

Obituary: Dr George Fussell

All members of the Society, and the wider historical community, will mourn the death on 1 January 1990 of Dr George (G E) Fussell. He had reached his hundredth birthday on 10 September 1989. At the time of his death, like the great Gascon historian Charles Samaran before him (d. 1982 at the age of 102), he was almost certainly Europe's oldest practising historian.

With a book in the press at his death, George certainly remained a practising historian to the last. However he was never a professional academic, and had developed his skills for himself since his first exploratory essays in the *Journal of the Ministry of Agriculture* in the early 1920s. What he described as his own industriousness and his 'writing itch' produced more than twenty books and six hundred articles in a publishing career spanning nearly seventy years (from 1922).



Dr George Fussell, September 1987

Photograph courtesy of Mrs K R Fussell

A native of Weymouth, he entered the Civil Service as a boy clerk in 1906, moving from the War Office to the Board of Agriculture and Fisheries in 1909, effectively remaining in what became the Ministry in 1919 throughout the remainder of his Civil Service career. H G Richardson, his superior there, positively encouraged Fussell's literary interests, and was an important mentor in his development as a historian of agriculture. With his encouragement, Fussell

produced a series of articles on the history of farm machinery in the *Ministry Journal* during the 1920s, and joined Hubert Hall's medieval seminar at the London School of Economics. By 1930, without the benefit of any formal academic training – he had sought unsuccessfully to matriculate before the war – he had established himself as an authority on agricultural history. His achievement was recognized by election to Fellowship of the Royal Historical Society in 1933.

He remained at the Ministry until 1949, as its Librarian, a post which offered opportunities for research, but also as a practical administrator during the Second World War, when he was concerned, successively, with the rationing of raw materials for the production of agricultural machinery and tools, and the supply of petrol to agriculture. He also served in the Home Guard, having been rejected for military service in the First World War because of 'poor physique'. An eventful Second War brought also marriage to Kathleen Rosemary Turner in 1940, the mother of his only child, a daughter.

It is probably difficult for modern agrarian historians fully to appreciate the problems which beset pioneering agricultural historians like Fussell. There were few post-medieval secondary studies of merit available in the 1920s, apart from Lord Ernle's *English Farming Past and Present* (1912) and its precursor, *The Pioneers and Progress of English Farming* (1888), and establishing patterns of interpretation and even sketching basic chronology was difficult. This made many of Fussell's early studies remarkable by any standards, and many remain valuable points of departure. Early articles in *Economic History*, in the new US journal *Agricultural History*, and in the *Economic History Review*, some written in collaboration with Constance Goodman, from the late 1920s began, for example, to attempt to quantify aspects of eighteenth-century farming in novel ways, and these became established elements of the secondary literature, only relatively recently overtaken by modern research. A remarkable part of the synoptic view of eighteenth-century growth by Deane and Cole (1962) proves, on close examination, to be heavily dependent upon this era of Fussell's work.

His work of listing and describing the library of the Ministry helped also to fuel a continuing theme of his work, that of bringing early books and pamphlets on agriculture to wider attention. He was also responsible, following a hint by Hubert Hall, for bringing before a wider readership one of the outstanding farm sources for the seventeenth century, *Robert Loder's Farm Accounts, 1610–1620*, published in the Royal Historical Society, Camden Series, in 1936. Fussell transcribed and edited Loder's accounts, with

some specialist assistance, and contributed a brief introduction to make this volume, with Henry Best's farming and memoranda books, a critical printed source for early modern agriculture.

His lasting reputation has not, however, in general been founded upon his skills and range as a documentary historian. Rather he has established a remarkable record of achievement, based upon encyclopaedic knowledge of the contemporary printed literature, and a clear awareness of the need for descriptive analysis. This methodology enabled him to explore many areas for which his pioneering books will long be consulted. Thus works such as *The English Rural Labourer* (1949), *The English Countrywoman* (1953), and *The English Countryman* (1955, both with his wife, K R Fussell) attempted to discuss life style, material culture, and work experience in the long agrarian history from the sixteenth century, and in so doing provided broad and popular surveys which no single modern work has supplanted. The later study of *The English Dairy Farmer, 1500-1900* (1966), also remains the only single volume study of this sector of farming. Many of Dr Fussell's books look somewhat old-fashioned to modern historians, in their great dependence upon printed sources and in their approach, but most have yet to be supplanted by popularly accessible single volume studies, and they therefore remain the points of departure for research by both professional and amateur historians. It was in recognition of his long-term and significant contributions to agricultural history that the University of Exeter awarded him the degree of D.Litt. in 1970, a distinction that brought him considerable pleasure.

Dr Fussell's immense record of publication is remarkable in itself, but he was also a major figure in the creation of The British Agricultural History Society, and in the promotion of interest in agricultural history in general. It was Fussell, who himself regarded Robert Trow-Smith and Eric Kerridge as partners in the foundation, who convened the meeting in Holborn in early 1952, which led, through further meetings in September and November 1952, to the formal inauguration of the Society at the University of Reading in April 1953. He subsequently served on its Executive Committee and the Editorial Board of the *Review* until 1962, and again from 1964 to 1971, serving as the Society's President, 1968-71. He was made the first Honorary Member of the Society in 1985 in recognition of his contributions to its work.

Many members of the Society will have had the pleasure of knowing George Fussell, and he will be remembered with warmth and affection. He remained an active participant in the Winter and Spring conferences of the Society until quite recently, and was always a trenchant and active commentator on the papers given. He took pleasure in travel, and enjoyed wine, even if that provided at some of the Society's conferences did not match his exacting standards. He was greatly pleased by the 'magnificent gift' of champagne given by the Society to celebrate his centenary. In remembering him, and in celebrating the life and achievement of the doyen of Britain's agricultural historians, the Society extends its sympathy to his widow and his daughter.

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