

Regions and Frontiers: Joan Thirsk, 1922–2013

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Joan Thirsk was for many years the dominant figure in the writing of English agrarian history of the early modern period during an academic career based first at the University of Leicester (1951 to 1965) – as a key member of the ‘Leicester School’ of English Local History – and then, as W.G. Hoskins’s successor as Reader in Economic History at the University of Oxford (from 1965 to 1983). Indeed, she did much to establish the status and special features of agrarian history as a recognised branch of historical studies by using different kinds of sources, asking new questions, and by extending its frontiers. That said, however, ‘agrarian history’ in itself is an inadequate label to describe the considerable range of her output. For one thing, she made occasional forays into urban history.¹ As well as noting these, however, historians of the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries constantly encounter Joan Thirsk’s work when they turn to examine the rural origins and growth of industry, innovations and their diffusion, internal trade, food, drink, clothing and fashion, social structure, family and inheritance patterns, cross-cultural contacts, and the many-sided, but often appallingly neglected, roles and activities of women and, indeed, of women historians in the past.² An essay she wrote on ‘The

- 1 Thirsk, ‘Stamford in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries’ in A. Rogers (ed.), *The Making of Stamford* (Leicester, 1965), reprinted in Thirsk, *The Rural Economy of England. Collected Essays* (London, 1984), pp. 309–26 and ‘England’s Provinces: Did they serve or drive Material London?’ in Lena Cowen Orlin (ed.), *Material London c.1600* (Philadelphia, Penn, 2000), pp. 97–108
- 2 Her seminal essay on ‘Industries in the Countryside’, first appeared in F.J. Fisher (ed.), *Essays in the Economic and Social History of Tudor and Stuart England in Honour of R.H. Tawney* (Cambridge, 1961); ‘New Crops and their Diffusion: Tobacco-growing in Seventeenth-century England’, in C.W. Chalklin and M.A. Havinden (eds) *Rural Change and Urban Growth. Essays in English Regional History in Honour of W.G. Hoskins* (1974); ‘The Fantastical Folly of Fashion: the English Stocking Knitting

History Women' in 1995 was a powerful counterblast to J.P. Kenyon's arrogantly misogynist study of *The History Men* (1983) which denied her sex its rightful place in historiography. Elsewhere she underlined the pioneering and distinctive contribution made by women writers, among them Lilian Knowles, Alice Clark, Ivy Pinchbeck, Mary Bateson, Eleanor Trotter, and Joan Wake, both to economic history and to local history; she could not resist labelling as 'Thirsk's law' the process by which women pioneers were then crowded out as men took over and dominated a field. Joan Thirsk's kind of history was always concerned with opening windows on to new or neglected areas of history and, though not a combative feminist, she invariably made a special point of trying to present 'the woman's point of view' and to bring into the foreground the sort of things that both men in the past and later male historians had by-passed or simply failed to notice. After all, as she pointedly observed, until very recently it was men who had constructed the syllabuses, written most of the history books, and (on the home front) usually left household chores and shopping to their womenfolk.³

Her first article-length publications which appeared in the early 1950s stemmed from her doctoral research supervised by R.H. Tawney at the LSE on post-Civil War land transfers and the Restoration land settlement.⁴ (She later paid tribute to Tawney's classic study of *Religion*

Industry, 1500-1700' in N.B. Harte and K.G. Ponting (eds) *Textile History and Economic History. Essays in Honour of Miss Julia de Lacy Mann* (Manchester, 1973); 'The Family', *Past & Present* 27 (1964); 'Younger Sons in the Seventeenth Century', *History* 54 (1969), 'The European Debate on Customs of Inheritance, 1500-1700' in J. Goody, Joan Thirsk and E.P. Thompson (eds), *Family and Inheritance. Rural Society in Western Europe, 1200-1800* (Cambridge, 1976). All of these are reprinted in Thirsk, *The Rural Economy of England*. See also 'The Fashioning of the Tudor-Stuart Gentry', *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester*, 72:1 (1990), 69-85.

3 Thirsk, 'Foreword' to Mary Prior (ed.), *Women in English Society, 1500-1800* (London, 1985), pp. 1-21; 'The History Women' in Mary O'Dowd and Sabine Wichert (eds), *Chattel, Servant or Citizen? Women and Status in Church, State and Society* (Historical Studies, XIX, 1995), pp. 1-12; 'Women Local and Family Historians' in D. Hey (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Local and Family History* (Oxford, 1996), pp. 498-504; 'The Tribute of an Agricultural Historian' in Hilary Diaper (ed.), *A Favoured Land. Yorkshire in Text and Image. The Work of Marie Hartley, Joan Ingilby, and Ella Pontefract* (1994), pp. 64-70; 'Historic Passions. Nature versus Nurture', *History Workshop Journal* 47 (1999), 273-77.

4 Thirsk, 'The Sales of Royalist Land during the Interregnum' and 'The Restoration Land Settlement'. These are reprinted in her collected essays *The Rural Economy of England* (London, 1984), pp. 85-128. She occasionally returned to the Civil War period in later publications. See, for example, Thirsk, 'Agrarian Problems and the

and the Rise of Capitalism (1926) as 'amongst the most influential and riveting' books she ever read and to the effective and meaningful ways in which this writer's 'philosophical and political convictions infused and fertilized his history').⁵ Tawney's dialectical linking of past and present was a quality that she found admirable and she continued to emulate in her own way. History for both of them was emphatically not a dead end. 'I see all around me the past in the present', she once observed, 'and my historic passions, far from fading, thrive as strongly as ever'.⁶ She was a natural choice both for inclusion among the contributors to the Tawney *Festschrift* which appeared in 1961 and as the Economic History Society's Tawney Lecturer in 2000. *English Peasant Farming. The Agrarian History of Lincolnshire from Tudor to Recent Times* (1957) was her first full-length book, and capitalised on her early war-time impressions (as an evacuee from London) of the Lincolnshire landscape and farming regions. Another later landmark publication (the re-worked text of her Ford Lectures at Oxford) was *Economic Policy and Projects: The Development of a Consumer Society in Early Modern England* (1978); it opened up a whole new field. Other important, innovative and insightful works followed, among them *Alternative Agriculture: A History from the Black Death to the Present Day* (1997) and, most recently, *Food in Early Modern England. Phases, Fads, Fashions 1500–1760* (2007), both of which demonstrated an enviable competence for taking on large subjects and long time-spans and for demonstrating contemporary relevance. She edited volumes 4 and 5 of *The Agrarian History of England and Wales* in 1967 and 1984/5 respectively and for many years was the dynamic General Editor of the monumental series – more than 9000 pages in length – in which these books appeared. It was largely a tribute to her energy that volume 4, dealing with the period 1500 to 1640, was the first in the series to be published. Her collected essays, *The Rural Economy of England* appeared in 1984 and provided many reminders of her wide agenda and versatility. She edited a *Festschrift* (*Land, Church and People*) for Leicester Professor

English Revolution' in R.C. Richardson (ed.), *Town and Countryside in the English Revolution* (Manchester, 1992), pp.169–97.

- 5 Thirsk, 'Historic Passions', 275. To a lesser extent Sir John Neale's teaching at the University of London between 1945 and 1947, she later claimed, helped anchor her in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century history. 'The Fashioning of the Tudor-Stuart Gentry', 69. She gave the Neale Lecture at University College, London in 1982.
- 6 Ibid., 277. W.G. Hoskins, too, consciously followed in Tawney's footsteps and dedicated his book *The Midland Peasant. The Economic and Social History of a Leicestershire Village* (London, 1957) to him as 'a grateful tribute'.

of English Local History and long-standing friend H.P.R. Finberg in 1970, and wrote lengthy and generous obituary tributes of two other notable Leicester professors from the same department (W.G. Hoskins and Alan Everitt) for the *Proceedings of the British Academy* in 1995 and 2010 respectively. With Oxford colleague J.P. Cooper she co-edited a huge volume of *Seventeenth-century Economic Documents* in 1972, initially to provide their own undergraduate students with a companion collection to Tawney and Power's *Tudor Economic Documents* published as long ago as 1924. But 'people-centred' history, local and regional in scale, was always her chief *forte*. Arid antiquarianism, dehumanised quantification and the disembodied economic generalisations heralded in terms like 'proto- industrialisation' held no appeal; for her economic history which lost touch with its social underpinnings was fundamentally incomplete and represented a lost opportunity. And when she dealt with landscape history it was always communities' and individuals' relationships with their physical surroundings that caught her eye. Her linguistic skills in German, French and Spanish enabled her to extend her reach, keep abreast of a wide range of publications, and – alone among the 'Leicester School' in this respect – produce deeply researched comparative history.⁷ Her command of modern languages, it is certainly worth observing, was put to different uses during the Second World War at the famous decrypting centre at Bletchley Park, and the eagle eyes she developed there for detailed analysis and for spotting easy-to-miss inter-connections stayed with her throughout her career. Interestingly, the manor of Bletchley in the seventeenth century figured in the subject matter of her doctoral research.

She was a member of the editorial board of the increasingly influential historical journal *Past & Present* from 1957 to 1992 and then Vice President of the *Past & Present* Society. She was active in the British Agricultural History Society from its early days in the 1950s and edited the *Agricultural History Review* for eight years from 1964. She served as a member of the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments from 1977 to 1986, and then on the Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts from 1989 to 1996. Academic distinctions were showered on her – honorary degrees from no fewer than seven universities in the UK (including Kent, Sussex and Winchester) and one from the Netherlands, a Fellowship of the British Academy in

7 See, for example, 'The European Debate on Customs of Inheritance, 1500–1700' (1976), reprinted in *The Rural Economy of England*, pp. 359–74.

1974, the invitation to deliver the prestigious Ford Lectures in Oxford in 1975, and a CBE in 1994. But she carried such honours lightly and had no appetite at all for pomp and ceremony. She was frankly embarrassed by her depiction in Stephen Farthing's group portrait for the National Portrait Gallery in 1999 of the editorial board of *Past & Present*. At the personal level Joan Thirsk was always passionately and capably domestic and counted cookery, sewing, machine-knitting and gardening among her absorbing hobbies; she was every bit as multi-tasking as some of those she wrote about in the past. Always helpful, hospitable and understanding in her dealings with others, she helped many young, and some not-so-young, historians find their feet, and was generous in assisting keen and knowledgeable amateur historians. She had an extensive circle of friends, former students and correspondents in the USA, Japan and South Korea, and published extensively in journals and *Festschriften* in those countries.⁸ She had a long-term involvement with the Standing Conference for Local History and then the British Association of Local History. For nearly twenty years she was closely connected with the Edmonton Hundred Historical Society (the part of London with which her paternal ancestors had been connected) and more recently with Kentish local historians and their organisations. That the extremely well-attended memorial event held in her honour at the University of London on 11 January 2014 attracted a considerable number of her local friends and neighbours from Kent came as no surprise. Her writing was always squarely based on deep research, and its hallmarks were that it was accessible, lucid, jargon-free, lively, challenging, penetrating in its insights, and balanced in its judgements. Her unostentatious and beautifully constructed prose was always a joy to read. All these, and other, academic and personal qualities were appropriately celebrated in the two volumes of essays dedicated to her, the first in 1990 – *English Rural Society, 1500–1800*, edited by John Chartres and David Hey – and the second (more focussed) in 2004 *People, Landscape and Alternative Agriculture*, edited by R.W. Hoyle, her last research student at the University of Oxford.

Sensitive appreciation of regional differences was always one of the defining features of Joan Thirsk's work and went back to her

8 See, for example, Thirsk, 'Changing Attitudes to Enclosure in the Seventeenth Century' in *Festschrift for Professor Ju Hwan Oh* (Daegu, South Korea, 1991), pp. 517–43. Important though it is, this must surely rank today as the most inaccessible of all Joan Thirsk's publications and slipped through the net of the assiduously compiled *English Local History: The Leicester Approach. A Departmental Bibliography and History, 1948–1998* (Leicester, 1999).

student days, even before she started to specialise in history.⁹ Enrolled initially on a modern languages degree course at Westfield College, University of London (then evacuated to Oxford in wartime) writers like Hauptman, Zola and the lyric poet Annette von Droste-Hulshoff won her admiration precisely because they unmistakably possessed a 'special skill in depicting the personality of regions'.¹⁰ Vita Sackville West's 'The Land', a 'wondrously atmospheric poem', later claimed her attention for the same reason.¹¹ Indeed the interface between literature and history, and the insights which explorations of it offered, remained a continuing fascination.¹² Thirsk's early research for the Leicestershire VCH and her Lincolnshire project in the 1950s helped crystallise her own regional approach. In due course *The Agrarian History of England and Wales*, though national in scope, amply demonstrated that it was rooted in regional and local awareness and particulars. The whole of the first book-length part of Volume V – 1640–1750 (Cambridge, 1984) – which she herself edited was entirely devoted to twelve chapters dealing with regional farming systems. *The English Rural Landscape*, a book of essays which she edited in 2000 also celebrated regional diversity from different perspectives using both wide-angle lens panoramas and highly focussed cameos of particular places at particular moments in time.

Though she ranged widely readers of this journal will no doubt be particularly appreciative of Joan Thirsk's attentiveness to the southern counties. Buckinghamshire, Essex, Hampshire, Kent Middlesex, Surrey, Sussex and Wiltshire all feature in her collected essays. Buckinghamshire, Essex, Hampshire, Kent and Wiltshire also furnish some of the examples discussed in *Alternative Agriculture*. Moreover, telling evidence drawn from the southern counties was woven into her account of *Food in Early Modern England*. Cheese purchases only for

9 Hoskins, by contrast, more fascinated by the particular features of individual places (and always outspoken) perversely regarded 'region' as 'a horrid word that smacks of the lecture hall or the schoolroom'. Hoskins, *One's Man's England* (1978), p. 8.

10 Thirsk, 'Historic Passions', 276.

11 Ibid.

12 See, for example, her essays 'Plough and Pen. Agricultural Writers in the Seventeenth Century' in T. Aston *et al* (eds), *Social Relations and Ideas. Essays in Honour of R.H. Hilton* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 295–318 and 'Making a Fresh Start: Sixteenth-century Agriculture and the Classical Inspiration' in M. Leslie and T. Raylor (eds), *Culture and Cultivation in Early Modern England. Writing and the Land* (Leicester, 1992), pp. 15–34. This was a revised version of her 1982 Neale Lecture given at the University of London. She was a regular reviewer for the interdisciplinary journal *Literature & History*. Hoskins frequently quoted Hardy, a writer for him with an unrivalled sense of place.

servants by the Petre family at Ingatestone, Essex in the Elizabethan period are used to exemplify early upper-class prejudices against that commodity. London's highly distinctive place in food history is amply documented. The first mid-seventeenth century coffee houses in London and Oxford get special mention. Joan Cromwell, Oliver's wife, shines through here as one of the author's favourite characters and is applauded for her no-nonsense, economical housekeeping, even at Whitehall. Gervase Markham and John Tradescant are two of the agricultural writers whose names frequently occur in these pages. John Houghton's late seventeenth-century London-based food journalism is highlighted as, from the following century, is *The Country Housewife's Family Companion* (1750) by the Hertfordshire publicist William Ellis.

Kent became the principal home of Joan Thirsk and her librarian husband from the 1980s, though it was three decades earlier that they had bought the section of Hadlow Castle in which they came to live. She published an affectionate, informative account of it in *Hadlow Castle. A Short History* (1987, 3rd edition 2007). More substantially, along with three of her near neighbours and a medieval Latin scholar from London, Bridgett Jones, she collaborated on and edited *Hadlow. Life, Land and People in a Wealden Parish 1460–1600* (2007), giving pride of place to an English translation of the survey of Hadlow manor undertaken around 1460 and revised and reissued in 1581. It brought out some of the many continuities in the place-name and family name history of the parish and, more generally, the distinctiveness of the Wealden landscape. In historiographical vein Thirsk had earlier published a significant reappraisal of Edward Hasted, the eighteenth-century historian of Kent.¹³

Three short autobiographical pieces explored the origins and progress of Joan Thirsk's developing historical interests.¹⁴ Her prolific and astonishingly varied and innovative output amounts to a legacy that few other social and economic historians of her generation can rival. She remained hyper-active long into her retirement and wrote or edited some publications – like *The English Rural Landscape* (2000) – which

13 Thirsk, 'Hasted as Historian', *Archaeologia Cantiana* 111 (1993), reprinted in R.C. Richardson (ed.), *The Changing Face of English Local History* (Aldershot, 2000), pp. 69–82.

14 Thirsk, 'Historic Passions', 'From Farming to Food: 40 years in Lincolnshire History', *Lincolnshire History and Archaeology* 32 (1997), 9–11, 'The British Agricultural History Society and the Agrarian History of England and Wales: New Projects in the 1950s', *Agricultural History Review*, 50:2 (2002), 155–63.

(footnote-free) were aimed chiefly at the general reading public.¹⁵ But she refrained from going as far down the 'popularisation road' as W.G. Hoskins had done, never wrote county or regional guidebooks, and did not venture into radio broadcasts and television. Though widely acclaimed she never became a 'personality', a household name, as he did by the late 1970s. She steered a middle course, avoiding on the other hand Finberg's sometimes rather stiff and aloof academic stance and the somewhat inaccessible, high-flown theorising and at times jargon-laden exposition of Charles Phythian Adams, a later holder of the Leicester chair. She and her former research assistant (and eventual Leicester professor) Alan Everitt, by contrast, were in so many respects always closely in tune. Chronologically Joan Thirsk's range extended from medieval to modern times.¹⁶ She could handle big subjects with impressive *panache* but at the same time held back from making rash and insupportable generalisations and doctrinaire judgements and had the Bletchley Park-induced ability to squeeze every last drop of significance and meaning out of an individual document.

15 Earlier she contributed a chapter on 'The Rural Economy' to Jerome Blum's lavishly illustrated coffee-table book *Our Forgotten Past. Seven Centuries of Life on the Land* (1982), pp. 81-108.

16 Her 1964 and 1966 *Past & Present* articles on 'The Common Fields' represent her most significant contributions to medieval agrarian history. They are reprinted in *The Rural Economy of England*, pp. 35-64.