

Records of Social and Economic History

The thirtieth volume in the New Series of Records of Social and Economic History was published in June 2001. Professor Michael Thompson FBA, Chairman of the editorial committee and General Editor of the series, discusses the past achievements and future ambitions of this highly regarded Academy series.

This project is almost coeval with the Academy itself, for within a year of his election as a Fellow in 1905 Sir Paul Vinogradoff proposed that the British Academy should come forward with 'a great national undertaking' by producing a series of volumes of 'Records of British Economic and Social History', to make available to scholars the most important of 'the most remarkable set of records of economic and social history in the world', which England possessed, a proposal which was enthusiastically received and speedily adopted. Vinogradoff's original concept for the series was ambitious and, in the light of close on a hundred year's experience of the editorial difficulties, wildly optimistic. While an initial concentration on the publication of records relating to agrarian conditions and rural society in the Middle Ages was envisaged, the scope of the series was always intended to embrace 'agricultural, industrial, and commercial documents of all kinds, ranging to present times'. Moreover, he expected that one or two volumes could be published every year without any financial or editorial difficulties – an estimated production cost of around £400 per volume, in pre-1914 prices, was actually rather high by present standards – and although expectations may have become tempered by experience when the first volume, instead of appearing in 1908 as forecast did not arrive until 1914, it was still launched with a promise to publish three volumes every two years. Forty-one volumes, in all, will have been published by the end of 2001, a strike rate of more like one volume every two years, if the years of world wars are removed from the reckoning.

Two world wars understandably affected the running of the project. In the bright dawn of the Academy it had not unreasonably been assumed that the government might well follow the example of the German, Habsburg, and French governments in providing state funding for the publication of records central to the making of national history and identity, and indeed might view the enterprise as a kind of continuation of the state-funded publication of public records in the Rolls Series. Following the nineteenth-

century precedents the Treasury obliged, making a modest annual grant-in-aid to the Academy towards the editorial and publication costs, which enabled the second volume to appear, in 1915. Trifling though this subsidy was in relation to total public expenditure it was discontinued in 1916 as part of the wartime economies in non-essential expenditure, and direct public funding of the project has never been resumed; the costs, usually no more than a fraction of pre-1914 costs in real terms, have subsequently been simply an element in the Academy's general expenditure. The wartime interruption in the academic work of editing was more serious, and publication could not be resumed until 1920. Thereafter there was a steady, if slow, advance in the inter-war years, with T.F. Tout, and F.M. Stenton succeeding Vinogradoff in the general supervision of the series, so that by 1939 a total of nine volumes had been published. The second world war marked a more decisive break in the project: the series was regarded as closed, and it was not until 1970 that the Academy decided to start the New, and current, Series.

The lengthy period between the inception of the project in 1906 and the appearance of the first volume in the New Series in 1972, 66 years during which only nine volumes had been published, was no doubt frustrating and disappointing for the generation of scholars who had conceived the idea, but was also quite fortuitously an advantage for the post-1945 generations, for it enabled the series to reflect something of the changing interests and expanding subject matter of social and economic history. The first series adhered fairly closely to the scheme of first tackling medieval records relating to agrarian conditions, with only one volume venturing into seventeenth-century estate accounts and all the rest being devoted to collections of documents, mainly those generated by religious foundations, from the eleventh to the fourteenth centuries. Moreover, while there had been some characteristic ambiguity in setting up 'the great national undertaking' as to whether the nation in question was England or Britain, in practice there had been no problem in presuming that the concern was with England and Wales (the first

volume, edited by Vinogradoff, was devoted to Denbigh). The New Series, by contrast, deliberately defined its brief as embracing 'British' records, and while so far England and Wales have remained prominent, not as a matter of policy but mainly as a result of the ingrained disposition of potential volume editors to approach traditional outlets for their work, there has been a volume of specifically Scottish records – volume 21, *Scottish Ecclesiastical Rentals at the Reformation* – and several volumes with overseas trade providing a substantial 'British' element in the records have been published or are in the pipeline, 'British' in the case of the eighteenth-century *Letterbook of Greg and Cunningham* (vol. 28) extending to the records of merchants trading between New York and Belfast.

The originators of the project may well have thought in terms of a finite body of records of 'national importance' that ought to be made available in scholarly editions, published through the efforts of local record publishing societies, topped up and in effect co-ordinated through the operation of the Academy's series. The publication of one such set of records, the surviving medieval surveys of the estates of great monastic establishments, is now within sight of completion with the volume of the twelfth-century Glastonbury Abbey surveys now imminent. Any notion that there is a known, identified, set of records of social and economic history relating to all periods and topics up to the present, simply awaiting the emergence of appropriately qualified and willing editors before being published, has however been decisively undermined by recent developments in social and cultural history, historical demography, and business history, which are constantly bringing new issues and fresh documentary sources into play, and causing long familiar sources to be re-examined: the purely statistical sources, the basic food of many recent developments in 'pure' economic history, have not, as yet, come within the ambit of the New Series. The project relies heavily on the voluntary work of volume editors, with the tasks of the Academy's project Committee being mainly those of assessing the merits of suggested volumes and providing advice, guidance, and supervision of the practices and standards of editing of those which are accepted, with a secondary role in identifying suitable sets of records and encouraging scholars to undertake their editing. Hence to a considerable extent the flow of volumes and their subject matter reflect the interests of the profession that puts forward proposals, and not simply an

Academy view of the appropriate content of social and economic history.

The New Series thus includes volumes with traditional and non-traditional subject matter, both types of records being used by active researchers engaged in interpreting and re-interpreting social and economic history which is continually being redefined. Cartularies, custumals, estate surveys, and agricultural reports have long been staple fare for the series; to these have been added merchants' accounts, household accounts, diaries and journals (including the famous seventeenth-century diary of Ralph Josselin), and the interest in historical demography has stimulated the publication of editions of some of the basic source material of poll taxes and ecclesiastical censuses. The way in which new types of social and economic history are being reflected in the series is perhaps most clearly illustrated in some of the recent volumes of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century records. Volume 26, *The Diary of Robert Sharp of South Cave* is the early nineteenth-century journal of the local schoolmaster, scribe, surveyor, and tax collector of a small East Riding village, a well-informed, independent, and radical autodidact, which opens a window on to village life and non-deferential opinion that is a sharp corrective to much received wisdom about bucolic torpor and ignorance. Volume 30, *Essex Pauper Letters, 1731–1837*, is the raw material of 'history from below', an absorbing collection of letters written by people in receipt of poor relief or seeking such aid, to the overseers of the poor in their parish of settlement, describing in their own words the various disasters, crises, setbacks, and misfortunes that had led them into poverty; the volume is at once an insight into the lives of the poor as seen by themselves rather than by the middle-class observers of the blue books, a source for early forms of popular literacy, and an account of the detailed workings of the Old Poor Law in actual practice.

With volumes in the pipeline on the business and family life of a provincial merchant of the early eighteenth century; the journals of an eighteenth-century farmer whose travels and observations complement those of Arthur Young; an edition of the Treasury's responses to Keynes in the inter-war years; or the journal of one of the early Excise officers who was given to reflections on the morality and sexuality of his local community, one can be confident that the Records of Social and Economic History will remain an active, productive, and exciting Academy project well into the twenty-first century.

An Essex Pauper Letter

As personal testimonies of people claiming relief, often written in a stunningly 'private' tone, pauper letters allow deep insights into the living conditions, experiences and attitudes of the labouring poor in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Some 750 of these pauper letters, all those presently known to survive in the county of Essex, were published in a new volume in June 2001 (see page 32). The documents reveal the strong belief of the poor in their right to relief, and their surprisingly powerful position in negotiating their case with the overseers.

ihave sent to you mister holden that i have no wark to doe and you must send me sum munny i have bean hout of wark a 11 weaks have not arnt but 1 pound i was at wark wen you sent me that muny at muster pues it was but afue days i have arnt but 2 shilens for three weaks i have hond all my things and i have got my furest and if you doe not send me sume munny i shall come home ass possiBle my wife expts to Be put to Beed every day and thear is a procts for me in a few weaks But when i git in to warke prars i may never truble you no more But if you wil not help me throu one kurtor you must surport my wife and famely all ther lifestme when there is a nesety i nevery will try to make my self a setelmenet aney more

you sent ward that my wife arnt a greate deal of munny sureny she youst to arnt a goudeal But she have arnt nothing latly and she is not likeley to arn aney more for sumtime you sed i might have bean at mister Clopper At this time But your pertner node nothing a But my Busens you may tel mester rouse to Cole at mester pues then e wil tl you all aBut my Busens ples to send me sum munny Buy rouse on fridy to pay sum of my deats of if not i shall come over next munday and git ahuse in my houn parshes

Letter 510. From Benjamin Brooker in Ipswich, before 2 December 1825

Transcript:

ihave sent to you mister holden that i have no wark to doe and you must send me sum munny i have Bean hout of wark a 11 weaks have not arnt But 1 pound i was at wark wen you sent me that muny at muster pues it was But afue days i have arnt But 2 shilens for three weaks i have hond all my things and i have got my furest and if you doe not send me sume munny i shall come home ass possiBle my wife expts to Be put to Beed every day and thear is a procts for me in a few weaks But when i git in to warke prars i may never truble you no more But if you wil not help me throu one kurtor you must surport my wife and famely all ther lifestme when there is a nesety i nevery will try to make my self a setelmenet aney more

you sent ward that my wife arnt a greate deal of munny sureny she youst to arnt a goudeal But she have arnt nothing latly and she is not likeley to arn aney more for sumtime you sed i might have Bean at mister Clopper At this time But your pertner node nothing a But my Busens

you may tel mester rouse to Cole at mester pues then e wil tl you all aBut my Busens

ples to send me sum munny Buy rouse on fridy to pay sum of my deats of if not i shall come over next munday and git ahuse in my houn parshes

Note from other hand on back: 'Dec' 2nd 1825 Sent by Rouse to B Brooker 10/-'