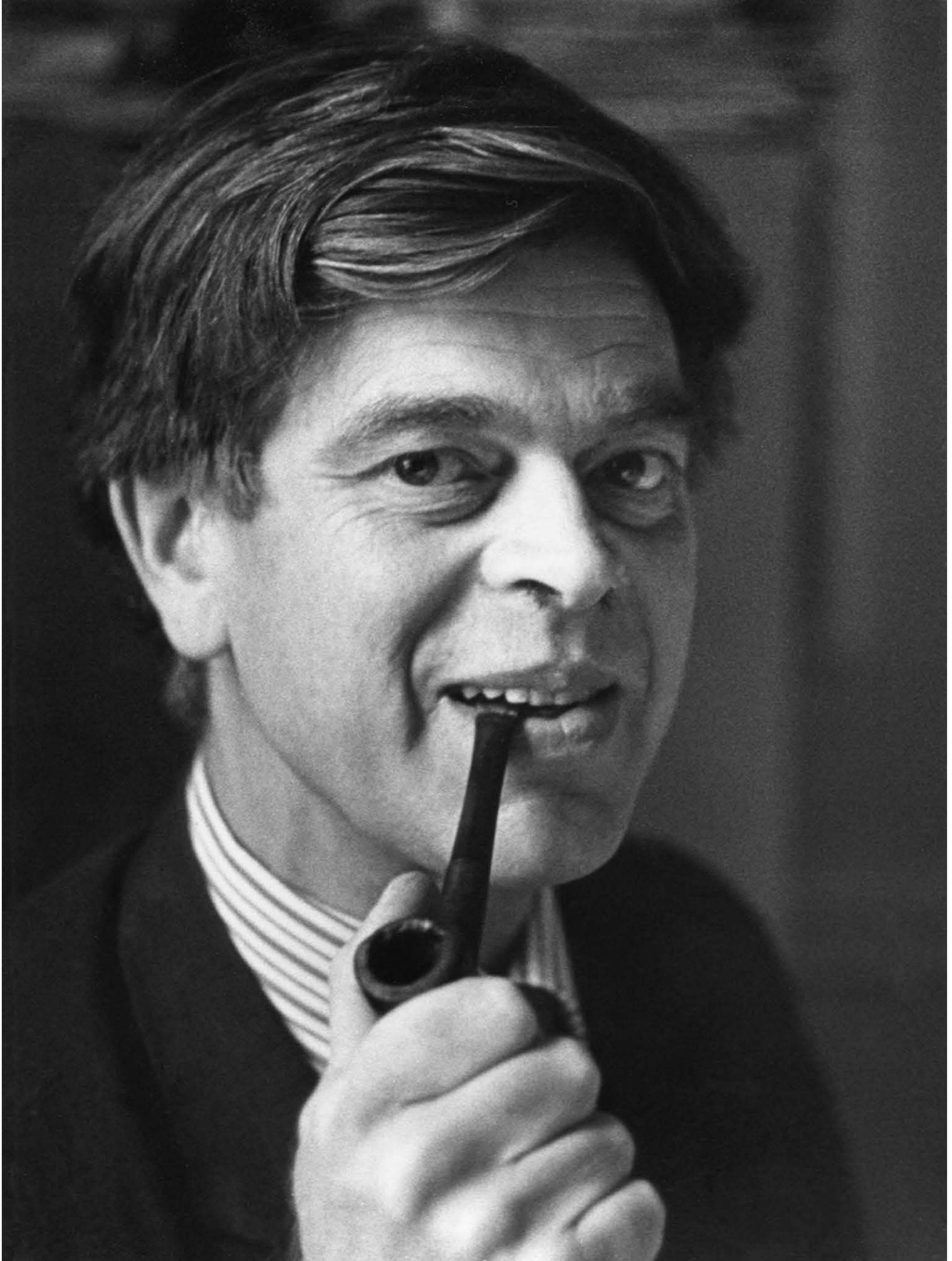
elected Fellow of the British Academy 1979

by

MARTIN DAUNTON
Fellow of the Academy

Michael Thompson was the outstanding historian of English landed society in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, who also made significant contributions to the agricultural, urban and social history of Britain. He gave much time and energy to sustaining the historical profession, as Director of the Institute of Historical Research, President of the Royal Historical Society and Economic History Society, and editor of two leading journals as well as the *Proceedings of the British Academy* and its *Records of Social and Economic History*. He combined geniality and modesty with quiet effectiveness over a long career.

Biographical Memoirs of Fellows of the British Academy, XIX, 277–307
Posted 25 August 2020. © British Academy 2020.



MICHAEL THOMPSON

Francis Michael Longstreth Thompson was, above all, the historian of English landed society in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In a review of a 'humdrum' book on the land question, he explained why the topic was so important:

> The subject is nothing less than the fundamental ingredient and determinant of all economic, social and political life: land, on which every human activity including preparations to leave it takes place; the rules under which it is used, allocated to different purposes, and the rewards of its development and exploitation are apportioned to different interests; and the attempts which have been made to alter these rules, which can be explained in terms of political strategies and tactics, social conflict, attitudes to social justice, and changing economic pressures on owners, occupiers and intermediaries.[1]

Over fifty years, he did more than anyone to draw on deep archival research to analyse these fundamental questions and to explain them with nuance and wit. There was nothing humdrum about his writings.

Michael was born on 13 August 1925 in a large detached house on the fringes of Purley. The house, and its neighbour, were built just before the First World War by his grandfather, Francis Thompson, as a speculation.[2] His great-grandfather—also Francis (1798–1884)—was one of the founders of the Black Ball shipping line in 1817 which started a regular, scheduled service between New York and Liverpool that dominated the mail and passenger services before the coming of steam; he was also a minister in the Society of Friends. He spent some time in Philadelphia, where he married Susan Morris Longstreth in 1823. The shipping company collapsed by 1878 as a result of the impact of the American Civil War and competition from steamships.[3] Michael's grandfather became a prosperous tea merchant in Mincing Lane, and his father—Francis Longstreth Thompson (1890–1973)—took a further step from commerce into a professional career. He studied engineering at UCL and served articles with Mather and Platt, before moving into a career in town planning.[4]

In 1917, Longstreth Thompson published *The Town Plan and the House* and in

[1] 'Review of Roy Douglas, *Land, People and Politics: a History of the Land Question in the United Kingdom, 1878–1952*', *History*, 62 (1977), 340.

[2] From the unpublished 'Memoir of Francis Michael Longstreth Thompson' kindly provided to me by Jonathan Thompson. Hereafter 'Memoir'.

[3] Information from Jonathan Thompson; see also http://www.tacomascene.com/kalakala/black_ball_line/black_ball_line.html (accessed 20 July 2020), and R. G. Albion, *Square Riggers on Schedule: the New York Sailing Packets to England, France and the Cotton Ports* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1938).

[4] 'Memoir'; *The Longstreth Family Records*, revised and enlarged by Agnes Longstreth Taylor (Philadelphia: Press of Ferris and Leach, 1909), pp. 171–2, and photographic plate, pp. 370–1; Edward H. Milligan, *Biographical Dictionary of British Quakers in Commerce and Industry 1775–1920* (York: Sessions Book Trust, 2007).

1923, *Site Planning in Practice: an Investigation of the Principles of Housing Estate Development.* He set up a town planning consultancy with Thomas Adams, one of the founders of the Town Planning Institute, with whom he produced a plan for the development of West Middlesex. He was involved in the design and planning of interwar housing estates and served as president of the Town Planning Institute in 1932–3. His half-brother by his mother's first marriage was George Pepler, chief planning inspector to the Ministry of Health from 1919 to 1941 and chief technical adviser to the Ministry of Town and Country Planning from 1943 to 1946, where he played a major role in the Town and Country Planning Act of 1947 that created the green belt. Longstreth Thompson was consultant for the development of Cape Town and Johannesburg, where he was stranded at the outbreak of the Second World War. On his return, he produced the plan for the redevelopment of Merseyside but decided there was no future in private practice and in 1943 he became chief planning officer for Essex County Council.[5]

Michael rarely talked of this family background, though in retrospect there are clear links with his interest in the use of land, urban development and the culture of business in the nineteenth century. He defended planning even in the high noon of Thatcherism when he pointed out that 'Regulation by the "unseen hand" of the market—a market worked by traders of grossly unequal power and wealth—has been erected into a substitute for economic policy'. He was aware of the ironies and unintended consequences of planning, and pointed out that support of the green belt could be less about the public good than the protection of property values and 'the propensity of vested interests to appropriate the instruments of planning and incorporate them into a set of rules under which the property game is played'. This realist assessment of motives did not lead him to reject planning: regulations were needed and should be enforced through bureaucrats and courts, and not merely to enable individuals and corporations to compete fairly in a free market. Rather, 'planning is about authority and about imposing a sense of the common good on recalcitrant minorities'.[6] He did not go any further in his formal analysis of the limits of planning and the market, but he was clearly concerned about creating a balance between the two. As we will see, the central feature of his work was how economic forces functioned within the constraints of law, institutions, vested interests and individual choice.

[5] 'Memoir'; Michael Simpson, *Thomas Adams and the Emergence of the Modern Planning Movement: Britain, Canada and the United States 1900–1940* (London: Mansell Publishing, 1985); Wikipedia entry on Francis Longstreth Thompson.

[6] F. M. L. Thompson, 'Jam tomorrow', *London Review of Books*, 11 (1989).

Although Michael had no obvious religious beliefs, his approach to life was deeply influenced by the Quaker background of both sides of his family. In the opinion of his friend and former colleague Penelope Corfield, he internalised a secular version of the Quaker stress on spiritual egalitarianism which meant he never pulled rank and treated everyone with the same simple dignity.[7] His mother, Mildred Corder, came from Sunderland where the family was in business as insurance brokers; her brother was a school friend of Longstreth Thompson at Bootham, the Quaker school in York. They married in 1913 at Jordans Quaker Meeting House near Beaconsfield. During the war, Longstreth Thompson was a conscientious objector and was involved with the Friends' War Victims Relief Committee in building temporary accommodation for refugees. Michael's education was largely Quaker, starting with a local Quaker kindergarten before moving to The Downs School in Herefordshire in 1935. In his memoirs, Michael recalled it had 'a distinctly Quaker tone and atmosphere—there was a certain amount of hymn singing, but also Sunday meeting in the school library. … A Quaker touch was to take in refugees from Nazi Germany: some were schoolboys, and one I recall as being a young architect from Gropius's Bauhaus … who did some teaching.' Another teacher was W. H. Auden 'who chain-smoked and taught a bit of English'. The school adhered to an open-air cult, with all four walls of the dormitories made of windows that were kept open in all weathers, and 'If that didn't harden us off there was a cold plunge in the morning'. Possibly more appealing were the school's nine-inch gauge miniature railway with a couple of steam locomotives and open carriages, and the organisation of boys into 'tribes'. 'An unusual, and much-loved, institution was the "ninepenny". This was a day's holiday, declared on the spur of the moment when it was a fine, warm day, maybe a couple or three times a year; each boy was given nine pence, and in groups of six or so we were sent off to buy provisions for the day, not being allowed back until supper time.'[8]

In September 1938, Michael left for Bootham and went straight into the school certificate classes where he discovered 'the attractions and challenges of History, through the inspiring teaching of Leslie Gilbert—who with hindsight one sees was a quite exceptional teacher. It was history of a fairly determinist sort, which led me to couple it with Economics in my second, post-Matric, year.' The school was evacuated to Ampleforth in 1939, to the alarm of the monks, before returning to York in 1940 from where Michael visited Coventry after the Blitz to help clear rubble. In June 1941, he sat his Higher Certificate examinations, followed by examinations for a Hastings

[7] Penelope J. Corfield, 'Michael Thompson's intellectual outlook', *History Workshop Journal*, 86 (2018), 306–7.

[8] 'Memoir'; the train still exists—see the School's website at www.thedownsmalvern.org.uk (accessed 20 July 2020).

Scholarship at Queen's College, Oxford. His success led to a school half-holiday at Bootham with permission to visit the cinema to see *Citizen Kane*. Michael's memoirs portray a happy and contented childhood, with a close family on both sides. Although his parents were absent in South Africa at the start of the war, his school holidays were spent in Wensleydale with his maternal grandmother, and on the farm of his maternal aunt and her husband at Preston Patrick in Westmorland, where he recalled a team of six or eight great horses working alongside tractors. The basis for his later work on the horse-drawn society was laid, as was his abiding pleasure in the countryside.[9]

In May 1942, Michael went up to Queen's to fit in four terms before call-up. He decided that 'the war against Nazi Germany was a just and necessary war, and that I could not follow my father's 1914–18 stand of conscientious objection'. He contracted jaundice and spent most of the term in the sick bay, relieved by conversations, drinking, playing bezique with (and rebuffing an attempt at seduction by) Lord Parmoor, the estates bursar and elder brother of Stafford Cripps. They visited college farms and the Cripps family seat near Henley which had been lent to King Zog of Albania. These excursions were apparently of greater use than tutorials with Norman Sykes, 'an ecclesiastical historian specialising in eighteenth-century bishops, which I did not find at all exciting'. Matters improved the next term when his tutor was A. J. P. Taylor of Magdalen College, a fellow Boothamite, 'whose mastery of nineteenth-century European history, insatiable appetite for paradox, and sharp eye for titillating historical gossip were exhilarating'. Less inspiring were tutorials on the history of political ideas 'given by a very tall man with a limp, in exile from Chatham House, whose mind was really focused on other things, like the failure of the League of Nations'. Alongside these tutorials, Michael undertook basic infantry training under the command of Edmund Blunden, the poet and fellow of Merton, 'whose commands were laced with literary references'. By the end of Trinity term 1943, Michael had performed well in his examinations in History and, more importantly, Certificate B in gunnery which determined his war service.[10]

Michael's initial training was his first social encounter with the urban working class. He remarked that

> Most of the intake of fellow conscripts at Maidstone were from the East End, and were astonished to see me put on pyjamas for sleeping in, never having seen such garments before. Their amazement was colourfully expressed, but it turned out that I had my uses as I was enlisted to write letters to girl-friends by the less literate of the squad. They may have been literally impaired, but not in other ways, and should they have

[9] 'Memoir'.
[10] 'Memoir'.

> survived long enough would have laughed at Larkin's proposition that sex began in 1964 [*sic*].

After artillery and officer training, he was posted in early 1945 to the 5th Indian Field Regiment, Indian Artillery near Rawalpindi, from where he was sent to the North-West Frontier which he recalled as

> a surprisingly pleasant interlude. It was May and June and extremely hot, hovering round about 100 degrees, but it was a dry heat and Wana [in South Waziristan] was a peacetime frontier post, with well shaded bungalows and a swimming pool bordered by peaches, which being ripe were there for the plucking while swimming. Also there were horses and riding in the early morning cool. Military duties were not rigorous.

Matters soon changed with a posting to the 7th Indian Field Regiment near Bangalore. The regiment had been involved in serious fighting with the Japanese, and was now withdrawn to recuperate and prepare for the invasion of Malaya.

> Training for the Malayan invasion didn't involve anything as practical as practising getting in and out of landing craft, since we were a hundred miles or more from any sea, and no one seemed to think such a thing was of any importance. One learnt later that our bit of the invasion would have been an utter shambles, as we were destined to land on a beach with such shallow water that the landing craft would have grounded 500 yards from dry land.

The dropping of the atom bombs and the surrender of Japan removed any need for this doomed enterprise.[11]

Michael was not well disposed to regular army officers with their obsession with hierarchy and status, and he found Indian officers more friendly and congenial. He disliked pomposity and standing on dignity by regular officers and, later, academics; even when he was himself part of the establishment, his default option was wry amusement at the self-importance of some senior historians. He disliked social barriers, but this did not mean he was unaware of social differences. In August 1945, he reported to his parents that

> One of the great things about this Indian artillery is that all the barriers with the BORs [British Other Ranks] are right down. I like our set a lot and I'm damned glad to be able to mix with them when I like without any silly restrained feeling.… I think parties with BOR's are the best of the lot.[12]

[11] 'Memoir'.

[12] Letter to parents and sister Ann, 28 August 1945. Anne and Jonathan Thompson kindly loaned me Michael's letters home from his time in the army.

Peacetime army life, with the return of petty rules and regulations, started to grate. 'One thing you can rest assured about, I won't stay in the army a minute longer than can help: a few weeks' sampling of peace-time soldiering is quite enough for me. I just couldn't stand its pettiness and pointlessness; in fact I'm not sure that I'll stand it for long here as it is.'[13] He approached Queen's to seek release without much hope and was despondent: 'sometime I'll have to make up my mind about going back, and right now I just don't know what I'll do…. Christ I'm browned off.'[14] He longed 'to be away out of reach of the high ups, free to make something worth-while out of a troop, to get somewhere where it isn't a crime to "fraternise" with the men'. Unwisely, he got drunk in the sergeants' mess and sang the Ball of Kirrymuir in the hearing of the commanding officer:

> It really is the absolute bottom of bad form to get tight and pally with the BORs: I am a chastened man; one must make allowances for the peace-time army. In my eyes when I am on parade I'm an officer and if I don't behave like one I'm in for the high jump; but off parade I'm anyone's friend who likes: but then I wouldn't know, I'm not a regular. Flourishes and alarms, exit, severely chastened.[15]

He assured his parents that there was no reason to worry that his sister Mary, who was in India with Queen Alexandra's Imperial Nursing Service, was engaged to a member of the BORs. Wartime NCOs were

> not at all like the regulars who are hard-drinking, hard-wenching, tough and coarse and usually not in the slightest degree intelligent! I enjoy going out with them, talking with them, visiting their mess; but there's just something, so hard to define without being snobbish, because it may just arise from the distinction between commissioned and non-commissioned, but it's something which would make me loathe to have them always living with me. It's not superficial, like manners or accents or grammar! Lord knows I don't keep much polish in the army. Something of an attitude, of irresponsibility, agin the government, agin authority. An outlook, in the army, that superiors are there to be bettered, that something is to be 'won' out of them – so that if you are friendly with a BOR you can never be quite sure that he isn't just thinking that he's having you for a sap; and an outlook, in civvy street, which likewise assumes that there's some prize to be taken from those above.

Michael was best man at the wedding in Calcutta in December 1945, where he witnessed crowds welcoming Nehru and shouting 'Quit India'. On his return, he was immediately posted to Sumatra.[16]

[13] Letter to parents, 8 September 1945.
[14] Letter to parents, 8 September 1945.
[15] Letter to parents, 26 September 1945.
[16] Letter to parents, 17/18 December 1945; 'Memoir'.

Michael was attached to the Division HQ as intelligence officer in Medan, a Dutch colonial city, supposedly to find out the views of Indonesian political parties though in reality he was a superior clerk with files. It was a confusing period economically and politically: the currency was a mixture of rapidly depreciating Japanese notes, Indian rupees, Dutch guilders and cigarettes, which required considerable skill in trading. The defeated Japanese were not in prisoner-of-war camps and initially incited the Indonesians against the British army—until they realised that they were just as vulnerable and co-operated in restoring order. Meanwhile, the British were trying to repatriate the Dutch civilians (who were more eager to have a 'binge' after internment) and to deal with 'insurgents' who feared the restoration of colonial rule. In Michael's view, the Indonesians were in a state of chaos with competing factions, stray attacks and disorder with

> no higher direction and no real policy… It seems that law and order are vital before any sensible political settlement can be made. I used to sympathise with the Indonesians, they seemed perfectly entitled to want self-government and it didn't seem to be our job to interfere. But these chaps, if they mean anything seriously, are just spiting themselves; they've no organisation to offer in place of ours, just confusion and chaos, and I couldn't sympathise less.[17]

Socially, it was much better, for the brigadier allowed the staff to get on with their work in an independent way, and there were dances and parties with 'fascinating lovely Dutch girls'.[18] It was too good to last: he was replaced in intelligence, the new brigadier was rude and conceited, and he was given the 'stoogiest job' as 'a glorified drains officer and I don't like it in the least'. The prospect of being in the army until Christmas 1946 or beyond was relieved by being made area education officer, and subsequently welfare officer, with responsibility for organising parties, sport and visits by ENSA.[19]

Most importantly, he met Lieske van Oude, a 'very charming and friendly' Dutch widow with two children whose husband had died in internment.

> Her house is quite my house too now, I feel completely as tho' I belong there, and it is such a good and satisfactory feeling after a year and more away from home. It's the first time I've been able to feel away from the army, I think, really away from the atmosphere and the stupid idea of a lot of grown men behaving like schoolboys – I've got real sanctuary, a life that is just the private affair of Lisca [sic] and I, and I love it. We talk together for hours, and it's like getting completely away into a real life – about England and Holland, the lakes and hills, skating on the canals, the tulip farms, then

[17] Letter to parents, 30 December 1945.
[18] Letters to parents, 21 January and 3 February 1946.
[19] Letters to parents, 7 March and 25 May 1946.

> about Oxford for hours and hours until I am really steeped in it again, and for the first time I really desperately want to go back, and my history has really started to live again for me.[20]

It was a return to domesticity and, as Michael later remarked, 'at the time it was extremely exciting and romantic, and very serious'—indeed, he told his parents they would marry and he visited her in Holland in 1947 and 1949.[21] By the middle of 1946, Lieske was repatriated, Michael was back to being a 'stooge' and the political situation was deteriorating with constant sniping. Michael now saw action in shelling a roadblock: 'I was v lucky, in six month of ops only two officers have ever engaged targets and then my first do I go and get one!!'[22]

In August, he complained that most people at home had forgotten there was an army still fighting, and he felt caged in and nostalgic for Wensleydale. In September 1946, Michael was posted back to India where he was staff captain to a brigadier, and then despatched to East Bengal to deal with communal tensions.[23] The highlight was when Michael and two or three other officers called on Gandhi.

> Warmly welcomed in a hut in the central square, throughout our meeting Gandhi was having his back rubbed with coconut oil by the Quaker woman who was his constant companion at this stage of his life. There being an Australian officer in our party, Gandhi quickly turned the conversation away from Hindu-Moslem antagonism, on which he had little to say beyond preaching peace and mutual understanding, to criticism of the "white Australia" regime, on which he had a lot to say…. Years later I earned brownie points for having a hand which had shaken the hand of the Mahatma.[24]

He sailed from Mumbai on 15 August 1947—Independence Day.

Michael returned to Queen's in October 1947, with his history all but forgotten, except for some memories of Taylor's tutorials. His only history reading during the war seems to have been Arthur Bryant and a book club volume on Henry VIII. The course was compressed into two years which 'meant writing two essays a week, a gruelling test of endurance and concentration as one had to switch every few days between thinking about the purpose of the Domesday Survey and the significance of the Putney Debates'. His college tutors were excellent—John Prestwich, and Edmund Dell who was then a Marxist historian of the Civil War whose position was not renewed in 1949. (He reappeared much later, after serving in the Wilson governments, as a member of the council of the Institute of Historical Research.) By contrast, the

[20] Letter to parents, 20 June; also 20 July 1946.
[21] 'Memoir'; information from Anne Thompson.
[22] Letters to parents, 20 July and 17 August 1946; 'Memoir'.
[23] Letters to parents, 17 August, 6 September, 5 October and 12 December 1946; 'Memoir'.
[24] 'Memoir'.

special subject on the French Revolution was a disappointment, for Felix Markham was not aware of recent literature by the Annales and Marxist schools. 'Very soon he side-tracked awkward pauses in tutorials after I'd read an essay which he plainly didn't understand, by producing glasses of sherry, and while we had quite convivial sessions they were pretty much a waste of time.' More stimulating was sharing digs with another history student from Queen's—Jack Pole, who was later a colleague at UCL in American history.[25] The landlord, Michael recalled, 'was almost a caricature of a lower middle-class Tory, anti-trade unions, anti-socialist, anti-Labour, anti-Semitic (he never rumbled Jack). He once waved a £1 note and said, "See this, it's only worth ten shillings thanks to Labour", and was speechless when I offered to buy his £1 with a ten-shilling note. The rooms, however, were adequate, and served pretty well for Pole-Thompson historical discussions and disputes as we wrote our twice-weekly essays.'[26]

The decision not to renew Dell's temporary appointment on ideological grounds created a vacancy for a fellow in modern history at Queen's. Michael was Prestwich's candidate but other fellows wished to limit his influence and the post went to Henry Pelling from Cambridge.[27] This fortunate escape from the treadmill of college teaching meant that Michael applied for a Harmsworth Senior Scholarship at Merton which meant devising a research proposal in the two weeks after finals. His choice was influenced by Hrothgar Habakkuk's 1940 article 'English landownership 1680–1740'. Habakkuk analysed the rise of the great estates: why not consider their nineteenth-century decline? The application was successful, with the additional award of a James Bryce Senior Studentship. Michael's supervisor for the first term was Asa Briggs until Habakkuk arrived to take up the chair in economic history. This change of supervisor probably accounts for the dual nature of the thesis. Briggs was more concerned with politics and suggested that Michael start with pamphlets on debates over land reform in the 1830s to 1850s which forms the first part of the thesis. Habakkuk, by contrast, was concerned with the use of economic theory to underpin historical observations which is reflected in the longer second part which analysed the estates of the Dukes of Northumberland. Both parts of the thesis are excellent; the problem was that they did not hang together as a whole.[28]

[25] Jack P. Greene, 'Jack Richon Pole, 1922–2010', *Biographical Memoirs of Fellows of the British Academy*, XII (2014), p. 385.

[26] 'Memoir'.

[27] 'Memoir'; Peter Clarke, 'Henry Mathison Pelling, 1920–1997', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 120 (2003), pp. 332–3.

[28] 'Memoir'; see F. M. L. Thompson, 'Hrothgar John Habakkuk, 1915–2002', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 124 (2004), pp. 91–114.

In his new lodgings as a graduate student, Michael met a fellow lodger early in 1950: Anne Challoner, who was working as a solicitor's secretary in Woodstock. The relationship soon developed with the aid of a 1928 Morris Cowley tourer which, somewhat improbably, was once cleaned by William Rees-Mogg who turned up with a furled umbrella and—possibly apocryphal—bowler hat. The Challoner family lived near Haltwhistle in Northumberland so the relationship was both romantic and practical, for the Challoners knew the Duke of Northumberland's land agent and Michael hoped to gain access to the papers at Alnwick. This secondary motive was not successful, for Michael annoyed the Challoners by criticising Churchill's record on India and his 'Gestapo' speech in the election in 1945. Anne thought he was on the left of the Labour party at the time; he had certainly subscribed to the *New Statesman* in India. Later in life, he helped deliver leaflets for the Lib Dems, but was generally non-partisan and interested in issues rather than party labels. Corfield thought him 'a classic liberal' in the mould of John Stuart Mill with a belief in fair play, free speech, equal rights, opportunities and respect.[29] Whether for political or other reasons, the land agent failed to secure access, but fortunately the duke was more amenable. On one visit to Alnwick, Mrs Challoner wrote to Michael to ask if his intentions were honourable or, if not, to leave her daughter alone, 'thus confirming suspicions that Northumbrian society was several decades behind anywhere else'. Progress was made both academically and romantically, with marriage set for August 1951.[30]

Shortly before the wedding, Michael secured an assistant lectureship at UCL. The story was one he was fond of retelling, both against himself and the pompous John Neale who had certain similarities with the less attractive brigadiers of army days. The department had funds for an assistant lecturer to teach history on a new BSc(Econ) degree and Neale wrote to Habakkuk for recommendations. Michael was interviewed by the entire Department in June 1951:

> After half an hour or so, it being 4 o'clock, I thought I heard Neale ask 'How would you like a cup of tea?' To which I replied 'How kind, but I think I ought to go and catch my train at Paddington'. The assembled professors and lecturers roared with laughter, for it never occurred to Neale to offer anyone tea, and he had actually asked me 'How do you like the sound of my team?' I left for Paddington, and Neale was so overcome that he couldn't avoid offering me the job without frightful loss of face.

[29] Conversation with Anne and Jonathan Thompson; Corfield, 'Michael Thompson's intellectual outlook', 307.
[30] 'Memoir'.

At this point, the Korean War intruded: Michael was called back to service in the Honourable Artillery Company but after a couple of wasted weeks on Salisbury Plain was sent home.[31]

At UCL, Michael taught nineteenth-century European History to bored economists and British political history to history students. It was only when Arthur Taylor left for Leeds that he taught economic history, and his teaching and research were aligned. Neale was the 'absolute monarch'[32] until he retired in 1956, and one of Michael's duties was to keep an attendance record and collect the tea money at the department's weekly tea meeting. Neale apart, Michael found UCL in the 1950s 'a pretty happy family, at least the younger ones'. Meanwhile, the thesis was on hold. During the time in Oxford, Michael used the archives at Alnwick; now at UCL, he made weekly trips to use the Tithe Commutation records and with Anne's help made transcripts of all the tithe awards for Essex to construct a cadastral survey of Essex in the 1840s. In 1953, they visited the Hampshire Record Office where the Baring archives contained details of the purchase of the estate of the Duke of Buckingham after his near bankruptcy, which provided the basis for his first article in 1955, 'The end of a great estate'.[33]

The thesis, titled 'The economic and social background of the English landed interest, 1840–70, with particular reference to the estates of the dukes of Northumberland', was completed in 1955, and was examined in 1956 by Asa Briggs, now at Leeds, and John Steven Watson of Christ Church, who remarked that he could not see how Michael could ever get a book out of it:

> That was a red rag to a bull, and although the book wasn't published until 1963 I was instantly determined to prove him wrong. Steven Watson, of course, was quite right. The thesis was in two rather artificially connected halves. The first half set out the contemporary nineteenth-century criticisms of the structure of landownership and the real property laws within which it operated, that is to say what the land question was considered to be in the mid-nineteenth century, and what its effects on the utilisation of the land and the welfare of the people were considered to be. The second half was an economic history of the Duke of Northumberland's estate, agricultural, industrial, rural, and urban, intended as a case study to test how far the real property laws—affecting land transfers, the powers of landowners and the position of tenants—did in practice distort or inhibit the full development of the land's potential. This was an approach unlikely to produce any conclusions beyond a demonstration of the obvious point that within the existing legal framework some estates prospered and

[31] 'Memoir'.

[32] Patrick Collinson, 'Neale, Sir John Ernest, 1890–1975', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online at http:/www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/31487 (accessed 20 July 2020).

[33] F. M. L. Thompson, 'The end of a great estate', *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser., 8 (1955), 36–52.

> were well run, and some estates were in poor shape. The methodology for a rigorous testing of the land question's arguments by a full-scale counterfactual exercise did not exist.[34]

The book that appeared in 1963 built on the second part of the thesis. Avner Offer, whose thesis on the land question from 1870 to 1914 was supervised by Michael, still believes that the first part was highly original and should have been published.[35]

The first part of the thesis dealt with arguments for a free trade in land as a corollary of free trade in corn to reduce aristocratic power. Radicals pressed for reform of strict settlement, entail, primogeniture and the constraints of complex laws of real property, and urged improved security for tenant farmers so that they could invest in their farms. The campaign also appealed to progressive intellectuals as a way of applying the principles of political economy to allow land to be used by the unimpeded action of market forces, in place of an imperfect land market dominated by large estates which limited economic development and perpetuated un-businesslike behaviour. He concluded that the complaints were of little significance: there might have been a reduction in the legal costs of transferring land, but owners were unlikely to sell more land just because transfer was cheaper. Rather, the supply was restricted by the fact that it gave influence and he doubted that there was an unsatisfied demand for land at existing prices from potential landed gentry or owner-occupiers. Further, the limited borrowing power of tenant farmers who lacked collateral was less significant than the ability of landlords to invest in improvements, not least when restrictions were removed on borrowing by life tenants and funds were available from insurance companies. If existing landowners did not improve their estates, it was not because of legal or institutional shortcomings but because they lacked an economic incentive: the decisive factor was the rate of interest and return on capital.[36]

This account of the land market informed three important publications. In 1957, he considered the nature of the land market.

> The nineteenth century witnessed the establishment or full development of organized markets for every variety of commodity, of money market and capital market, even of some semblance of a labour market. A land market alone seemed to remain persistently, obstinately, absent. Its absence was felt as a matter of organization and institutions …. Its absence was felt by some to be a social as well as an economic evil, a reflection of an artificially restricted circulation of land which produced the socially and politically undesirable, perhaps dangerous, effect of preventing a wide distribution of landed property among the middle and lower classes.

[34] 'Memoir'

[35] Conversation with Avner Offer.

[36] F. M. L. Thompson, 'The economic and social background of the English landed interest, 1840–70, with particular reference to the estates of the dukes of Northumberland', DPhil thesis (University of Oxford, 1955).

The radical critics missed the point: the land market was bound to be different, for the amount changing hands was always limited, it lacked uniformity of quality, and the value put upon it varied with the non-economic preferences of potential owners for social security, advancement or political influence. Nevertheless, 'a market in the economists' sense might exist if general influences produced general effects on the level of land transfers'. The land reformers were wrong in stressing artificial, legal restrictions on the supply of land; he placed more weight on demand.

> If on the whole it was demand which called the tune, and that demand fluctuated broadly with economic conditions and expectations, then investment in land occurred as opportunities for it seemed attractive, and land changed hands as freely as was consistent with the relatively high value put upon it. Whether land might have been more effectively mobilized than that is not for the historians to say.

Here is a central feature of Michael's work and world view: scepticism about sweeping plans for reform that do not reflect a grasp of economic reality.[37]

In 1965, he considered the politics of the land question more directly. He remarked that the lack of 'memorable achievement' of land reform 'keeps company with republicanism, teetotalism, and disestablishmentarianism'. The reform proposals were of little practical relevance: they were based on misconceptions, sought to change a condition which did not exist, or promised benefits that were not wanted, and the major problems were in urban and industrial society for which the land reform programme was little use. The importance of the campaign for land reform was rather about power. 'Just as the truth of a religious doctrine is irrelevant to the mounting of a crusade, so the truth of the radical doctrines on land was irrelevant to the struggle against landed dominance so long as the potency of the symbols continued to excite the faithful', and the 'empty symbols of radicalism' might provide a battle cry to hold together anti-landlord sentiments.[38] Michael did not pursue the implication that was taken up by other historians: the language of politics mattered in defining interests and shaping debates. In retrospect, his analysis of the rhetoric of land is more original than he allowed. His main concern remained with how the land was used.

The third paper set out his concept of the second agricultural revolution of 1815 to 1880—the idea that farming was transformed from a closed circuit to one that entailed inputs of fertiliser and feed from outside. Landlords made investments in their estates, in drainage or new buildings, with only modest returns; above all, the process was financed and managed by tenant farmers

[37] F. M. L. Thompson, 'The land market in the nineteenth century', *Oxford Economic Papers*, n.s. 9 (1957), 285–308.

[38] F. M. L. Thompson, 'Land and politics in England in the nineteenth century', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th ser., 15 (1965), 23–44.

> within an unregenerated institutional framework of landlord-tenant relations, before any statutory enactment of compulsory compensation for unexhausted improvements, … and while the great majority of tenants were tenants-at-will legally liable to eviction on six months' notice. In the face of the evidence of what actually happened to agriculture it seems idle to pretend that these legal and institutional arrangements discouraged enterprise by tenant-farmers, let alone that they made them into an oppressed and exploited class…. Institutional arrangements which were theoretically objectionable did in fact work in practice, and the cases of hardship whose importance was inflated for political reasons by radical polemic were in fact no more than evidence of friction at the margins of the system, and were of no economic importance.[39]

Practical men could find ways around legal and institutional impediments.

The longer second part of the thesis turned to the estates of the Duke of Northumberland, showing how his engagement in the land market shifted from buying land from distressed gentry and yeomen in the post-war deflation to withdrawing from purchases as the supply dried up from the 1840s. He showed that a settled estate was no obstacle to coal mining, and the large estate and expertise meant enlightened and progressive practice, guided by a business-like chief agent. After 1847, spending on improvements did not pay and continued more from a sense of responsibility. Hence impediments to development and the absence of agricultural improvements were not defects inherent in the system and were least likely to be present when the estate was really large.

> [F]ree trade in land did not merely misrepresent the actual situation, it misunderstood the nature of the problem. If there were many neglected settled estates, they would not be removed, or the neglect remedied, by legal changes designed to free land to find its economic level. Meanwhile the system of strict settlement necessarily fostered good estates as well as bad estates: good estates on which agriculture was given a subsidy for social reasons. The landed aristocracy performed a service which no laissez-faire state could have replaced.[40]

So far, this case study demonstrated the limits of the radical case which he came to see as a dead-end. For the book, he 'decided not to pursue the idea of testing the validity of the land question's arguments but instead to try to broaden the coverage of the history of estates from the single Northumberland base of the thesis to a large enough sample, in terms of geographical spread and of differing size and social position, to support an economic and social history of the Victorian landed interest'. He embarked on a tour of estate archives around England in the summer vacations, living

[39] F. M. L. Thompson, 'The second agricultural revolution, 1815–1880', *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser., 21 (1968), 62–77.

[40] Thompson, 'Economic and social background of the English landed interest', p. 9.

modestly by camping or hiring a caravan. Research in estates archives had its pleasures and limitations that were combined at Blagdon where 'At noon or soon after the butler was sent up with sherry, which he served in half pint tankards. I then joined the family for lunch… It was rapidly established that serious work at Blagdon was mornings only.'[41] The first results were presented in a paper to the first International Conference of Economic History in 1960,[42] but the decision to stop further archival visits and write a book came from Harold Perkin who wanted a book for his Routledge Studies in Social History on English landed society in the nineteenth century. The book appeared in 1963 and made Michael's reputation (and secured his promotion to Reader in Economic History) with its wide-ranging account of the land market, the management of estates, the life of the aristocracy, their engagement in the local community, from their heyday to Indian summer before the First World War.[43] He explained in his memoir that he wrote 'straight on a typewriter (I had taught myself to type in the 1930s, using [a] Pitman d.i.y. book), first version the final version, so sometimes progress was very slow while I thought through a paragraph in my head, and Anne wondered if I'd gone to sleep'. This approach remained the norm: both Anne and Jonathan commented that he never revised what he wrote, that he would write a paragraph, pause to work out the next and never alter what he had already written. In the preface, he acknowledged the inspiration of Habakkuk 'who originated modern work in this field, supervised my post-graduate work and who read and made valuable comments on a part of my final draft', as well as the assistance of Anne who 'not only spurred a naturally reluctant author to work, but has developed an enthusiasm for a subject she found naturally dull'. Anne remained a vital support throughout his career, helping his research before the children arrived and after they grew up, complementing and supporting him socially in his various posts, and joining in many events at Bedford College, the Institute of Historical Research and the Royal Historical Society with a wide circle of friends in the historical community.[44]

Michael was dedicated to his family and home, and Anne remarked that he did not like being away. In 1957, Michael and Anne moved from London to Holly Cottage in Wheathampstead where he remained until his death. Although they had plans to move to the countryside, the immediate trigger was the prospective move of Anne's employer, Nisbets the publishers, from central London to Hertfordshire. In 1958, their

[41] 'Memoir'.

[42] F. M. L. Thompson, 'English great estates in the nineteenth century, 1790–1914', *First International Conference of Economic History, Contributions, Stockholm* (Paris, 1960), 28–33.

[43] F. M. L. Thompson, *English Landed Society in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963).

[44] 'Memoir'; conversations with Anne and Jonathan Thompson; Thompson, *English Landed Society in the Nineteenth Century*, p. xiii, quotes from pp. viii–ix.

first son (Jonathan) arrived, followed by Suzy in 1959 and Matthew in 1964. Michael tended the large garden and grew vegetables; he was a warm and supportive father. He spent much time driving Suzy to gymkhanas and listed 'pony watching' as a recreation in *Who's Who*, alongside more conventional gardening, walking and carpentry.[45] Both Anne and Jonathan remarked that he lacked ambition: he did not apply for any job and did not go out of his way to seek advancement (and looked with amusement on those who did). He lived modestly—for many years, he drove to work in an old, yellow British Telecom van; and his dress sense was more redolent of the countryside than an urban academic.[46]

Soon after finishing *English Landed Society*, Michael was approached by the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors to write a book to mark the centenary of the foundation of the Surveyors' Institution in 1868. Having already discussed surveyors as land agents in *English Landed Society*, he now saw an opportunity to consider their other activities as estate agents, building surveyors, quantity surveyors and valuers, and to make a contribution to the academic interest in the rise of the professional classes beyond a purely institutional history. The book, *Chartered Surveyors: the Growth of a Profession*, was finished in time to be launched at the centenary meeting in the Festival Hall; the RICS president was the unhelpful land agent of the Duke of Northumberland, who now introduced Michael as his long-standing family friend.[47]

In 1968, Michael was contacted by Robin Du Boulay of Bedford College—a fellow artilleryman—asking if he would like to move there and, after a half-hour talk with the Principal, he started as Professor of Modern History and head of the history department in October 1968. It was, by all accounts, an idyllic period and the most enjoyable years of his career. Academically, the department was excellent, with colleagues ranging from Hugh Lawrence, the medievalist who had fought in Burma and looked like a real army officer; to Conrad Russell who certainly did not. The Department occupied St John's Lodge, a Regency villa in Regent's Park that was originally leased by the Marquess of Bute: Michael recalled that 'the main lecture room was a ballroom with a sprung floor, occasionally used for its original purpose; the common room was a first-floor drawing room, with fine views over the Park'. It was a small and close-knit department that was still adjusting to the recent admission of male students. There were close personal ties between the academics and the students, opportunities to play tennis and cricket, and excursions to Offa's Dyke and other landmarks organised by Caroline Barron, with Michael and Anne providing logistical

[45] 'Memoir'; *Who's Who* (London: A & C Black, 2017).

[46] Conversations with Anne and Jonathan Thompson; 'Memoir'; personal knowledge.

[47] 'Memoir'; F. M. L. Thompson, *Chartered Surveyors: the Growth of a Profession* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968), p. xvi.

support. Corfield remembered that he 'gave a decisive lead but without apparently doing so', allowing discussion to ebb and flow around him while getting the decisions he wanted. Another Bedford College colleague, Nicola Sutherland, remarked that

> he was a very straightforward person, not someone with whom one had to pick one's way with studied care. He was essentially affable, approachable, even-tempered, clubbable, fair and unflappable. I am sure no student ever trembled outside his door. He never appeared to be stressed (though there must have been times when he felt it) or especially busy, and yet it would appear that he was efficient: he got things done with a light touch.[48]

In the Festschrift to mark Michael's retirement, Corfield commented that 'he has the capacity to wield power without making enemies, while throughout remaining sociable, informal, relaxed and jovial'. His common-sense, calming influence was exemplified by the occasion when his response to a student throwing furniture around the common-room was to suggest a game of tennis.[49]

Michael's inaugural lecture, 'Victorian England: a horse drawn society', was witty and perceptive, combining his personal recreation of pony-watching with the loving account of manure in the second agricultural revolution. It captured his distinctive approach to the past. It rested on careful calculations of the number of horses from detailed study of archives, and of the amount of hay and oats they ate. It conjures up a world of 145 job-masters hiring out horses in London in 1909—the equivalent of Avis or Hertz today. It informs us that the maker of sun hats for horses also made bowler hats for City gents. And we find that Wales supplied cobs, and the East Riding hunters in the mid-nineteenth century, and hackney horses by the end of the century. The lecture, and the subsequent article, have the essence of Michael: an eye for a good topic, presented with wit, humour and sharp intelligence, yet without abstruse theory, and with a sense of how markets function and a feeling for place. It was, he told me not long before his final illness, his personal favourite.[50]

The idyll was threatened by economic reality. Bedford College was small, underendowed and with a short lease from the Crown Estate. Michael joined with

[48] Quoted by Barron, memorial service.

[49] 'Memoir'; Penelope J. Corfield, 'F. M. L. Thompson: an appreciation. As friend and colleague', in Negley Harte and Roland Quinault (eds.), *Land and Society in Britain 1700–1914: Essays in Honour of F.M.L. Thompson* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1996), pp. ix, x; Dr Claire Daunton, then a student at Bedford College, has explained the general ambience.

[50] F. M. L. Thompson, *Victorian England: the Horse Drawn Society. Inaugural Lecture as Professor of Modern History, Bedford College* (Bedford College, 1970), p. 20; F. M. L. Thompson, 'Nineteenth-century horse sense', *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser., 29 (1976), 60–81. See also F. M. L. Thompson (ed.), *Horses in European Economic History: a Preliminary Canter* (Reading, UK: British Agricultural History Society, 1983), p. 206.

Oliver Macgregor of the Department of Sociology to draw up a survival plan that entailed closing the weak and expensive natural science departments to become a high-quality liberal arts college in areas where it had real strength. That had no chance of being accepted and instead half-hearted negotiations started for a merger with Westfield College, also small and weak but with the freehold of its site in Hampstead. Michael joined Westfield's council and proposed a merger of the history departments, but nothing came of the talks, nor of a possible merger with King's. Eventually Bedford had to accept merger with Royal Holloway and its identity was submerged. One of Michael's last outings was to a reunion of the history department where he was received very warmly by former colleagues and students for whom the days in Regent's Park were very special.[51]

Michael's major project at Bedford College was to write a history of Hampstead which, he claimed, 'originated as a prank at one of the last meetings of Hampstead Borough Council before it was abolished on being absorbed into Camden: it was proposed that the final surplus in the borough's accounts should not be handed to its successor but instead be spent on a history'. Rather than the worthy local government history expected by some councillors, Michael opted to follow the example of H.J. Dyos's account of the development of Camberwell by explaining how and why its development from village to suburb had taken its distinctive shape. It appeared in 1974, later than initially intended, to the exasperation of one Camden councillor who 'told me somewhat threateningly that if I had contracted to provide 100,000 bricks there would have been a penalty for late delivery'. [52] It was very much an extension of the book on English landed society into an urban setting—though arguably the limitation of the legal system was now given more importance in shaping the development of the suburb. As he noted, 'To a historian of landownership and agriculture, dusting off the hayseeds as he enters the unfamiliar world of city streets, the fundamental role of property rights, tenures and interests in determining the character of urban development has naturally been of great interest'. His aim was to unravel the apparently chaotic and mindless jumble of a nineteenth-century suburb superimposed on an eighteenth-century village that grew from encroachments and enclosures from manorial waste, based on copyhold tenure. Expansion was at first blocked by impediments of a family settlement on one estate that prevented sales or anything other than farm leases; and on another estate by leases for life that did not provide security to make plots available for building. These difficulties and restrictions on ownership could have been overcome by various legal devices, but at a cost that would affect the

[51] 'Memoir'; I drove him to London for that final reunion and saw him surrounded by former students and colleagues.
[52] 'Memoir'.

price of houses when other land was available. Eton College owned the Chalcots estate, which was a blank sheet that could have been planned in a coherent manner but the self-interest of the fellows meant that they rejected the initially lower ground rent with longer-term benefits of a high-class development in favour of immediate high rent that would benefit them personally. And the will of Thomas Maryon Wilson halted development after 1821, for his heir and tenant-for-life could only make leases for twenty-one years—he failed to secure a private estate bill, and he never married, so there was no son with whom he could make an agreement to break the settlement and remedy the deficiency. He could have developed the land on his own initiative, but why take the risk and bother when he was already comfortably off? The delay allowed preservationists to mount a campaign and the land was bought by the Metropolitan Board of Works as one of its last actions and added to Hampstead Heath. It is a story of individual decisions within a particular legal framework—a view of how markets work that was exemplified by the specifics of Hampstead rather than formally stated.[53]

Michael's meticulous work on property and landownership was, in Corfield's view, not fashionable and became less so.[54] In fact, property rights did become more fashionable and central to debates in economic and social history as a result of work by scholars from different backgrounds. E.P. Thompson's later work, and that of his graduate students, dealt with the supposed shift from a 'hierarchy of use-rights' that were multiple and overlapping within an 'the inherited grid of customs and controls within which the right was exercised'. The ways in which the free miners of the Forest of Dean or indigenous peoples in the new world lost their rights meant that property and land law appealed to more radical social historians. Similarly, the replacement of customary tenure, leases for life and copyhold tenure that Michael discussed in Hampstead became a crucial feature in the 'Brenner debate' over the rights of small farmers to their land.[55] By contrast, Michael's analysis of these issues relied on his deep knowledge of the archives of landowners and how they managed their estates. An alternative approach was Douglass North's institutional economics which stressed the importance of secure property rights for economic success to encourage investment in new production and organisations.[56] North's sketchy historical knowledge

[53] F. M. L. Thompson, *Hampstead: Building a Borough, 1650–1964* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), p. xi; quote at p. ix.

[54] Corfield, 'Michael Thompson's intellectual outlook', 308.

[55] E. P. Thompson, 'The grid of inheritance', in Jack Goody et al. (eds.), *Family and Inheritance* (Cambridge, 1976), p. 337; C. Fisher, *Custom, Work and Market Capitalism: the Forest of Dean Colliers 1788–1888* (London: Croom Helm, 1981); Robert Brenner, 'Agrarian class structure and economic development in pre-industrial Europe', *Past and Present*, 70 (1976), and the debate it inspired.

[56] For example, D. C. North and R. P. Thomas, *The Rise of the Western World: a New Economic History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1973); and D. C. North and B. R. Weingast, 'Constitutions and

and sweeping generalisations were anathema to Michael, but he never to my knowledge addressed North's flawed argument. If he had, his own important work might have attracted wider attention, for claims over property rights were central to an urban industrial society, whether it be access to water rights, generous compensation to landowners that affected the finances of railway companies, or the prices secured by slums landlords in clearance schemes. Michael's work on property rights remains of huge significance and is worth revisiting.[57]

In the summer of 1976, another unsolicited job offer arrived—this time to be Director of the Institute of Historical Research. The future of Bedford College remained uncertain and the IHR was similarly caught in the emerging crisis of the federal University of London as small colleges faced merger or disappearance, and some larger colleges resented the central bodies. The great glory of the School of History in London was that students could take optional and special subjects across the whole university on a common timetable, with access to college and Senate House libraries, and with a programme of inter-collegiate lectures, all laid out in the 'white pamphlet', and with a single board of examiners. This federal degree with its exceptional range of offerings was resented by the 'leavers' of UCL on Gower Street and supported by the 'remainers' of The Strand, and woe-betide anyone on Gower Street who took a different view.[58]

The IHR was at the centre of these conflicts, as the venue for research seminars across the university and beyond, and Michael had to fight his corner. He was very well supported at the IHR by Bill Kellaway and by Alice Prochaska as secretary-librarian who took on much of the day-to-day running of the Institute. Michael's direction was self-effacing—he was a frequent benign presence in the tea-room and at seminars, and the Institute survived, as scholars young and old gathered there after a day in the reading room of the British Library across the road or the PRO before its move to Kew. The Director was not yet involved in fund-raising, which was then in any case pointless for it merely led to a reduction of the allocation from the university, in a perverse lack of appreciation of incentives; for example grants for specific research projects were acceptable only if they paid for administrative overheads, which grant-awarding bodies would not pay.[59]

---

commitment: the evolution of institutions governing public choice in seventeenth-century England', *Journal of Economic History*, 49 (1989).

[57] For example, Michael Taggart, *Private Property and Abuse of Rights in Victorian England: the Story of Edward Pickles and the Bradford Water Supply* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

[58] I was chair of the School and was informed that I was a 'traitor'; Conrad Russell, who had returned from Yale as Astor Professor of British History at UCL, departed for KCL.

[59] 'Memoir'; personal recollection as chair of the School of History and later chair of the IHR's Advisory Board.

The Director's principal role was international. The annual Anglo-American conference of historians had in the interwar years been the only regular annual conference of historians, bringing together historians from all British universities, as well as British historians from North America (and other English-speaking universities). By the 1960s, most branches of history had their own societies and conferences—Michael was himself president of both the Economic History Society and Agricultural History Society. In the 1970s and 1980s, he tried to preserve the Anglo-American conference as a venue where scholars could meet regardless of specialism and period, with a clear theme each year such as 'liberty', 'equality' or 'property', in three chronological strands with a wide geographical and disciplinary coverage. It was a huge amount of work but had limited success. The Director also inherited a somewhat mysterious role in the British National Committee of Historians which arranged British participation in the quinquennial meetings of the Congrès Internationale des Sciences Historiques. Since 1945, the BNC handled relations with state-run national academies of science, especially in the Soviet bloc, with some funding from the British Academy. The Institute provided administration, but the Director was not necessarily its chairman and that could cause tensions. The outcome was that Theo Barker became chairman, with Michael as secretary, from 1978 to 1994, and together they organised trips behind the Iron Curtain. One highlight was a trip to Hungary, at a castle on a collective farm where Michael 'bonded' with the cows, the delegates consumed too much home-produced spirits and met clandestinely one night with young historians to discuss capitalism. My enquiry of what the party committee would make of the meeting was met with the bemused response: 'we *are* the party committee'.[60]

During his time at the Institute, Michael worked on two themes: social history more generally, and his continued interest in landed society and gentrification that resulted in his lectures to the Royal Historical Society (he was president from 1983 to 1986) and the Ford lectures in Oxford in 1994. He had not so far strayed much beyond land and agriculture, and his first major foray into social history was an attack, in 1981, on the notion of social control. He doubted that social control imposed by powerful members 'conditioned and manipulated the propertyless masses into accepting and operating the forms and functions of behaviour necessary to sustain the social order of an industrial society… and underpinning of bourgeois capitalist society'. Perhaps he recalled the British Other Ranks and his experience as a junior officer in rejecting the idea that the working classes were 'so much putty in the hands of a masterful and scheming bourgeoisie, a remote and powerful state, and a set of technological imperatives'. He preferred to accept that workers 'generated their own values

[60] 'Memoir'; personal experience of BNC visits.

and attitudes suited to the requirements of life in an industrial society and imposed their own forms on middle-class institutions'. He argued for 'the autonomous development of working-class culture' that was not about class consciousness and conflict: it was about workers themselves learning, and valuing cleanliness and respectability, family life and thrift, through burial clubs and friendly societies. The crucial divide was not the middle class against the working class, but of puritans against indulgers, respectables against roughs. The shift to more respectable leisure was less the work of social control than of entrepreneurs who supplied entertainment that the audience wanted—an insight that might owe something to ENSA.[61]

This line was expanded in *The Rise of Respectable Society: a Social History of Victorian Britain 1830–1900*. Respectability took different forms in different groups, with fine differentiations and graduations, both between and within classes over, say, consumption of alcohol or attitudes to leisure pursuits. Influences ran from the bottom up as well as the top down. Urbanisation and industrialisation were not some sudden shock, for 'family and neighbourhood ties, upbringing, inherited cultures, and group loyalties proved more persistent and resilient than technologies', and 'were sufficiently powerful to ... ease the passage towards large-town society without disastrous dislocation'. Rather than the final emergence of a coherent and homogenous factory proletariat in the 1890s, Michael saw collective action in trade unions and politics as the sectional consciousness of 10 to 20 per cent of organised workers who made an unreal claim to speak for the whole—a claim that was always rejected at the polls. His approach emphasised the peaceable, convivial and unpolitical popular culture of Victorian cities, rather than disorder and conflict, and the independence of popular culture in brass bands, choirs and flower shows, and commercial entertainment in the music hall or seaside.[62]

His stress on the independent popular culture of workers now seems more realistic and perceptive, but at the time his approach attracted criticism as well as praise. Paul Addison saw the three edited volumes of *The Cambridge Social History of Britain 1750 to 1950 as* 'a triumph of professional detachment over radical engagement', with little attention to socialist historians of the 1960s who stressed class conflict or the feminists of the 1970s who saw repression in gender relations.[63] In Addison's view, 'Socialist and feminist historians have sometimes been mistaken. But in presenting the

[61] F. M. L. Thompson, 'Social control in Victorian Britain', *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser., 34 (1981), 189–208.
[62] F. M. L. Thompson, *The Rise of Respectable Society: a Social History of Victorian Britain, 1830–1900* (London: Fontana, 1988), p. 382.
[63] F. M. L. Thompson (ed.), *The Cambridge Social History of Britain, 1750–1950*, vol. 1: *Regions and Communities*; vol. 2: *People and their Environment*; vol. 3: *Social Agencies and Institutions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

past as a drama of toil, tears and sweat, they have hit upon a psychological truth which is often missing in the *Cambridge Social History*.' Instead, the emphasis was on 'lesser conflicts inseparable from the development of a stable but plural society' based on individualism, voluntary effort and community.[64]

Michael returned to landed society in his Royal Historical Society presidential lectures, where he extended his account into the twentieth century in what is essentially a second volume of his great book of 1963,[65] and in the Ford lectures which turned to gentrification and the 'aristocratic bourgeoisie'. He explained in a book review in 1987, that

> It begins to look as if the middle classes were willing slaves to wealth, power and established position, and that the notion of concessions to their independent demands may need rethinking. The concept of the aristocratic bourgeoisie, a bourgeoisie aping aristocratic airs and graces, is currently attracting attention in discussions of the formation of the middle class. It is a concept with problems about the evidence and about interpretation. One would, for example, have to know whether the wealthy bourgeoisie pursued social status by purchasing landed estates, or simply imitated aristocratic styles without seeking the property to go with them; whether the cultural gentrification of the businessmen sapped industrial vigour, or, given that the landed gentry and aristocracy who provided the model had a long record of behaving as very astute risk-takers, simply steered business efforts into different channels.[66]

Rather like the working class, the bourgeoise could act on the basis of their own culture and ambitions. Indeed, businessmen (and their successors) who did not acquire land were much less successful in continuing their businesses than those who did acquire land. 'This is good evidence for the view that the aristocratic-bourgeois style, combining high achievement in the world of business and the life of a country gentleman, could persist from generation to generation. Indeed, the combination of business wealth and landed estate emerges as the indispensable recipe for continued business success at the highest level.' That wealthy businessmen, or their heirs, did acquire land 'whether for enjoyment, family-building, social acceptance, social climbing, or as a necessary part of a hybrid aristocratic-bourgeois culture, was very much taken for granted throughout the nineteenth century'. Crucially, it was not—as argued by Martin Weiner, and repeated by Keith Joseph and Margaret Thatcher—a reason for

[64] Paul Addison, 'Dismantling the class war', *London Review of Books*, 13 (1991).

[65] F. M. L. Thompson, 'English landed society in the twentieth century: 1, Property: collapse and survival; 2: New poor and new rich; 3: Self-help and outdoor relief; 4: Prestige without power?', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th ser., 40 (1990) 1–24; 6th ser., 1 (1991), 1–20; 6th ser., 2 1992), 1–23; 6th ser., 3 (1993), 1–22.

[66] 'F. M. L. Thompson looks at the long run of the English aristocracy', *London Review of Books*, 9 (1987).

British economic decline. 'At no point … would it appear to have had any pronounced effects on the performance of the national economy or on the overall economic performance of the gentrified new men, being in some hands an incentive to accumulative efforts and in others a disincentive, while on balance it is seen to have been a derivative of individual achievement and aspiration more than a determinant of economic advance or decline'. Michael's argument here was part of a wider defence of the humanities and universities against Thatcherite onslaughts.[67]

As Corfield remarked, Michael was reluctant to speak of his historical methodology. In her view, 'He was a liberal empiricist to his core. He hated loose and erroneous pseudo-historical generalizations that claimed to have the answers to everything'. His approach rested on the interaction of deep long-term structures or impersonal forces—demand and supply, demography, institutions—which influence and shape the lives of individuals, just as the actions of individuals influence and reshape structures. The closest he came to explaining his view was in the book of his Ford lectures:

> It is reasonably clear that the processes of industrialization and economic growth were not simply the product of great impersonal forces, and that individual entrepreneurs were important in determining their timing, shape and dimensions. Entrepreneurs in turn were not simply interchangeable bits of economic machinery, but as individual and social beings required motivation as well as opportunity to induce them to take the risks which resulted in new enterprises'.[68]

Material conditions might shape culture; equally, culture might affect economic performance with linkages and causation flowing both ways. It was as Corfield put it, history as 'a case of organized complexity'.[69]

Michael rarely wrote about non-British—or indeed non-English—topics, despite his war service in India and Indonesia, and the close connections between the aristocracy and service in the colonies, or the extension of debates over land reform to the empire. But he did have wide knowledge which he could marshal to undermine overly bold claims—such as Eric Hobsbawm's comment in *The Age of Capital* that politics and economics cannot be separated in a capitalist society any more than can religion and society in an Islamic society. The second proposition, he pointed out, is a tautol-

[67] F. M. L. Thompson, 'Life after death: how successful nineteenth-century businessmen disposed of their fortunes', *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser., 43 (1990), 40–61, quote at 57–8; F. M. L. Thompson, *Gentrification and the Enterprise Culture: Britain 1780–1980: the Ford Lectures Delivered in the University of Oxford in Hilary Term 1994* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. v , quote at pp. 160–1. The criticism was of Martin Wiener, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit, 1850–1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

[68] Thompson, *Gentrification*, p. 21.

[69] Corfield, 'Michael Thompson's intellectual outlook', 309.

ogy: a society defined by its religion cannot be separated from itself without ceasing to exist. Whether religion and society can be separated in an Islamic *state* is more debatable, for Iran, Pakistan and Egypt differed. And were politics and economics inseparable in capitalist societies? Since 1917, politics and economics were even more inseparable in non-capitalist societies:

> The connection between politics and economics seems to be self-evident and independent of the nature of economic systems. That the connection was operating in the process of Late Victorian imperialism is undeniable, but that process can be more sensibly ascribed to the economics, and power, of advanced industrialisation than to the peculiarities, or wickedness, of capitalism. That is to say, the new production and transport technologies were the real factors, along with demographic trends, producing the opening-up of new territories, integrating far-flung countries into a single international economy, and supplying the world with cheap goods. Traditional and aboriginal societies were undermined by contact with the 'civilisation' of machine-made goods and European disease – not by ideology, unless it was that brought by missionaries. The result was a mixture of far-flung empires, far-flung client or satellite economies which were more than nominally independent in a political sense, and regeneration and imitation (Japan). The Western machines were owned and managed by capitalists: but a steamship will outpace a dhow or a junk whether it is being operated on behalf of a private capitalist, a state enterprise or a commune, and in that sense capitalism was incidental, not central, to the whole process. [70]

One can only wonder what a Thompsonian 'age of capital' would look like, for he was not given to grand overviews on the lines of Hobsbawm.

Michael identified himself as, above all, an economic historian: he was editor of the *Economic History Review* from 1968 to 1980, president from 1983 to 1986 and treasurer of the International Economic History Society from 1986 to 1994. He rarely missed a conference, and was gregarious and popular, with a close group of friends and colleagues. His career spanned the rise and fall of economic history as a separate discipline with its own departments, but he was never a member of a Department of Economic History which was much to his benefit in allowing him to evade the inward-looking approach that came to dominate these departments. Michael was never one for demarcation disputes and that made his approach to the economy fertile and perceptive. Neither did he succumb to 'new' economic history or cliometrics and the application of modern economic theories to the past. He did read economics at some point—he read Taussig and Henderson's *Supply and Demand* at school, and Keynes's *General Theory* at Habakkuk's suggestion, yet there is little formal economics in his writings. In his memoir of Habakkuk, Michael remarked that he (Habakkuk)

[70] F. M. L. Thompson, 'Going down with the band playing and the rich in evening dress', *London Review of Books*, 10 (1988).

despaired of learning the new methods of econometrics and moved into academic administration. Michael simply thought learning the new techniques unwise.[71]

Michael's approach to economic history rested on a number of clear principles. First, do not allow modern economic theories to distort understanding the past. In a 1963 review of Alan Peacock and Jack Wiseman on public spending, Michael commented that 'the authors invoke an over-elaborate theoretical framework' to reach conclusions.[72] Similarly, his review in 1965 of Sidney Pollard's economic history of Britain praised him for avoiding defence or demolition of different economic theories, and for following the approach of a straight historian in establishing facts. Michael commended Pollard for bringing Sir John Clapham up to date, with the same virtue of linking economic history with social structure and policy. But Michael also pointed to two ways in which he differed from Clapham. One difference was good: Pollard was orderly and clear. The other difference was bad: Pollard did not write with wit or humour. Here we have Michael: he did not defend or demolish economic theories; he established the facts, presenting them with wit and humour, and always with clarity and order.[73] Michael always avoided the abiding fault of Clapham—of sitting on the fence, and never presenting a clear proposition to test. Michael always set out a clear question and then used deep archival research to address the issue.

Second, do not rely on dubious statistics. His approach was, as he put it in his Ford lectures, 'doggedly persistent empirical research' to compile data to test loose generalisations, pose pertinent, well formulated questions and use statistics to pick apart flawed arguments.[74] One approach to economic history was to produce long-run data of national output, gross domestic product or capital formation, to measure growth. Michael was suspicious of dubious data that led to error. In his review of Charles Feinstein's and Sidney Pollard's massive study of capital formation, he pointed out that it would be used by researchers as an 'inexhaustible quarry'. But 'They should be warned that quarries are dangerous places and that there is not a lot of firm bedrock in any of these figures'. He warned against the illusory precision of tabular statements. His review ended with a backhanded compliment: 'The spadework, economic logic, accounting expertise, and mental gymnastics which have gone into these fabrications of historical statistics are to be saluted…. The safeguard is that the unwary is unlikely to shell out £48 for the problematic benefits of this experience'.[75] Michael would use statistics to test his argument—but only when the bedrock was firm and derived from carefully assessed archives.

[71] 'Memoir'; Thompson, 'Habakkuk', 104.
[72] Review in *History*, 48 (1963), 238–9.
[73] Review in *History*, 50 (1965), 115.
[74] Corfield, 'Michael Thompson's intellectual outlook'. 307; Thompson, *Gentrification*, p. 2.
[75] Review in *Agricultural History Review*, 37 (1989), 104–5.

Third, do not assume that markets are self-correcting and reflect precise calculations of the optimal use of resources. In Michael's writings, markets are embedded in social practices and institutional arrangements—in the family strategies of businessmen, in the legal systems of ownership and transfer, and in the ideological assumptions relating to efficiency of small farms or large estates. Michael's approach to economic history does not assume that individuals were machines of economic calculation—of course, they could not neglect to use their resources effectively, but they were driven by many motivations and were not *homo economicus* pure and simple—hence his suspicion both of economic theory and of macroeconomic statistics. Michael understood human behaviour in the economy and did not reduce it to either a triumph of the free market or of capitalist exploitation. His was a humane economic history.

Fourth, pay attention to localities and geography. Michael believed in the principle that the economic historian's best research tool was a strong pair of boots (as well as a good eye for archival evidence). He always believed that economic life means an attention to place—whether it be agricultural practices on different soils, or the building of suburbs shaped by different estate strategies and locale, without losing sight of general processes which were modulated by local circumstances.

This approach to the past could be seen as cautious and undramatic, but that was how he preferred it. He was, as Corfield remarked, 'a liberal ameliorist' to whom things got better through education, political rights, technological innovation rather than conflict and riots.[76] He could sometimes appear ponderous or slow which could baffle people who did not know him. As Corfield commented, 'People can sometimes underestimate him on first meeting; and he can sit apparently dormant throughout a seminar, lulling the speaker into false security, before offering a searching critique of the paper in the debate that follows'.[77] Ronald Quinault, with whom he ran the seminar in modern British history at the IHR, noted that 'The wit and fluency of his writing contrasts strongly with the economy of his conversation'.[78] Indeed, it could be an unnerving experience: a comment or question was greeted with silence and the temptation to fill it with another remark, just as the initial conversational gambit was met with a considered and perceptive response. His son Matthew remarked that

> I will always remember him as Thinking Fast and Slow. Most of the time slow. A rare person who when asked a question would activate his extensive grey matter before engaging his mouth. Of course this could often be infuriating for the flow of conver

[76] Corfield, 'Michael Thompson's intellectual outlook', 306–7, 308.

[77] Corfield, 'Friend', p. xi.

[78] Roland Quinault, 'F.M.L. Thompson: an appreciation. As a historian of landed society', in Harte and Quinault (eds.), *Land and Society*, xiii.

> sation, and sometimes you'd think he'd fallen asleep …, but in the end you knew that his considered response was always worth the wait.[79]

Anne remarked that he was not an easy conversationalist, but would have liked to have been, and sometimes students (and those more senior) were not quite sure how to react to long pauses—and frequent bursts of laughter. Caroline Barron, a colleague at Bedford, captured him well when she remarked on the 'very engaged intent reflective look that was so characteristic of Michael. He's listening to what is being said, with a slightly quizzical look as if he is about to say "I'm not entirely convinced by what you're saying". But also in that face there's a great gentleness and a great compassion. He wasn't a bit sentimental, but he was extremely compassionate.'[80]

Was this a Quaker trait of waiting to speak until one had something sensible to say? Michael also suffered from tinnitus and deafness, possibly from his service in the artillery, which cannot have helped, and he had serious and painful arthritis, as well as experiencing depression. Caroline Barron remarked that 'Many of us would never have known that, but we did know it at Bedford a bit because sometimes talking and giving talks was a struggle, but he never gave up, however difficult it was for him. He was very dogged, but I think it's worth remembering that this golden successful man had at times struggles of his own, and that I think gave him compassion in his dealings with other people.'[81]

Michael believed in institutions and gave much time to editing two journals—the *Economic History Review* and, at the IHR, *Historical Research*—as well as chairing the British Academy's *Records of Social and Economic History* committee and editing its *Proceedings*; he presided genially over the council of the Royal Historical Society and other bodies; he sustained the IHR. He encouraged his doctoral students and supported young scholars. He was selfless in the time and energy he devoted to these tasks, and never put his views in a dogmatic way. His approach to these institutions was maintaining and sustaining rather than overturning and transforming.[82]

Michael spent a long retirement at Holly Cottage, happily engaged with his garden and family, and keeping up his interest in history. He had a final project on women landowners, which did not result in publications. For long, he remained youthful in appearance with abundant hair that failed to turn grey, and his mind remained active and sharp. Unfortunately, his eyesight deteriorated and for the last few years he was virtually blind. My last memory is of him sitting in an armchair, with his cat on his

[79] Comment by Matthew Thompson at memorial service, supplied by Jonathan Thompson.
[80] Conversation with Anne Thompson; Caroline Barron at memorial service, provided by Jonathan Thompson.
[81] Caroline Barron, memorial service.
[82] Corfield, 'Friend', pp. ix, xi.

knee, talking about the Memoirs of the British Academy which he edited for many years. We talked about his early life, about meeting Gandhi and about the foibles of his social gatherings with the elderly in the village. He remained, as Corfield recalled him many years earlier and as many will recall him: 'his signature tune continues to be a long, infectious, whooping and rumbling laugh that often abides as a *basso profondo* even when the conversation moves on to other topics'.[83]

Acknowledgements
I would like to thank Anne and Jonathan Thompson for their assistance in providing material and for memories; Caroline Barron and Claire Daunton for their recollections of Bedford College; Avner Offer for his memories of supervision; and Barry Supple for his recollections of editing the *Economic History Review*.

Note on the author: Martin Daunton is Emeritus Professor of Economic History at the University of Cambridge. He was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1997.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

[83] Corfield, 'Friend', p. ix.