MARGARET SPUFFORD

Honor Margaret Spufford

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by

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Margaret Spufford was one of the most original and influential social and cultural historians of early modern England active over the last century, despite never completing a first degree or having an established academic job until she was almost sixty. She was the author of a pioneering comparative study of inheritance practices, economic change and popular belief in three Cambridge villages, and of many fundamental studies of the education, religion, reading and clothing of the 'common people' of early modern England. All this was achieved despite her own ill-health, and the genetic disorder and early death of her daughter.

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MARGARET SPUFFORD

(Honor) Margaret Spufford ranks amongst the most original and influential historians of her generation, yet her career was unconventional, even wildly improbable. She was the author of one of the most significant works of early modern English social history, *Contrasting Communities* (Cambridge, 1974), and the supervisor and inspiration of a remarkable cohort of graduate students, despite having no first degree in history (or indeed in any other subject) and no established academic post until her appointment as Research Professor at Roehampton Institute (later Roehampton University) in 1994, when she was almost sixty. Spufford's career was marked by her own ill-health and that of her mother; it was overshadowed by the tragedy of her daughter's genetic disorder, chronic illness and early death; but overall her life was one of scholarly achievement and personal fulfilment, enriched by a notably happy marriage and by her talent for enduring friendships.

Margaret Spufford was born in Hartford, Cheshire on 10 December 1935 into a comfortable middle-class home, with maidservants and a uniformed nursery nurse. This was a serious household of a scientific bent, where both parents had trained as chemists. Her mother, born Mary Johnson, one of the first women chemists at Cambridge University, and a Fellow of Newnham College from 1922 to 1925, had given up an academic career on becoming engaged; at the time of Margaret's birth her father, Leslie Marshall Clark, was Director of Research at ICI Alkali at Winnington near Northwich. Margaret's sister Jean, some seven years older, took a more conventional path to an academic career. Both Margaret and Jean were initially home-schooled by their mother, but when the family moved to St Asaph in North Wales during the Second World War, Jean attended Howell's School in Denbigh, moving from there to Newnham where she graduated with a degree in Geography in 1948. She was Director of Studies in Geography and Fellow of Girton from 1960 to 1994. For the younger Margaret, things were less straightforward, particularly after she witnessed her mother's serious stroke in 1945: 'The securities and tenderness of my childhood were shattered when I was ten', she wrote in 1989.[1] Margaret's father, absent in Cheshire throughout the week, was a distant figure and her earlier home schooling proved a mixed blessing when her mother's disability ushered in a succession of difficult schools and unsympathetic carers, before a more congenial and productive period at Cambridge High School for Girls. In Cambridge, Margaret lodged with the family of the distinguished archaeologist of Africa [Charles] Thurstan Shaw; Shaw's wife Ione was a crucial early influence, fostering a profound commitment to the Anglican church. The sudden death of her father in 1953 meant the loss of the family home in Cheshire and brought Margaret at eighteen significant responsibilities for her mother who also moved to Cambridge, where Jean was by now married with a growing family.

[1] M. Spufford, *Celebration* (London, 1989), pp. 25–6.

Somehow in these difficult early years Spufford acquired her stubborn vocation as a historian. She insisted that she had not 'the faintest idea' how this happened, although she credited her scientific parents, especially her mother, with her respect for 'empirically ascertainable fact'.[2] In December 1954 she triumphed in her university entrance exams, winning a Senior Scholarship in History at Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford, as well as an exhibition at Newnham College, Cambridge. But a glittering undergraduate career did not materialise. Margaret's disrupted childhood had left her socially and psychologically vulnerable, and she had a breakdown at Oxford, exacerbated, as she felt to the end of her life, by a lack of sympathy from her female tutors. Newnham, where her mother and elder sister had studied, was more to her taste, but ill-health again—and after a little more than a term in 1956–7—prompted her to withdraw from Cambridge to concentrate on caring for her disabled mother.

Somehow she persisted. Effective treatment improved her emotional stability, and she enrolled on a Cambridge adult education course on local history run by Esther Moir (de Waal). Work done for that class contributed to her first publication; an examination of the possible relationship between soil type and the width of selions (open strips of land) within two Cambridgeshire and seven Derbyshire parishes; characteristically, she concluded that there was none.[3] It was also through Esther Moir that she met her husband, the medieval economic historian Peter Spufford, at a party in the summer of 1959. Margaret and Peter were married on 7 July 1962, following Peter's appointment to an Assistant Lectureship at Keele. This passionate personal and intellectual partnership was crucial to the lives and careers of both scholars. As Margaret wrote of how she was 'so deeply fortunate in my marriage', so her son recalls his father's testimony that 'of course the biggest intellectual influence of my life was Margaret'.[4] Throughout their lives, Margaret and Peter Spufford were each other's staunchest supporters and fiercest critics, first readers of each other's work. Their mutual influence can be discerned in the systematic, quantitative elements that helped to structure Margaret's vivid accounts of the social and cultural lives of the common people, and in the social and human contexts discussed in Peter's analyses of money in Medieval Europe. There was no envy or rivalry; the scholarly work of both was facilitated through dogged juggling in the face of demanding, often traumatic family responsibilities. While Peter had the conventionally successful academic career, it was Margaret who first made a mark on her field with *Contrasting Communities*, and she had produced two monographs before Peter published a major book. In theory, they

[2] Spufford, *Celebration*, pp. 62, 65.
[3] H. M. Clark, 'Selion size and soil type', *Agricultural Historical Review*, 8 (1960), 91–8.
[4] Spufford, *Celebration*, p. 27; T. Dean, G. Parry and E. Vallance (eds.), *Faith, Place and People in Early Modern England, Essays in Honour of Margaret Spufford* (Woodbridge, 2018), dedication.

tried to take it in turns to work on major projects, but Margaret 'jumped the queue' on her second book, *Small Books and Pleasant Histories* (London, 1981) when she was immobilised by two accidents and could do nothing but write.[5]

The Spuffords were at Keele until 1979, living on campus as all academic staff were then obliged to do, but usually spending summers in Cambridge. The history department was an all-male, and rather misogynist, body; no woman was appointed to a substantive post there until 1991. Margaret's role at Keele was therefore somewhat anomalous, in formal terms 'merely' a 'staff wife', but also an increasingly distinguished scholar. In the early 1960s, encouraged by Esther Moir, she submitted an essay for the John Nichols Prize awarded by the Department of English Local History at Leicester University. She did not win but her work so impressed Professor Herbert Finberg, the head of the department, that he offered her a research studentship, overcoming the regulations that required holders to have a first degree, and thereby kick-starting her career as a scholar. Spufford began her 1995 inaugural lecture at Roehampton with praise for the 'Leicester school' of local historians, who had trained and nurtured her early work, and it was an ideal location for her study of Cambridgeshire.[6] W. G. Hoskins, Finberg and Joan Thirsk encouraged detailed, practical local research, trudging the fields as well as searching the archives. They were concerned with the landscape, with the varieties of human settlements, inheritance, housing and the everyday lives of the common people, alert to the character of specific places but also identifying broader regional patterns. Their themes and methods are evident in all Spufford's work, although she was also particularly interested in the culture and religious beliefs of the people. Her MA on Chippenham, later published as a Leicester Occasional Paper, was awarded in 1963, and her PhD, 'People, Land and Literacy in Cambridgeshire in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries', in 1970. By this time the Spuffords had two children, Francis born in 1964 and Bridget in 1967.[7]

Despite her odd position, Spufford made her mark on Keele, as she was to do wherever she went, and forged friendships that lasted for the rest of her life. It was during her time at Keele that she made her reputation as an historian. In the early 1960s she taught an adult education course with her husband at Eccleshall, laying the foundations for a significant publication some thirty years later. More immediately she worked on the book for which she is still best known, *Contrasting Communities*, published in 1974, and based partly on her thesis. Additional research was supported

[5] Spufford, *Celebration*, p. 67.
[6] M. Spufford, *Chippenham to the World: Microcosm to Macrocosm* (University of Roehampton, 1996), delivered 20 February 1995, pp. 2–5.
[7] M. Spufford, *A Cambridge Community: Chippenham from Settlement to Enclosure* (Leicester, 1966).

by an Eileen Power Research Studentship in Economic History and a Calouste Gulbenkian Research Fellowship, held at Lucy Cavendish College, Cambridge between 1969 and 1972. She was able to spend a full year at Cambridge when Peter Spufford had a sabbatical from Keele, but otherwise relied on regular visits to the archives from Keele. Following the publication of *Contrasting Communities*, Margaret was finally awarded an honorary lectureship at Keele, which came with a meagre stipend but more usefully provided support for grant applications. An award from the Social Science Research Council facilitated work on later seventeenth-century chapmen (completed at Cambridge); before the Spuffords left Keele she had published pioneering work on education and popular literacy and completed the manuscript of her book on the small 'merry books' and 'godly books' available to the common people of early modern England.[8]

All this was achieved despite the serious ill-health of herself and her daughter. Spufford was almost always in pain and frequently immobilised by broken bones, caused by early onset osteoporosis diagnosed, finally, after the birth of her children. Shortly afterwards came the crushing diagnosis of her daughter Bridget's incurable genetic disorder, cystinosis; in her son's words, this is 'a ridiculously rare disease, a disaster it was almost absurd to be afflicted by, like being struck by a meteorite'. Bridget's condition meant hourly feeds by tube, and regular, draining journeys to Great Ormond Street. The Spuffords were tireless and brave, but relied also on the help of au pairs, friends, colleagues and students. When Spufford was confined to bed, flat on her back, Keele University's workshop built an ingenious contraption, 'a special machine that went over the bed and adjusted to any angle', so that she could read her sources and write, and which was strong enough for the three-year old Francis to climb on it to play. In this way some of *Contrasting Communities* was written, and the book was completed while Spufford was spending months in Great Ormond Street hospital with her desperately ill small daughter. The manuscript was typed up by the department secretary, who also reproduced the medical charts essential to Bridget's survival.[9] Throughout all this, Spufford retained an enthusiasm for the research of others, and was a stimulating and ambitious presence on a sometimes introspective campus. She encouraged Marie Rowlands to begin research on early industrial development in the Black Country, and supported the work of Laura Weatherill on consumption and material culture.[10] These reciprocal relationships, which in many

[8] M. Spufford, 'First steps in literacy: the reading and writing experiences of the humblest seventeenth-century spiritual autobiographers', *Social History*, 4 (1979), 407–35; M. Spufford, *Small Books and Pleasant Histories: Popular Fiction and its Readership in Seventeenth-century England* (London, 1981), p. xxi.

[9] F. Spufford, *The Child That Books Built* (London, 2002), pp. 13–15; Spufford, *Celebration*, pp. 40–1.

[10] M. B. Rowlands, *Masters and Men in the West Midland Metalware Trades before the Industrial Revolution*

ways mirrored her understanding of early modern English social relations, took many forms. Shared interests in the reading habits of the labouring poor made her an effective mentor to the young historian David Vincent, and without his knowledge she arranged for a paperback edition of his first book. In turn he conducted on her behalf a successful appeal to the local benefits office for disability support.

It is misleading then to assess Spufford's career only through her individually authored works; it is also through her capacity to encourage others and to build research communities, not unconnected to her own need for practical support, that she had a major influence within and beyond early modern English history. When Peter moved from Keele to Cambridge, Margaret Spufford took up a fellowship at Newnham, converted in 1985 to a bye-fellowship (resigned in 1992). Her poor health prevented her teaching undergraduates and her relationships in the College were not always easy, but at Cambridge she was able to attract a remarkable group of postgraduate students, commonly known as the 'Spuffordians'. They came because of her books, rather than her formal status, and mostly shared her interests in social relationships, inheritance, popular religion, reading, cheap print and the circulation of ideas and goods. The Japanese scholar Motoyasu Takahashi had read C*ontrasting Communities* and he came to Cambridge to build on Spufford's studies of Willingham and Chippenham. An article in both their names was published in 1996, and he later solicited her help in developing community studies in Japan. Michael Frearson was inspired by reading *Small Books and Pleasant Histories* at university in New South Wales to do research at Cambridge with Spufford. His 1993 thesis, 'The English Corantos of the 1620s', was a valuable contribution to the 'historical geography of the book trade'; like Spufford he explained the networks through which material circulated throughout the country as well as analysing the content of his texts.[11] Many achievements of the Spuffordians could be highlighted, but it is worth mentioning in particular Tessa Watt's *Cheap Print and Popular Piety, 1560–1640* (Cambridge, 1991) and Christopher Marsh's *The Family of Love in English Society, 1530–1630* (Cambridge, 1994). These books, based on their doctoral theses, remain standard works that build in creative fashion on Spufford's own concerns with piety and reading matter, and with religious dissent in communal contexts. In an influential, if controversial, collective work on patterns of religious dissent in England, Spufford presented work by Frearson, Marsh and Watt alongside studies by other students on the later Lollards and post-Restoration religious belief, and a substantial section of her own work. As

(Manchester, 1975); L. Weatherill, *Consumer Behaviour and Material Culture in Britain 1660–1760* (London, 1986).

[11] The phrase is from Patrick Collinson's 'Critical conclusion', in M. Spufford (ed.), *The World of Rural Dissenters, 1520–1725* (Cambridge, 1995), p. 389.

she wrote in the Preface, it demonstrated her conviction that 'to watch research students soar away, each into a different empyrean, is the ultimate academic pleasure', although she did acknowledge also 'the specific pleasure, for the historian, of finding a new and exciting document'.[12]

Spufford's students were invited into her family, as much as into an academic network. They met her, and each other, more often in her living room, kitchen or garden rather than in some austere study and, as they testified at her funeral, they were bowled over by her 'profound sense of fun and her irrepressible enthusiasm'.[13] They were expected to rally round in a crisis (and crises were frequent), filling the fridge and helping with dinner. During most of the time she had graduate students, Spufford's daughter was very sick and her own health precarious. Some students were overwhelmed by the situation, but most benefitted immeasurably from an atmosphere of mutual affection and perceptive support. When Michael Frearson was finishing his thesis the Spuffords held visiting fellowships at the Netherlands Institute of Advanced Study, and they paid for him to join them so that Margaret could go through his final draft.

Spufford's networks were not confined to her own students. Despite her own somewhat tense relationship with Keith Wrightson, the other early modern social historian at Cambridge, she is remembered with gratitude by several Wrightson students, and Henry French was jointly supervised.[14] As at Keele, the Spuffords' houses, at Girton, Haddenham, Bateman Street, Cambridge and finally the Guildhall at Whittlesford, offered generous hospitality and lively debate for historians and literary scholars. You did not have to agree with her; she enjoyed decades of 'stimulating and friendly disagreement' with Professor David Cressy over the penetration of cheap print in the English countryside and over standards of literacy.[15] To Professor Cressy, as to her own students and other protégés, Spufford was a passionate and persistent patron, although not always a very effective one. Her advocacy was particularly fierce on behalf of those whose careers, like hers, did not always run smoothly.

Spufford's work is beautifully written, often very personal and superficially artless. Her own reflections on her scholarship were ambiguous. She often presented her intellectual development as a process with a purely internal logic, prompted by the sources and her own preoccupations, denying any role to external methodological and/or theoretical positions: illness and family responsibilities had limited her reading of

[12] Spufford, *The World of the Rural Dissenters*, p. xvii.

[13] I am grateful for a copy of the address Michael Frearson gave at Spufford's funeral, written by himself and Christopher Marsh.

[14] Henry French and Steve Hindle contributed to *Faith, Place and People*, the volume in Spufford's honour.

[15] Margaret Spufford to David Cressy, 2 February 1977 (courtesy of Professor David Cressy).

other historians. 'Serendipity is not a methodology, but is nonetheless extremely useful', she wrote in 1995, but in her inaugural lecture the same year she repudiated the view that her research was wholly serendipitous, insisting on 'a quantitative skeleton to my work, to which I attach my qualitative work securely'. Indeed, throughout her career she turned to fiscal records, especially of the Hearth Tax, to establish basic patterns of population and wealth that she could connect to agricultural regions, and contrasting landscapes and cultures.[16] Hence, perhaps, her enduring admiration for the statistically minded herald and Staffordshire man, Gregory King, who like her was also a field worker who did not mind getting mud on his boots.[17]

Spufford always described herself as a local historian, with mud on her boots and often in her hair, but hers was a more sophisticated local history than she is sometimes given credit for. As we shall see, she came to regret that she had not been more methodologically self-conscious, feeling that it meant her work did not have the impact it deserved. She was always alert to the idiosyncrasies of particular places but did not accept that meant that 'everywhere is different' or that no generalisations could be drawn.[18] For local history, as for micro-history, the relationship between the particular and the general was crucial: 'this issue of typicality or a-typicality for an agricultural type seems to me the central problem with which micro-historians have to wrestle'. You could not claim typicality without some systematic work, and hence the attraction of the Hearth Tax.[19]

Spufford's first book, *Contrasting Communities*, remains her most influential. The first and most substantial section, 'People, families and land', based on her doctoral work, sought to address a long-standing concern in early modern English economic history, 'the disappearance of the small landowner'. Influenced by the work of the 'Leicester school', in particular the 'ecological' approach to farming regions associated with Joan Thirsk and Alan Everitt, she analysed developments in three different Cambridge communities, Willingham in the fens, Chippenham in the chalk lands and Orwell on the heavier clay soil. Her conclusions were founded on systematic analysis of population, landholding, inheritance practices and the treatment of widows, using taxation, manorial and probate records. In Chippenham and Orwell economic change, vulnerability to bad harvests and the vagaries of the market made smaller landholdings increasingly less viable in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries—a

[16] Spufford, *The World of the Rural Dissenters*, p. xvii; Spufford, *Chippenham to the World*, pp. 7–9, 12.
[17] M. Spufford, *Poverty Portrayed: Gregory King and Eccleshall in Staffordshire in the 1690s* (Keele, 1995); see also A. Ailes, 'The Heralds and the Hearth Tax', in Dean, Parry and Vallance, *Faith, Place and People*, pp. 95–110.
[18] Spufford, *Chippenham to the World*, pp. 17–18.
[19] M. Spufford, 'The scope of local history, and the potential of the Hearth Tax returns', *The Local Historian*, 30 (2000), 203.

process exacerbated by over-generous inheritance arrangements in Orwell. In Willingham, however, the grazing and other rights afforded by the fens enabled a more egalitarian society to survive. Subsequent sections dealt with 'The schooling of the peasantry' and 'Parishioners and their religion'—perhaps not the most appropriate title as Spufford focused on religious dissent at least as much as on people's relationships with the established parish church. Both these sections built on earlier articles and covered themes that she returned to frequently during the rest of her career.[20] *Contrasting Communities* wears its ambition lightly, but it was an ambitious book, intended to have an impact on European social history. Spufford explained in her preface that she had not been able to read Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie on *The Peasants of Languedoc* before publication, but she made several references to the work of Pierre Goubert on the Beauvais, and she used extensive comparisons with Le Roy Ladurie in recasting her work on Cambridgeshire in a comparative volume on family and inheritance in Western Europe.[21]

Spufford's next book, *Small Books and Pleasant Histories: Popular Fiction and its Readership*, was prompted initially by a desire to consider, in more depth than was possible in *Contrasting Communities*, what religious influences, besides their local vicar, were available to the common people, but the book presents vivid accounts of the 'small merry books' and romances with their tales of courtship, heroism and chivalry as well as discussing the godly books and prints that could be purchased for a penny. Spufford again offered comparisons with continental Europe in a chapter comparing her analysis of Pepys's cheap print collections with Robert Mandrou's account of 'le bibliothèque bleu'. At a time when most discussions of popular culture were based on the content of the cheap literature ordinary people were assumed to have read, Spufford's was a pioneering study that combined analysis of content with research on the distribution of cheap print and on the reading skills of the common people. She could thus demonstrate that 'small books' reached English villages through elaborate networks of 'pedlars, hawkers and petty chapmen', and she could show that it was likely that significant elements amongst the rural population could read this material. Her sensitive account of the ways in which reading pious handbooks or merry tales of courtship and adventure related to the everyday lives of the

[20] Amongst other examples are: M. Spufford, 'The schooling of the peasantry in Cambridgeshire, 1575–1700', in J. Thirsk (ed.), *Land, Church and People: Essays Presented to Professor H. P. R. Finberg*, Supplement to the *Agricultural History Review*, 18 (1970), pp. 112–47; M. Spufford, 'The dissenting churches in Cambridgeshire from 1660 to 1700', *Proceedings of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society*, 61 (1968), 67–95.

[21] M. Spufford, 'Peasant inheritance customs and land distribution in Cambridgeshire from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries', in J. Goody, J. Thirsk and E. P. Thompson (eds.), *Family and Inheritance. Rural Society in Western Europe, 1200–1800* (Cambridge, 1976), pp. 156–76.

peasantry was developed from substantial research on real pedlars, school mistresses and readers. Spufford's original synthesis of supply and demand, distribution and reception was developed by her own students, notably Tessa Watt and Michael Freason, and has had a productive influence on scholars of popular literacy in more recent times. Around the same time, she published 'First steps in literacy: the reading and writing experiences of the humblest seventeenth-century spiritual autobiographers'.[22] Where previous work on literacy had used statistical methods, using large data sets to discover what proportions of the population could sign their own names, Spufford built on her extensive research on education to uncouple reading and writing as distinct skills. Reading was taught before writing and with the widespread availability of semi-formal schools in the countryside she argued that many poor families could spare a few pence so their children could acquire rudimentary reading skills before they were required to work, even if they could not stay in school long enough to gain the more advanced capacity to write. She then turned to qualitative evidence, using spiritual autobiographies to demonstrate the strenuous and poignant efforts poor dissenters might take to preserve and improve their ability to read. She was more optimistic about the reading skills of the rural poor than many scholars, and she later acknowledged the importance of economic as well as religious influences on literacy, but her account of what reading might mean for the common people remains one of the most influential articles on the cultural history of early modern England ever written.[23]

Spufford's third book can also be seen as a natural outcome of questions raised earlier in *Contrasting Communities* and *Small Books*. Aided by a Senior Research Fellowship from the Social Science Research Council in 1978–80, she embarked on a study of the chapmen and women who brought reading matter to the people, more systematic than had been possible in the chapter in *Small Books*. Pedlars' packs held ribbons, buttons, textiles and ready-made clothes along with ballads, story books and religious tracts; the book's title, *The Great Reclothing of Rural England*, echoed a key achievement of the 'Leicester school'—W. G. Hoskins' article 'The rebuilding of rural England'.[24] This was another original contribution, establishing pedlars as

[22] M. Spufford, 'First steps in literacy', first published in *Social History*, 12 (1979), 407–35, was reprinted in H. J. Graff (ed.), *Literacy and Social Development in the West* (Cambridge, 1981) and in the collection of her essays: M. Spufford, *Figures in the Landscape* (Aldershot, 2000).

[23] In a comparative study, M. Spufford, 'Literacy, trade and religion in the commercial centres of Europe', in K. Davids and J. Lucassen (eds.), *A Miracle Mirrored: The Dutch Republic in European Perspective* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 229–83, Spufford denied that she had ever questioned the basic human need to earn a living, and accepted that literacy was higher in towns than in the countryside.

[24] M. Spufford, *The Great Reclothing of Rural England. Petty Chapmen and their Wares in the Seventeenth Century* (London, 1984); W. G. Hoskins, 'The rebuilding of rural England, 1570–1640', *Past and Present*, 4 (1953), 44–59. For an astute discussion on the potential of this book, see 'Introduction', in Dean, Parry and Vallance, *Faith, Place and People*, p. 10.

cultural intermediaries, although her own treatment was rather under-theorised. Spufford's initial aim, to provide a systematic analysis of the chapmen licensed under national legislation of 1697–8, proved unworkable, and she provided instead a host of suggestive examples, based particularly on the creative use of wills and inventories, discovered through her own research and references from her extensive scholarly networks. Her final, posthumous, book, published more than thirty years later, built on this study. Chapmen are crucial to *The Clothing of the Common Sort*, produced with Susan Mee, one of her Roehampton PhD students, and seen through the press by Peter Spufford. This ground-clearing work explores what can be learnt of the largely uncharted territory of the clothing available to everyone from 'the poorest' to the 'chief inhabitants' of early modern communities. It covers both production and consumption; creative and painstaking research in poor relief and probate archives reveals the most common fabrics used, their transformation by 'women with a needle', and the widespread availability of ready-made clothing.[25]

Spufford's religious faith was fundamental to her life and, in paradoxical fashion, to her scholarship. She was a devout Anglican, with participation in the Eucharist at the heart of her faith. Yet most of her research and writing on early modern religion focused not on the orthodox, but on Quakers, Baptists and other dissenters from the established church. She cautioned against assumptions that the piety of the 'conformable' was consequently less powerfully felt, but she believed ('a shade too pessimistically' as Patrick Collinson noted) that: 'Very little can ever be said of the way that the beliefs of the orthodox amongst the laity affected them. Orthodoxy, like happiness has no history.'[26] If her specific religious beliefs were not reflected in her research and writing, her faith reinforced her opposition to accounts of historical change that explain belief, especially religious belief, solely in economic terms, or assume that ideas inevitably flow from the more prosperous to the poorer groups in society. In a later article she explored the possibilities of statistical analysis of religious belief, concluding with a pointed question: 'Can we weigh souls or count them?' In the process she attacked those who accepted Puritan judgements on the religious failings of the 'conformable': 'with a naivete that seems quite extraordinary, contemporary social historians swallow at their face value the judgements made by the "godly" on those they themselves considered "unreformed".'[27] This was a barely disguised dig at Keith

[25] M. Spufford and S. Mee, *The Clothing of the Common Sort 1570–1700* (Oxford, 2017).

[26] Spufford, *Contrasting Communities*, p. 319; Collinson, 'Critical conclusion', *The World of Rural Dissenters*, p. 395. This assumption has indeed been challenged by much recent scholarship on the history of religion and the history of emotions, and indeed by work done by Spufford's own students and associates, such as Christopher Marsh and Judith Maltby.

[27] M. Spufford, 'Can we count the "godly" and the "conformable" in the seventeenth century', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 36 (1985), 438 and 434.

Wrightson in particular, and in this spirit she also challenged the links discerned by Christopher Hill and Wrightson between Puritanism and attempts to discipline or control unruliness amongst the lower classes.[28] Drives to close alehouses or particularly harsh punishment of illegitimacy occurred in periods of economic distress or population pressure, and were not a product of particular religious affiliations.[29] For the whole of her career she insisted, 'I do not myself believe in any economic determinism, for religious conviction or dissent, although there may be conditions that foster it.'[30]

Spufford's views on religion and society, with their implications for her broader understanding of early modern England, are demonstrated particularly clearly in the collective volume she edited, *The World of Rural Dissenters*. This began with some hundred pages of her own on 'the importance of religion in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries', in part made up of revisions of recent articles, but the rest comprised a showcase for the work of her students and associates.[31] This is in some ways an odd book. It contained its own first review in the form of a 'Critical conclusion' by Patrick Collinson, in turn subject to some pointed responses in footnotes added by Spufford herself. As Collinson noted, there were important chapters by Eric Carlson, Tessa Watt and Michael Frearson that nonetheless did not quite fit the overall theme, and he also raised the question of whether there was anything distinctive about *rural* dissenters.[32] The chapters most relevant to Spufford's overall vision were those by Derek Plumb on the Lollards, Bill Stevenson on post-Restoration Dissenters, and Nesta Evans on 'The comparative mobility and immobility of Lollard descendants in early modern England'. Plumb and Stevenson both demonstrated that religious heterodoxy could not be connected to specific social groups but was found across all social groups, and in further support of Spufford's assumptions about English society they found (as Christopher Marsh did for the 'Family of love') that religious dissenters were mostly well integrated in their communities. Spufford connected their conclusions with the research of Nesta Evans on the survival of Lollard surnames amongst the seventeenth-century Quakers of the Buckinghamshire Chilterns. She noted the relative geographical immobility of people who lived in a

[28] C. Hill, *Society and Puritanism in Pre-Revolutionary England* (London, 1964); K. Wrightson and D. Levine, *Poverty and Piety in an English Village: Terling, 1525–1700* (New York, 1979).

[29] M. Spufford, 'Puritanism and social control?', in A. Fletcher and J. Stevenson (eds.), *Order and Disorder in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 41–57.

[30] Spufford, *Chippenham to the World*, p. 16.

[31] Sections were based on Spufford, 'Can we count the "godly"', and M. Spufford, 'The importance of the Lord's Supper to seventeenth-century dissenters', *Journal of the United Reformed Church History Society*, 5 (1993), 62–80.

[32] Collinson, 'Critical conclusion'; see also the thoughtful review by P. Griffiths, *Continuity and Change*, 11 (1996), 145–7.

region with excellent communication links (as Frearson showed), insisting that 'this relative immobility over time was the result of social acceptance in their own localities. They did not want to move because their neighbours, on the whole, tolerated them.'[33]

Spufford's account of religion and society is influential but not universally accepted. She had almost no interest in the 'Puritanism' which has attracted so much attention from historians, or in how the sixteenth-century Reformation transformed the status of Lollardy and complicated notions of orthodoxy and dissent. As Collinson pointed out, after 1662 many godly Puritans who had worked to reform the established church had themselves become dissenters but these Presbyterians and Congregationalists are missing from analyses that focus on Quakers and Baptists. Where she emphasised social integration and continuity, Christopher Hill used the same characteristics of familial patterns of dissent over time as an underground tradition of resistance in his article, 'From Lollards to Levellers', first published in 1978. While drawing on the work of Marsh, Plumb and Stevenson, later scholars have nonetheless seen a more fluid and complex interweaving of 'toleration' and confessional conflict in post-Reformation England and Europe.[34]

Spufford's ultimate ambition, in her own words, was to recreate, 'with love, and respect for these preceding human beings, all that I can currently grasp that needs to be known, and can be known, of their lives'.[35] In practice she devoted herself to the lives of 'ordinary people' in 'ordinary villages', and despite her broad interests in economic life, inheritance, piety and reading matter, there were significant omissions. Some of these she recognised herself. She speculated briefly in *Contrasting Communities* on the impact of Parliament's radical army during the English Civil War—'It is impossible to believe that Leveller ideas did not spread into Cambridgeshire.'[36] Here, she wrote, 'courage and time have failed me', but this simple explanation obscures the degree to which her own assumptions affected the choices she made and the time she allocated to particular themes. She could not work on a fen community like Willingham without paying some attention to struggles between landlords and tenants over collective resources threatened by fen drainage projects, but her account is comparatively low key, even humorous; the tenants have the best of a contest that appears relatively

[33] Spufford, *World of Rural Dissenters*, pp. 63–4.

[34] C. Hill, 'From Lollards to Levellers', first published in M. Cornforth (ed.), *Rebels and their Causes: Essays in Honour of A. L. Morton* (London, 1978) and in revised form in *The Collected Essays of Christopher Hill* vol. 2 (Brighton, 1985), pp. 89–116. Evans's chapter in *World of Rural Dissenters* echoes Hill's. On the complexities of toleration see, for example, A. Walsham, *Charitable Hatred: Tolerance and Intolerance in England, 1500–1700* (Manchester, 2006).

[35] Spufford, *Celebration*, pp. 63–4.

[36] Spufford, *Contrasting Communities*, p. xxi.

good natured.[37] In the Preface to *Contrasting Communities* (again) she explained: 'I have, purposely, avoided any consideration of the gentry and parochial clergy whose influence on their tenants and parishioners could obviously be an overriding one.' Although she added 'I think myself the docility of tenants to both their lords and their priests can be overstated', most of her work, as we have seen in discussion of religion, has stressed social cohesion rather than conflict.[38] Looking at crime or popular protest, for example, would have required more attention to matters that divided people rather than united them. And, for a scholar so passionately concerned with the lives and interests of the poor, there is surprisingly little on the workings of poor relief, although she used records of the poor law for material on the clothing of the poor. In an 'original, vivid and thought-provoking' account of the Staffordshire parish of Eccleshall, she used an extraordinarily detailed survey to illuminate the occupations and family relationships of the poor in 1690s. She used visual sources, and the nature of the survey itself, to explore how ways of understanding poverty changed over time, but there is little sense of whether or how the character of social relationships was transformed.[39]

We have suggested already that Spufford regretted the 'massive error' not to take up invitations to discuss her methodology, following the publication of *Contrasting Communities*: 'I thought it would be boring for my audiences.' This mattered because she believed this failure had limited her influence on English social history.[40] Her general comments were often an implicit and sometimes an explicit dialogue with or challenge to the interpretation of social change in early modern England associated with Keith Wrightson and his students. To put it at its simplest, she felt that the account of Terling by Wrightson and Levine had triumphed as a model for English social history over her Cambridgeshire villages.[41] In attempting a summing up of Spufford's work, the comparison with Wrightson cannot be avoided. In his detailed research on Terling, his perceptive articles and very influential general books, and through his talented students, Wrightson has established the dominant framework for early modern English social history. This is a more pessimistic model than Spufford's, and a more integrated account where growing economic inequality developed alongside social and cultural polarisation. Puritanism in this context is, in part, a means of

[37] Ibid., pp. 122–30.

[38] Ibid., p. xx.

[39] Spufford, *Poverty Portrayed*; the judgement is from Dr Jane Whittle, review of *Figures in the Landscape: Rural Society in England 1500–1700*, (review no. 237) https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/237 (accessed 16 September 2019). This is an extremely perceptive account of Spufford's work.

[40] Spufford, *Chippenham to the World*, p. 7.

[41] Wrightson and Levine, *Poverty and Piety in an English Village*. The description of the 1995 Oxford University Press edition correctly has it: 'This classic study of a single community in early modern England has had a major influence on the interpretation of the social dynamics of the period.'

social differentiation and social control; social relationships are more marked by bitterness and aggression. As we have seen, Spufford sought in *Contrasting Communities* to provide a systematic and comparative account of economic change, which did demonstrate greater economic inequality. But she did not agree that growing economic differentiation necessarily implied cultural differences or social conflict. Through her study of inheritance practices in Cambridgeshire villages, she established that members of the same kinship networks might experience widely different economic fortunes, and with her student Motoyasu Takahashi she published an article that demonstrated 'poorer relations' witnessing the wills and attending the death beds of their richer kin (and vice versa). This occurred not only in the relatively egalitarian fen village of Willingham but even in later seventeenth-century Chippenham after the 'great economic gulf had developed between yeomen and their agricultural labourer relations'. This she argued was typical of a community in the 'chalk uplands' and, consequently, 'translating the economic gulf into a rigid social cleavage is purely a historians' construct'.[42] Spufford's work has thus been influential in resisting a deterministic account of culture, particularly in reference to forms of religious association and popular piety. Her stress on social cohesion also finds supporters, although for others her views of the fortunes of the 'common sort' and of social relations are over-optimistic. We must look elsewhere for accounts of the ways in which more discriminatory social relationships were embodied in the operation of the poor law and other forms of social regulation; of bitter quarrels over resources between landlords and tenants; or of collective popular agency in religious and political protest.[43]

Her scholarship remains a model in its imaginative rigour and in its humanity. In all her writings, Spufford used often unpromising sources to bring to life men and women within their communities: 'Until one has more adequately translated the statistics into human terms, it seems that despite all the care one takes, the human beings have slipped between the meshes of the net, and that one has not yet begun to

[42] M. Spufford and M. Takahashi, 'Families, will witnesses, and economic structure in the fens and on the chalk: sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Willingham and Chippenham', *Albion*, 28 (1996), 399 and 395. Her target in the last quotation is again Terling. Compare, for example, C. Marsh, *The Family of Love in English Society, 1530–1630* (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 183–7, where the bequests of Familists are used as evidence for the social integration of a group with radically distinctive religious beliefs.

[43] For different approaches, amongst a vast literature, see Wrightson and Levine, *Poverty and Piety*; S. Hindle, *On the Parish? The Micro-Politics of Poor Relief in Rural England, c. 1550–1750* (Oxford, 2004); J. Walter and K. Wrightson, 'Dearth and the social order in Early Modern England', *Past and Present*, 71 (1976), 22–42; J. Walter, 'Abolishing superstition with sedition? The politics of popular iconoclasm in England, 1640–1642', *Past and Present*, 183 (2004), 79–123; A. Wood, *The Politics of Social Conflict: The Peak Country 1520–1770* (Cambridge, 1999); P. Griffiths, *Lost Londons: Change, Crime and Control in the Capital City 1550–1660* (Cambridge, 2008); and for the latest summing up: K. Wrightson (ed.), *A Social History of England. 1500–1750* (Cambridge, 2017).

understand the real situation, which must have been so immediately apparent to the most illiterate peasant in every one of the alehouses of the villages concerned.'[44] She has introduced or popularised new sources, such as the probate accounts used as the foundation for her last book on clothing; and transformed approaches to familiar ones, as when she demonstrated the influence local scribes had on the religious clauses of early modern wills.[45] She offers unforgettable portraits of individual men and women, whose circumstances gently lead us to ponder important historical questions. There is Sister Sneesby, an elderly deaf Cambridgeshire widow, working as a casual labourer whose Baptist faith had been shaken by her reading Quaker books. Sister Sneesby, the records tell us, had been reduced to 'a sad, deplorable condition'. Her condition, Spufford wrote later, 'has haunted me ever since I first made her acquaintance', and she returned to Sneesby's troubles in many essays.[46] Sneesby embodies Spufford's insistence on the capacity of humble men and women for independent thought and action. In 'First steps in literacy', which completely transformed our assessment of literacy levels in early modern England, she described the young Oxfordshire shepherd (who could read but not write) who gave a lame young man one of his two sheep (**one of two**) 'to teach me to make the letters and joyn them together'.[47] And the sad case of a shipwrecked sailor, accused of vagrancy in Northumberland, while selling 'pictures, ballads, and other paper wares' bought on credit, sheds light on the complex family relationships and precarious existence of poorer chapmen in the eighteenth century.[48]

Spufford was sympathetic to women's history. She supervised Amy Erickson's important work on women and property, and offered sympathetic support to many other women scholars.[49] There are vivid accounts of women's experience in her studies of religious dissent, education and literacy, and chapwomen find a place alongside men in selling ballads, pins and clothes across England. Typically, she disclaimed any acquaintance with the feminist history emerging from the 1960s and 1970s: 'There was never any time for secondary reading of other historians, of theology as it interested me more, or feminism as it blossomed. My work developed in a vacuum.'[50] Nonetheless, Spufford's published work demonstrated a form of inspirational,

[44] Spufford, *Contrasting Communities*, p. 167.
[45] M. Spufford, 'The limitations of the Probate Inventory', in J. Chartres and D. Hey (eds.), *English Rural Society 1500–1800: Essays in Honour of Joan Thirsk* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 139–74; Spufford and Mee, *Clothing of the Common Sort*. Peter Spufford and Amy Erickson had earlier highlighted the value of probate accounts.
[46] Spufford, *Contrasting Communities*, pp. 216–17; Spufford, *World of the Rural Dissenters*, p. 64.
[47] Spufford, 'First steps in literacy', 415–16.
[48] Spufford, *The Great Reclothing*, pp. 24–5.
[49] A. Erickson, *Women and Property in Early Modern England* (London, 1991).
[50] Spufford, *Celebration*, p. 68.

practical feminist scholarship in that it never hid the ways in which research and writing took place amongst personal difficulties and family responsibilities. In her inaugural lecture she explained that the idea for *Contrasting Communities*, 'the book of which I am most proud', came to her while she was driving to an adult evening class in Staffordshire, with her baby (Francis) 'stuffed under the seat in a carrycot'.[51] In the acknowledgements to that book, and in subsequent publications, she thanked those who had given her domestic support as well as more conventional intellectual influences, and grant-givers. She was frank about her own ill-health and about the difficulties in finding replacement care for her sick daughter. Such openness has become more common, but in the 1970s it was heartening to read a historian that admitted the hard work, the support from family and friends, the 'planning, organising, telephoning' necessary to clear a space to start, still more to complete, serious academic work.

While most of us engage in juggling acts to be parents, scholars, partners and friends, Spufford's dilemmas were of another order. She believed her sufferings and her faith enriched her work as a social historian by helping her understand better the people of the seventeenth century who were often in pain, usually devout and only too familiar with infant mortality. In *Celebration* she acknowledged the danger of 'over-identification' while insisting that 'Empathy is probably the historical virtue I most value'.[52] In this unflinching, deeply moving, surprisingly yet aptly titled book, Spufford wrote for new audiences as a committed Christian and a mother, as well as a dedicated historian, accepting but never facilely coming to terms with suffering. She explored her experience of three generations of 'physical evil': her mother's catastrophic stroke, her own ill-health and, especially, her daughter's chronic and incurable suffering through a genetic disorder, a particular example of the 'failures of God's creation'. As a convinced believer in an omnipotent and a loving God, Spufford pondered how he 'permitted such hurt'. Readers do not need to share her faith to be moved by the clear-sighted discussion of the dilemmas of families living on the frontiers of medical knowledge, where the search for a cure may be as troubling as the disease: as 'genuinely humane, high technology, modern medicine' brings nightmares as well as triumphs, and as, in the end, parents, 'utterly powerless and almost completely responsible', have to accept decisions made by sick, adult children. A kidney transplant from her father when she was eight bought Bridget precious time before her health deteriorated in young adulthood and she died in May 1989 aged twenty-two. *Celebration* is a notable contribution to medical ethics, posing the fundamental question of whether life

[51] Spufford, *Chippenham to the World*, p. 2; P. Spufford, 'Margaret', in Dean, Parry and Vallance, *Faith, Place and People*, p. 17.
[52] Spufford, *Celebration*, p. 70.

should always be sustained through 'massive and repeated medical intervention'. Spufford became an oblate of the Benedictine Community of St Mary's Abbey, West Malling in 1973, and it is clear that her strenuous Christian faith was fundamental to her life and work. At the end of *Celebration* she wrote, 'I loathe and detest my bone disease … But oddly, after twenty years, I can no longer wish that things were quite otherwise, except for my husband's sake. Learning to live with the disorder as creatively as possible has in the end formed the person I am … as historian, or mother, or oblate … the disease has indeed been a creative medium.'[53]

After Bridget Spufford died, a trust was established which between 1991 and 2003 supported a hostel for profoundly disabled students in Cambridge, enabling young people to live independently as Bridget had not. An 'Indian summer' for Margaret (and Peter) Spufford, of productive work, travel and new appointments was a paradoxical and unlooked for result of Bridget's death. They lectured in New Zealand and North America in 1991; held visiting fellowships in the Netherlands in 1992–3; and visited Japan for the first time in 1994, when Margaret was Visiting Professor at Rikkyo University, Tokyo. Spufford's former student, Motoyasu Takahashi, adopted her methods to develop local history in Japan, heading a team to study the village of Kami Shiojiri in Nagano Province, that specialised in breeding the eggs of silk moths, and in 2003 she visited Japan again, as a guest of the Japan Academy, to see for herself a place that had been much discussed in Cambridge and Whittlesford.

Meanwhile in 1994 Spufford was appointed as Research Professor in Social and Local History at Roehampton Institutute of Higher Education, a post she held until her retirement in 2001.[54] The appointment was the initiative of Roehampton's Professor Peter Edwards; he and Spufford were friends with a shared interest in the history of horses, whether they were carrying chapmen or going to war. Bridget Spufford would have studied at Roehampton had her health not collapsed. As Edwards wrote in an obituary for Spufford, the appointment came at 'the height of the RAE poaching frenzy' and aroused 'admiration and jealousy in equal measure'. Spufford raised the research profile and encouraged the ambitions of Roehampton's historians; the department duly achieved a high '5' rating in the 2001 Research Assessment Exercise. In 1995 Spufford established the Centre for Hearth Tax Research; she acted as Director until 2006 and it continues at Roehampton to this day.[55] As early as 1962 she had written an article on 'The significance of the Cambridgeshire Hearth Tax',

[53] Spufford, *Celebration*, pp. 49, 19, 99–114.

[54] The Institute was formed in 1975 through a federation of higher education colleges; it became the University of Roehampton in 2004.

[55] Peter Edwards, 'Obituary: Margaret Spufford, 1935–2014' that appeared on the Economic History Society website, https://web.archive.org/web/20140407092218/http://www.ehs.org.uk/news/obituary-margaret-spufford-1935–2014 (accessed 29 September 2019).

and almost forty years later in a lecture on the 'potential' of the Hearth Tax returns she repeated her conviction that 'each of our beloved village studies needs to be set in context for its significance to be fully known'.[56] The Hearth Tax, levied between 1662 and 1689, is the most remarkable source for the population of England between the Doomsday Book and the 1801 National Census, and illuminating also for research on wealth and housing. It is a vital resource for family and local historians as well as for academic historians and demographers. The Hearth Tax project is a remarkable collaboration between academic historians, local societies and dedicated volunteers across the country; appropriately it has been funded by both the British Academy and the Heritage Lottery Fund. By 2018, eleven volumes had been published (eight by the time of Spufford's death) by the British Record Society, often in cooperation with county record societies. It is a very fitting legacy.

Spufford was elected to the British Academy in 1995, and was awarded the OBE in 1996, 'for services to Social History and to Higher Education for People with Disabilities'. She was awarded a LittD by Cambridge University in 1986, and had honorary doctorates from the Open University (2002) and Keele University (2005). After her death on 6 March 2014 there were obituaries in the *Daily Telegraph*, *The Guardian* and *The Times*; a conference in her memory, 'After Margaret Spufford: English Local History Now', was held at the University of Roehampton in June 2015. The consequent volume in her honour was published in 2018.[57] She had planned a fund to support an undergraduate dissertation prize for a Newnham student, but so much money was raised that prizes in her name have been established for MA performance at all the institutions she was associated with: at Lucy Cavendish College Cambridge as well as Newnham, and Leicester, Roehampton and Keele Universities.

In an interview Francis Spufford explained that 'the qualities that made my mother extraordinary also made her difficult sometimes'; a lifelong friend stresses that she was always a fighter—for herself and her vocation as a historian, for her daughter and for her students and protégés.[58] Margaret filled any room she entered; the force of her personality, her convictions and her faith made her always inspiring if sometimes intimidating. Her family life and her remarkable scholarly achievements were only possible with the support of friends and students, but she repaid this help a thousand-fold. If Spufford had written only *Contrasting Communities* and her 'First

[56] H. M. Spufford, 'The significance of the Cambridgeshire Hearth Tax', *Proceedings of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society*, 55 (1962), 53–64; Spufford, 'The scope of local history', 213.

[57] Dean, Parry and Vallance, *Faith, Place and People in Early Modern England, Essays in Honour of Margaret Spufford*.

[58] Francis Spufford, interview with Terence Handley MacMath, 26 August 2016, www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2016/26-august/features/interviews/interview-francis-spufford-writer-and-lecturer (accessed 16 October 2019). I am relying also on discussions with Michael Frearson and David Vincent.

steps in popular literacy', her reputation as a social and cultural historian would be secure, but she leaves behind a broader corpus of pioneering studies of cheap print, consumption, communications, material culture, religious change and medical ethics, besides the research she inspired in her students, and the energy that established the team producing the Hearth Tax editions, sources of fundamental importance to early modern English economic and social history. She would never have wanted to be fashionable, and her scholarship worked to its own internal logic, but nonetheless, in her work on the history of the book and of reading, on consumption and material culture, on landscape and culture, she pioneered themes and methods that became decades later the focus of self-conscious, modish 'turns'.

Spufford's scholarship—personal, thoughtful and provocative—is of fundamental and enduring importance; the achievements of a remarkable historian and a remarkable woman in almost unimaginably difficult circumstances.

Acknowledgements
I did not know Margaret Spufford well at all, although I had the honour of giving the address when she was awarded an Honorary Degree at Keele in 2005. Consequently, I have been more than usually in need of help and advice with this obituary. I owe a great deal to the kindness of Michael Frearson, Amy Erickson and Judith Maltby amongst Margaret's students, while David Vincent and David Cressy have been particularly generous with personal testimony. Most of all I am indebted to Peter Spufford who provided me with warm hospitality at Whittlesford, copies of Margaret's books and offprints of her articles and a revised version of Margaret's own memoir prepared for the British Academy. I am more sorry than I can express that I was not able to complete this account before his death on 18 November 2017. For Peter Spufford's published account of Margaret Spufford's career, see his essay in the volume of essays in her honour.[59]

Note on the author: Ann Hughes is Professor of Early Modern History, Emerita, at Keele University.

[59] P. Spufford, 'Margaret', in Dean, Parry and Vallance, *Faith, Place and People in Early Modern England, Essays in Honour of Margaret Spufford*, pp. 15–26.