

Conference Report

The Society's Winter Conference, 2014: 'Rural Worlds on the Move'

by Mathew Homewood

This year's Winter Conference, 'Rural Worlds on the Move', focused on migration. The four informative, and often entertaining, papers covered a good variety of themes, and ranged from the medieval period to the twentieth century. The conference began with a paper by Lyn Boothman entitled 'Those who stayed, those who went, and those who arrived: migration and stability in a Suffolk town, 1661–1861.' Boothman has been studying the Suffolk village of Long Melford for many years, and has built up a significant database on the population of the village. This particular paper, using 'population reconstruction' was concerned with stability, which, as Boothman points out, is statistically just as important as migration, when studying movement. In order to demonstrate her findings on the rates of stability in Melford, she used three examples within her research. First, by studying two cohorts of children brought up in Melford, one set from the late 1600s and the other from the mid-1800s, she discovered that stability was greater in the latter period. Additionally, with over 20 per cent of the children remaining in Melford for at least 30 years, in both eras, if the accepted belief that remaining in one's own village was an 'oddity' is true, Melford was perhaps a very odd place. Second, Boothman looked at the 1851 census to identify where Melford-born individuals, who had left the village, were located. Very few were found outside East Anglia or London, with the majority of under 16-year-olds found in adjacent parishes to Melford. Amongst these migrants, 765 marriages were found. However, it was found that only 13 per cent of these couples lived at some point in Melford, indicating that the large majority of migrants left the village as single people. Lastly, stability amongst couples was discussed. Using a variety of sources to their full potential, across three separate eras, Boothman made many interesting observations. For

instance, the couples where at least one was a second- or third-generation resident, slowly increased their presence in Melford over time. However, with regards to social status, a greater proportion of newcomer couples had obtained higher-grade occupations than the non-newcomers by the mid-1800s.

Mark Bailey's paper, entitled 'Patterns of rural migration in south-east England c.1300 to 1500: the evidence of servile incidents recorded in manorial court records', gave us a fascinating insight into migration in the medieval period, and the untapped potential of manorial court rolls for revealing migration habits over time. The small number of studies into medieval migration has identified a very mobile medieval population, especially after the Black Death. Some historians have argued that the distance of migration increased due to more aggressive lordship, which forced serfs to move longer distances in order to escape seigneurial control. Others have suggested that migration was driven more by economic opportunities, which were increasingly concentrated in towns. Bailey turned to manorial court rolls, where the 'presentments for absence' and 'chevage' records noted absences of serfs from the manor. These records have been little used, due to concerns about the patchiness of their content, but Bailey demonstrated that their frequency increased after the Black Death, together with the information they provide about migrants in general, and migrant women in particular. His preliminary findings indicate that there was little increase in long-distance migration, but a discernible increase in the 10–20 mile category. He also tentatively concluded that there was a greater extent of rural-urban migration compared with the pre-Black Death period. This material provides much colour and detail about the individual experience of migration, which allows some anecdotal assessment of the extent

of circular and networking migration. Previous studies had concluded that circular migration was very rare, but Bailey's painstaking research methods revealed many examples, not only of male migrants who returned to a manor, but also of similar migration patterns for women. In the process of gathering this information, some rich life stories have been recovered, and Bailey convincingly argued that the information held within the manorial court records has great potential for filling the gaps in our knowledge of medieval migration.

The afternoon session commenced with a significant, and interesting, diversion from the usual subject areas within migration. Harriet Ritvo gave an insight into the experimental breeding of exotic animals with her paper 'Aliens amid the corn'. The Zoological Society of London opened a zoo in Regents Park in 1828. However, they had also planned ambitious goals, one of these being the introduction of new and curious subjects of the animal kingdom to enhance and diversify existing British livestock. This resulted in breeding experiments being carried out in order to effect improvements in the quality of domestic animals, or domesticating other animals for British shores. These experiments ultimately failed, and after the withdrawal of funding, certain patrons continued with their own plans, which often resulted in the consumption of the animals. However, these institutions labelled themselves as 'acclimatisation societies', and during the latter half of the nineteenth century became popular across the world. For instance, the Society in France had government backing and was more practical in its quest for acclimatization and cross-breeding. Nevertheless, like the British experiments, this too made little impact on the domestic or wild fauna of France. One of the most successful institutions was the Acclimatisation Society of Victoria, in Australia. However, consumption was still a prime purpose here, with antelope a potential replacement for mutton, and even native animals such as wombat and possum regarded as a tasty treat. The experimental breeding of large animals such as wild cattle was seen as producing accessible representatives of a connection to a more heroic national past. The Chillingham cattle on the estate of the earls of Tankerville are such an example, and were seen as ornamental as well as being used for both hunting and consumption. The extinct wild aurochs is the ancestor of all modern domesticated cattle, and attempts have been made since the 1920s to replicate this beast. These modern-day acclimatizers, by attempting to recreate a less aggressive form of the aurochs, have

diverged somewhat from their nineteenth-century predecessors. However, the major difference is that these newly created cattle have not yet been promoted for hunting or consumption. Yet, given time, with possible over-breeding of these creatures, one can see how at some point in the future these aurochs replicas might find their way onto our restaurant menus.

The final paper of the day was given by Clair Wills, entitled "'The Best Are Leaving": representations of post-war Irish rural emigrants'. Observing the type of rural male who left Ireland for England during the 1950s and 1960s, Wills focused on the anxieties about masculinity which emerged during that population crisis, and how the turn-of-the-century Celtic revivalist stereotyping of Irish migrants played out in the representation of these post-war migrants. It was seen that Ireland was losing the best of its men to migration. But what defined the 'best'? As migration spread its net across Ireland, the best could be seen as code for certain grades of class and social status. However, the best could also refer to the work-ethic and physical strength which made men ideal workers; these characteristics being found particularly in the men of Ireland's western seaboard. But was it just hard-working men who were leaving Ireland? Was migration down to natural selection? Wills notes that these men from the rural holdings of the western seaboard were viewed as ideal emigrants due their upbringing in a harsh environment. However, we must also note that many social, religious and cultural groups of the time regarded those who left this environment as displaying a lack of both will and nationalism. Moving on to representations in the arts, Wills drew on works such as Donall MacAmlaigh's *Diary of an Exile*, Philip Donnellan's 1965 film *The Irishman*, and the paintings of Frank Auerbach, to discuss how the rural Irish emigrant to England was depicted. The Irishman was seen to be wild and heroic, where fighting and drinking set him apart from the typical Englishman. Donnellan's film, for instance, focuses on the association of the rural Irish worker with earth, clay, concrete, drilling, and holes, forming an unmistakable analogy between the industrial labour and the experience of the First World War trenches.

This year's Winter Conference highlighted the wonderfully diverse areas of study within the topic of migration, and demonstrated the wealth of untapped sources available to the historian researching this subject. Professor Paul Warde was thanked for organizing a most interesting day.