



PROFESSOR GORDON MINGAY, 1923–2006

Just three years after his arrival at the infant University of Kent in 1965, Gordon Mingay was appointed to a personal chair in Agrarian History, and became the first, so far unique holder of such a title in Britain. This was a just recognition of the impact of his early books and articles in this area of economic and social history, notably his highly readable *English landed society in the eighteenth century* (1963); *The agricultural revolution, 1750–1880* (1965) which he wrote with J.D. Chambers; and *Enclosure and the small farmer in the age of the Industrial Revolution* (1968). Mingay was to remain at Kent until retirement in 1983, living with his wife, Mavis, in a large, well appointed house at Selling and enjoying a comfortable life-style, one leading some to suspect that he sprang from a privileged background.

In fact, few were aware of the numerous hurdles that he had been obliged to surmount on his way to reaching high academic distinction. Mingay was born at Long Eaton, Derbyshire, but spent his boyhood in Chatham. Due to the war, he was unable to complete his Higher School Certificate before following his father into the Royal Navy in 1942. His wartime experiences included active service on HMS Uganda in support of the landings in Sicily and at Salerno, while after commissioning as a cypher officer in 1944, he was attached to the staff of the Admiral in charge of shore bases during the assault on Normandy. He also served in Far Eastern waters before demobilisation in 1946, but remained on the Navy Reserve for many years with appropriate promotions, reaching in due course the rank of Lieutenant Commander.

In postwar civilian life there followed several years of struggle, buoyed up by the support of Mavis, whom Mingay had married in 1945. First, he had to establish his credentials even to enter university, and this was achieved by dint of part-time study at Chatham Technical College while working for the Kent Education Department. In 1949 he was accepted to enter Nottingham University where his exceptional determination, industry and talents were soon recognised by Professor J.D. Chambers. It was Chambers who directed Mingay towards the study of agrarian history and was initially his mentor. A first-class degree was awarded in 1952 and embraced an outstanding BA dissertation on the estates of the Dukes of Kingston, a piece of work which in the opinion of the external examiner, H. J. Habakkuk, could have earned a B.Litt. at Oxford. A doctorate followed in 1958 which, in view of the paucity of postgraduate awards at

that time, was characteristically hard earned as Mingay acquired concurrently a teaching certificate (with distinction) and coped with the demands of successive posts at Bolton School (1952–3) and Woolwich Polytechnic (1953–7).

Now recognised as a coming man, he was next offered an appointment – with a substantial salary reduction – at the London School of Economics, where he was to remain for eight years until persuaded by his close friend, the late Theo Barker, to move to Kent. Here, he proved to be one of the new university's most prolific authors, producing *The Gentry, the rise and fall of a ruling class* (1976) and *Rural life in Victorian England* (1977), as well as editing a number of important works, perhaps most memorably a two-volume compilation, *The Victorian Countryside* (1981), which presented scholarly essays in an unusually sumptuous format. Nor did Mingay confine himself to rural themes: histories of *Georgian London* (1975) and (with P.S. Bagwell), *Britain and America, 1850–1939* (1971) featured among his publications. All this helped to bring him increasing international recognition, and he received many invitations to travel as visiting professor to foreign universities, especially in the United States but also in Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. He made many new and lasting friendships on his travels.

The flow of scholarly contributions continued unabated for many years after Mingay's retirement in 1983. *The Victorian Countryside*, revised and augmented, appeared as a trilogy: *The Rural Idyll*, *The Vanishing Countryman*, and *The Unquiet Countryside* (1989), in the same year that he earned plaudits for bringing to fruition (thereby ending an hiatus which had lasted nearly thirty years), a massive and authoritative tome, *The Agrarian History of England, VI, 1750–1850* (1989). Several well-received texts also emerged from his study at Selling. They included *The transformation of Britain 1830–1939* (1987) and *Land and society in England, 1750–1980* (1994), while *A social history of the English countryside* (1990) called forth from one reviewer a comment that captured perfectly the essence of the author's approach to rural and agricultural history. 'Mingay', he wrote, 'sets the emotions of social history in the context of insightful economic reality and the analytical tools of economic history'. His final major book, *Parliamentary enclosure in England* (1997), summed up half a lifetime of research in the area and was welcomed in the pages of *Agricultural History Review* as a succinct and scholarly summary of the causes and consequences of enclosure.

Mingay achieved consistently high levels of productivity while never neglecting his Kent students, several of whom contributed to a *festschrift*, *Land, labour and agriculture, 1700–1914* (1991). This publication reflected the esteem and warmth of feeling which Mingay engendered among others working in the field, being edited by two rising stars in their own right, B. A. Holderness and M. E. Turner. His standing was reflected also by election to the Presidency of the British Agricultural History Society in 1986, following a lengthy period as editor of *Agricultural History Review*.

To be sure, much of the foregoing is common knowledge in academic circles. However, because of a certain reticence or shyness deriving from his genuine modesty, few colleagues were aware of the full range of Mingay's interests. While not given to blowing his own trumpet, he was an accomplished pianist, leading in his younger days a trio, later an eight-piece ensemble, which played the dance halls of the Medway towns. Two of the members of the Gordon Mingay Band later made a living as professional musicians, one with the Ted Heath Band. Fortunately for the future of agrarian history in this country, Mingay did not choose to follow the same path, but he retained an interest in big band music throughout his life. Still less well known, perhaps, is his literary alter ego. A fluent writer, Mingay could change gear much more easily than most academic authors. Even so, it will surprise those who knew him only casually, or on the basis of his scholarly reputation, to learn that he produced in the 1980s and under the pseudonym of Lee Lambert a number of thrillers that were slightly racy in tone. They featured titles such as *The Balinese Pearls*, *The Guaymas Assignment*, and *Blonde for Danger*.

Mingay was a private man with a much wider range of talents than he is usually credited with. He will be remembered by those who knew him well for his keen sense of humour and for the kindness and underlying warmth which lay just below the surface of his quiet and unassuming demeanour. He died on 3 January 2006, aged 82.¹

W. A. ARMSTRONG

¹ A version of this obituary appeared in *The Times* on 5 April 2006.