
JOAN THIRSK



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SOME HISTORIANS, however illustrious, have an unfortunate way of becoming trapped inside their narrow specialisms and its timeframes. Joan Thirsk, who died in October 2013, was an outstanding exception.

Although she was unquestionably for many years the pre-eminent figure in the writing of English agrarian history of the early modern period and did more than anyone else to establish the credentials and special features of agrarian history as a recognized branch of historical studies, Thirsk did not rigidly confine herself to either that field or period. Chronologically, she moved with ease into both the medieval and modern centuries; urban history sometimes claimed her attention.¹ But such was her range that Thirsk's work also embraced subjects as disparate as the rural origins of industry, innovations and their diffusion, food, drink, clothing, inheritance patterns, cross-cultural contacts, and the many-sided (but often badly neglected) roles and activities of women and, indeed, of women historians in the past.² An essay she wrote on "The History Women" in 1995 was a powerful reminder of women's rightful place in historiography. Elsewhere, she underlined the path-finding and distinctive contribution made by women writers, among them Alice Clark, Ivy Pinchbeck, and Joan Wake, to both economic and local history; she could not resist labelling as "Thirsk's law" the process by which women pioneers were subsequently elbowed out as men took over and monopolized a field. Joan Thirsk's kind of history was always concerned with opening up new or underexplored areas of history, and although not a strident feminist, she invariably made a special point of trying to present "the woman's point of view" and bring into prominence the sort of things that both men in the past and later male historians had bypassed or simply failed to notice as a result of their different vantage points and priorities.

Her first articles, which appeared in the early 1950s, were products of her doctoral research supervised by R. H. Tawney at the London

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* (1984), 309–26 and "England's Provinces: Did They Serve or Drive Material London?" in Lena Cowen Orlin (ed.), *Material London c. 1600* (Philadelphia, 2000), 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 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 European Debate on Customs of Inheritance, 1500–1700," in J. Goody, J. Thirsk, and E. P. Thompson (eds.), *Family and Inheritance: Rural Society in Western Europe, 1200–1800* (Cambridge, 1976). All of these works are reprinted in Thirsk, *The Rural Economy of England*.

School of Economics on post-Civil War land transfers and the Restoration land settlement.³ (She later acknowledged Tawney's classic study of *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* [1926]) as one of "the most influential and riveting" books she had ever read.)⁴ History for both of them was not an hermetically sealed compartment of time. "I see all around me the past in the present," Joan once observed, "and my historic passions, far from fading, thrive as strongly as ever."⁵ 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. 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 of study into which others, such as Lorna Weatherill, Beverly Lemire and John Brewer, have subsequently ventured.⁶ 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 showed enviable skill (a) in handling large subjects and long timespans and (b) for convincingly demonstrating relevance to today's world. She edited volumes 4 and 5 of *The Agrarian History of England and Wales* in 1967 and 1984/5, respectively, and for many years, she was the dynamic General Editor of the monumental series—more than 9,000 pages in length—in which these books appeared. It was largely a tribute to her energy that volume 4, dealing with the period 1500–1640, was the first in the series to be published; furthermore, as well as editing it, she also contributed three substantial chapters. 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 of English Local History and long-standing friend H. P. R. Finberg in 1970, and wrote lengthy and generous obituary

3 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* (1984), 85–128. She occasionally returned to the Civil War period in later publications. See, for example, Thirsk, "Agrarian Problems and the English Revolution" in R. C. Richardson (ed.), *Town and Countryside in the English Revolution* (Manchester, 1992), 169–97.

4 Thirsk, "Historic Passions," 275.

5 Ibid., 277.

6 Weatherill, *Consumer Behaviour and Material Culture in Britain 1660–1760* (1988, 2nd ed. printed in 1996); J. Brewer and R. Porter (eds.), *Consumption and the World of Goods* (1994); Lemire, *Dress, Culture and Commerce: The English Clothing Trade before the Factory, 1660–1800* (1997).

tributes of two other notable Leicester professors from the same department (W. G. Hoskins and Alan Everitt).⁷ With Oxford colleague J. P. Cooper, she co-edited a bulky and serviceable collection of *Seventeenth-Century Economic Documents* in 1972.

However, “people-centred” history, local and regional in scale, was always her chief *forte*. Arid antiquarianism, dehumanised quantification, and disembodied economic generalizations held no appeal; for her economic history artificially divorced from its social foundations was, at best, two dimensional. Landscape history, too, for her was always chiefly a social study, concerned with people in their specific physical environments. 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 and challenging comparative history.⁸ Her command of modern languages, it is certainly worth observing, was put to different uses during World War II at the famous decrypting center at Bletchley Park, and the eagle eyes she developed there for detailed analysis and spotting crucial details and easy-to-miss interconnections stayed with her throughout her career. Interestingly, the manor of Bletchley in the mid-seventeenth century figured in the subject matter of her doctoral research.

Her academic career was spent chiefly at two institutions, first at the University of Leicester from 1951–65 as a key member of the burgeoning Leicester School of English Local History, and then at the University of Oxford from 1965–83 as Reader in Economic History. She was a member of the editorial board of the increasingly influential historical journal *Past & Present* from 1957–92 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 8 years starting in 1964. She served as a member of the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments from 1977–86, followed by a term on the Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts from 1989–96. Academic distinctions were showered on her—eight honorary doctorates, a Fellowship of the British Academy in 1974, the invitation to deliver the prestigious Ford Lectures in Oxford in 1975, and a CBE [Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire] in 1994. However, she carried such honors lightly and had no appetite for pomp and ceremony.

7 “William George Hoskins, 1908–1992,” *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 87 (1995), 339–54; “Alan Milner Everitt, 1926–2008,” *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 166 (2010), 181–97.

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

At the personal level, Joan Thirsk was always passionately and capably domestic. Never self-advertising, invariably supportive to her own students, hospitable, fair-minded, and understanding in her dealings with others, she helped many fledgling historians find their feet and was generous in assisting amateur historians. She had an extensive circle of friends, former students, and correspondents in Japan, South Korea, and the United States, and published extensively in journals and *Festschriften* in those countries.⁹ Much admired and respected in the United States, she held a Senior Mellon Research Fellowship at the National Humanities Center in 1986–87. (One product of the fellowship was her contribution to the symposium and, later, book *Raleigh and Quinn, The Explorer and his Boswell*, edited by H. G. Jones [Chapel Hill, 1987]). Her writing was always squarely based on deep research and was accessibly written, jargon-free, lively and argumentative, thought provoking, and balanced in its conclusions. All of these, and other, academic and personal qualities were justly celebrated in the two volumes of essays dedicated to her, the first published in 1990 (*English Rural Society, 1500–1800*, edited by John Chartres and David Hey) and the second published in 2004 (*People, Landscape and Alternative Agriculture*, edited by Richard Hoyle, her last research student at the University of Oxford). The impressive list of contributors to both volumes, as well as the subject matter and methodologies under review, were clear indications of how widely her influence and inspiration had resonated.

A sensitive alertness to regional differences was always one of the defining features of Thirsk's work and went back to her early student days, even before she started to specialize in history.¹⁰ She was enrolled initially on a modern languages degree course at Westfield College, University of London, which was evacuated to Oxford during World War II. German and French writers such as 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."¹¹ Vita Sackville West's "The Land," a "wondrously atmospheric poem," later claimed her attention for exactly the same reason.¹² Thirsk's early research for the Leicestershire *Victoria County History* and her Lincolnshire project in the 1950s helped her develop her own

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

10 Hoskins, by contrast, was always more fascinated by the particular features of individual places.

11 Thirsk, "Historic Passions," 276.

12 *Ibid.*, 276.

distinctive regional approach. In due course, *The Agrarian History of England and Wales*, although national in coverage, amply demonstrated that it was firmly grounded 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, comprised 12 chapters dealing with regional farming systems. *The English Rural Landscape*, a book of essays that she edited in 2000, also celebrated regional diversity from different perspectives, both through overviews and close-ups.

Three short essays in autobiography explored the origins and development of Thirsk's developing historical interests, as did the preface to her collected essays.¹³ Her prolific and astonishingly varied and innovative output constitutes a legacy that few other social and economic historians of her generation can rival. She remained active long into her retirement and wrote or edited some publications (e.g., *The English Rural Landscape* [2000]), which were aimed chiefly at the general reading public. However, she never set herself up as a popularizer of history like W. G. Hoskins. She (unlike him) never wrote textbooks and county or regional guidebooks, and she did not venture into radio broadcasts and television. Although widely acclaimed in the academic community, she never became a household name "personality" in the same kind of way that Hoskins did in the United Kingdom. Conversely, she had a more secure international reputation than Hoskins, whose particular brand of "Englishness" (or, more precisely, English provincialism), which was pugnaciously and uncompromisingly upheld, was not an easy export. She was certainly better known and appreciated than he was in the United States.¹⁴ She could handle big subjects with consummate skill but at the same time held back from indulging in rash and sweeping generalizations and doctrinaire judgements; and she never lost sight of significant details, however small or hidden.

Elected 1982

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13 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, vol. 2 (2002), 155–63.

14 It is a curious fact that although their careers significantly intersected, Hoskins and Thirsk never worked alongside each other in the same university department for any length of time. He was chiefly responsible for her appointment to the University of Leicester in 1951 but left for Oxford soon after she took up her post. He returned to Leicester as a professor in 1965, but Joan Thirsk, at the same point, moved to Oxford to take up the Readership in Economic History, which Hoskins had just vacated.