

Gordon Mingay: an appreciation

In 1968 Gordon Mingay was promoted to a Chair of Agrarian History at the University of Kent.² There was no other such title in the British university system. At one and the same time it promoted him to a position which he richly deserved, but it also defined the man and his academic distinctiveness. In what follows I concentrate on his agrarian history. If readers wish to see his other contributions to economic and social history then they might explore the bibliography attached to the festschrift volume that was prepared in his honour in 1989, and which was published in 1991.³

Mingay's distinctive contribution to agrarian history has three overlapping features. First there was Mingay the archival researcher, seeking close detail on the workings of the landed estate in the eighteenth century. Initially this was more concerned with the development of the estate from the landowners' point of view rather than with the intimacies of the estate tenants and the labourers, though these wider issues came out in later works. Secondly there was Mingay the editor of multi-authored works. In this context we think firstly of his organisation and editing of the *Agricultural History Review* from part 2 of 1972 to part 2 of 1983. Has anyone edited the *Review* for longer? In addition he edited Volume VI of *The Agrarian History of England and Wales*. He also co-edited with Eric Jones a prestigious volume of essays in honour of David Chambers in 1967.⁴ The volume included Mingay's own essay on the estate steward, one of the subjects to which he made a significant contribution. Thirdly, Mingay was a fine writer of texts in which he synthesised and reinterpreted standard subjects in agrarian history, and recognised the impact of successive generations of researchers. He was well equipped with a very good prose-writing style.

Gordon Mingay was a scholar who didn't jealously guard his ideas against revision and criticism. He was delighted that his contributions aroused the inquiry of others and more or less adhered to that old maxim that while facts and details are sacred, the opinions or interpretations arising from them are open to debate. Perhaps he inherited this from J.D. Chambers who presided over that influential school of rural research at Nottingham of which Mingay was a member. A closer reading of Mingay also reveals a substantial debt to H.J. Habakkuk. This is plainly evident, partly because he tells us so, but also because in his early publications the thread of ideas from Habakkuk is signalled in the text or in the footnotes. Habakkuk was at least the equal of Chambers in influencing the younger Mingay. Their joint influence was recognised by Mingay in his contribution to the First International Conference of Economic History held in Stockholm in 1960.⁵ This inaugural conference attracted an illustrious group of established as well as emerging economic historians. It included David Landes, Walt Whitman Rostow, Owen Lattimore, J.D. Chambers, and within the section in which Mingay appeared there was the pick of the contemporary agricultural historians, Wilhelm Abel, W.N. Parker, George Duby, V.M. Lavrovsky and the two members from the UK who were emerging as the landed society historians of their age, Mingay and F.M.L. Thompson. Whenever was the study of English landed society stronger? These things run in cycles and others have taken up the challenge of defining and divining the role of the aristocracy, but have they or others superseded Mingay and Thompson? More like they have given the subject some different twists.

Mingay entered higher education and the profession as a mature student, but he clearly had a precocious talent. Two of his earliest essays appeared years before his PhD was examined and before he planned his immediate future at that Stockholm conference. Moreover, these pieces appeared in two of the premier British journals, the *Economic*

² This is a version of an address given at the memorial service for Gordon Mingay which Alan Armstrong convened on 23 June 2006 at the University of Kent at Canterbury. I have omitted the personal stories, not least the fact that Gordon Mingay examined my Ph.D. thesis in December 1973 at the University of Sheffield along with my supervisor B.A. (Jim) Holderness. It was no coincidence that Jim and I edited a festschrift for Gordon in 1991.

³ J. Whyman, 'G.E. Mingay: a bibliography', in B.A. Holderness and M.E. Turner (eds), *Land, labour*

and agriculture, 1700–1820: Essays for Gordon Mingay (1991), pp. xxi–xxiv.

⁴ G.E. Mingay (ed.), *The Agrarian History of England and Wales*, VI, 1750–1850 (1989); E.L. Jones and G.E. Mingay (eds), *Land, labour and population in the Industrial Revolution: Essays presented to J.D. Chambers* (1967).

⁵ G.E. Mingay, 'The large estate in eighteenth-century England', in *First International Conference of Economic History: contributions and communications* (1960), pp. 367–83.

History Review and the *Agricultural History Review*.⁶ The former article was a classic piece that broke new ground. It was on the agricultural depression of the second quarter of the eighteenth century. The long-term impact of this work has been less in outlining something new in economic and agrarian history, for Lord Ernle had already covered the period albeit with the bias that Ernle clearly brought to his work through his own lifetime experiences in the late nineteenth century depression. Rather, what Mingay did was to gather together evidence involving the main economic parameters of prices, rents, and rent arrears, with the human input of the way estates managed these circumstances with their tenants. He did it mainly for a single estate, albeit a good sized landed estate, but with a specific location. Subsequently it was not difficult for others to identify alternative geographies and find different local circumstances leading sometimes to discordant outcomes. While that was not the point of the exercise and the impact of his contribution, nevertheless he developed a model approach combining economic circumstances with the development of management techniques that has been replicated at various levels until finally a national picture could be obtained not only of that second quarter, but also for a longer sweep of time. The second article was on the related issue of estate management but in the quite different circumstances of Kent. Together these articles helped to define Mingay's earliest interests and contributions to our scholarship – eighteenth-century estate management in specific economic circumstances. The origin of this approach came even earlier in his BA dissertation of 1952 which was on the Duke of Kingston's mainly Nottinghamshire estate.⁷ These dissertations are the origins of so many careers, but according to Theo Barker's account in the festschrift presented to Mingay, this was a case of serendipity since Mingay's first choices for his dissertation were far removed from estate management.⁸

Out of the BA and those early publications there emerged in 1958 his PhD on *Land ownership and agrarian change in the eighteenth century*.⁹ The Duke of Kingston's Midland estate may have been the bedrock for the PhD, but it was a much wider-ranging study, both in terms of geography and of the number of contemporary estates it included. It developed further in that Stockholm conference and it pointed in the direction of Mingay's first major book, his volume of 1963 on *English landed society in the eighteenth century*.¹⁰ This was a piece of closely studied archival investigation. It also formed the cornerstone of a later more popular text, *The Gentry*, which appeared in 1976.¹¹

From these early works on landed society Mingay developed a more enduring interest in wider rural society, especially those members of it on the lower rungs of the agricultural ladder. This included two early and major articles in the early 1960s in the *Economic History Review*, one on the size of farms in the eighteenth century, and the other on the Land Tax assessments and the small landowner in the eighteenth century.¹² In 1968 it was followed by one of the earliest pamphlets in the Macmillan series of *Studies in Economic and Social History*.¹³ It was on the influence of enclosure on the fortunes of the small landowner. The combined effects of that pamphlet and the articles was to put back into the frame the long-standing debates about the people that the Hammonds had once suggested suffered fatally at the hands of agricultural change, especially those changes arising from enclosures. We return briefly to this later, but for the moment the significance of reawakening this line of inquiry was to bring back into the discussion a particular source, the Land Tax. This was a source which David Chambers in his own time had also revived, and specifically in the context of the small landowners. But Mingay sounded a considerable note of caution over the interpretation and use of the Land Tax. This is where his influence was brought to bear on a generation of researchers that emerged in the 1970s and who specifically took up the Land Tax and specifically related it to enclosure. The brashness, or perhaps the confidence of youth did not allow Mingay's considerable criticism, caution and hesitancy

⁶ G. E. Mingay, 'The agricultural depression, 1730–50', *EcHR* 8 (1956), pp. 323–38, and repr. in E. M. Carus-Wilson (ed.), *Essays in Economic History* (3 vols, 1954–62), II, pp. 309–26; id., 'Estate management in eighteenth-century Kent', *AgHR* 4 (1956), pp. 108–13.

⁷ G. E. Mingay, *The Duke of Kingston and his estates* (BA diss., University of Nottingham, 1952).

⁸ Mingay's original choices were the Thames and Medway Canal, and Whitbread's London Brewery. See Theo Barker, 'Gordon Mingay: The man and the scholar', in Holderness and Turner (eds), *Land, labour and agriculture*, p. xvii.

⁹ G. E. Mingay, *Landownership and agrarian trends in*

the eighteenth century (Ph.D. thesis, University of Nottingham, 1958).

¹⁰ G. E. Mingay, *English landed society in the eighteenth century* (1963).

¹¹ G. E. Mingay, *The Gentry, the rise and fall of a ruling class* (1976).

¹² G. E. Mingay, 'The size of farms in the eighteenth century', *EcHR* 13 (1962), pp. 469–88; id., 'The Land Tax assessments and the small landowner', *EcHR* 17 (1963), pp. 381–8.

¹³ G. E. Mingay, *Enclosure and the small farmer in the age of the Industrial Revolution* (1968).

about the source to put them off. Instead, working more or less independently, they found ways to use it and in so doing by-passed the considerable doubts that Mingay had advertised.¹⁴ Does this show the value of open and honest debate? Without those doubts perhaps that succeeding generation would not have searched for solutions.

The story has reached the late 1960s and at this stage Mingay was promoted to the personal title of Professor of Agrarian History. He settled less into the life of the archive historian and more into the style of the figurehead which goes with such a title. It is evident in a stream of books, chapters and articles which are essentially interpretive, synthesising the work of others in the profession. He became a very good textbook writer for he had a very engaging text-writing style, and he also became the Editor of this *Review*. We cannot do justice to the range of these contributions but we should list his two volume work on *The Victorian Countryside* to which so many scholars of his generation contributed, and his anthology of Arthur Young's work.¹⁵ He also made a number of contributions to international conferences.¹⁶

Yet textbook writing dominated in the 1980s and 1990s, though these texts hid some very good ideas. In his last book – a text on parliamentary enclosure – he hid away two gems, gems which still seek an extended appraisal.¹⁷ Briefly he turned his back on the agrarian consequences of enclosure and posed two questions. The first was on the relationship between enclosure and industrialisation in the sense that enclosing land and clarifying ownership rights released that land for mineral exploitation as an alternative to staying in agriculture. The second gem was the question of enclosure at the urban fringe and the clarification of ownership rights so that subsequently urban developers could extend the towns and cities into the countryside.¹⁸

This was never intended to be a Cook's tour of Mingay's contribution but rather a recognition of his broad legacy. In consequence a lot has been left out, but we cannot conclude without reference to two major contributions.

Mingay edited volume VI of the *Agrarian History of England and Wales*. The volume was planned in 1960 but Mingay was not its intended original and sole editor, it was meant as a joint venture with John Higgs. Mingay became sole editor when John Higgs had to withdraw, and while he was bringing the contributions together he also lost David Chambers and Arthur John. The volume finally came together in 1989 and stands as a tribute to the patience and skills of its editor as it does to the strength of British agricultural history, though at least two reviewers have noted the major omission of a stand alone chapter on parliamentary enclosure.¹⁹ The death of contributors on projects which take a long while to complete is a hazard that editors face. Ted Collins will attest to this with regard to volume VII in the same series. In this case it also exemplifies another skill that Mingay possessed. He readily stepped into the breach left by Holderness's final illness and picked up the organisation and writing of the regional chapters in volume VII with Paul Brassley.²⁰

That leaves one major piece of work to consider. In the middle to late 1960s Mingay's talents came to a focus in his joint book with J.D. Chambers, *The Agricultural Revolution*.²¹ Theo Barker was in no doubt that Chambers was

¹⁴ J.M. Martin, 'Landownership and the Land Tax Returns', *AgHR* 14, 1966, pp. 96–103; M.E. Turner, 'Parliamentary enclosure and landownership change in Buckinghamshire', *EcHR* 28 (1975), pp. 565–81; J.R. Walton, 'The residential mobility of farmers and its relationship to the parliamentary enclosure movement in Oxfordshire', in A.D.M. Phillips and B.J. Turton (eds), *Environment, man and economic change* (1975), pp. 238–52; J.M. Neeson, 'Common right and enclosure in eighteenth-century Northamptonshire' (PhD thesis, University of Warwick, 1977).

¹⁵ G.E. Mingay (ed.), *The Victorian Countryside* (2 vols, 1981); id. (ed.), *Arthur Young and His Times* (1975).

¹⁶ G.E. Mingay, 'The course of rents in the age of Malthus', in M.E. Turner (ed.), *Malthus and his time* (1986), pp. 85–95; id., 'Agricultural productivity and agricultural society in eighteenth-century England', in G. Grantham and C. S. Leonard (eds), *Agrarian organisation in the century of industrialisation in Europe, Russia, and North America* (Research in Economic History,

Supp. 5), pp. 31–47.

¹⁷ G.E. Mingay, *Parliamentary enclosure in England. An introduction to its causes, incidence and impact, 1750–1850* (1997), esp. pp. 41–44.

¹⁸ This was a subject which had also engaged Maurice Beresford, who incidentally died just three weeks before Gordon Mingay. John Beckett and I have also been running with this idea, but alas we are still running and the finishing line is not yet in sight.

¹⁹ M. Overton, 'The critical century? *The Agrarian History of England and Wales, 1750–1850*', *AgHR* 38 (1990), pp. 185–89; M.E. Turner, review of Mingay, *The Agrarian History of England and Wales, VI, 1750–1850*, in *History and Archaeology Rev.*, Spring 1990, p. 75.

²⁰ E.J.T. Collins (ed.), *The agrarian history of England and Wales, VIII, 1850–1914* (2000), in which he thanks Gordon Mingay 'for bringing together chapter 5 with a new cast of authors', p. xxxvii.

²¹ J.D. Chambers and G.E. Mingay, *The agricultural revolution, 1750–1880* (1966).

very much the junior partner – this was principally Mingay's work – and it has proven to be a remarkably durable piece of work. It constitutes just about the first footnote in countless studies of the English rural scene, but not uncritically so. Members of the profession sometimes love it but also sometimes hate it, but nobody ignores it. One group sees it as an apology for the upper classes in the class struggle, an exposition or an excuse for the mal-distribution of opportunity and income bowing to the great god progress. But a different group sees it as a concentration more on the outcomes or end results of agrarian change. That is not to say that these outcomes ignored the means to those ends, and the casualties arising from those means. On the contrary the work recognises that it was a nasty and brutish period for a significant proportion of society. Mingay, in subsequent texts, also reiterated this. But if someone can produce a piece of work that at one and the same time infuriates, yes, delights, certainly, but most important of all fires imaginations in all directions, then they leave a legacy which will endure. What more could one ask of a scholar?

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