



PETER LASLETT

Thomas Peter Ruffell Laslett

1915–2001

PETER LASLETT was born in Bedford on 18 December 1915 and died on 8 November 2001 in his eighty-sixth year. He was one of seven children of George Henry Ruffell Laslett, a Baptist minister, and his wife Eveline Elizabeth, née Alden. Much of his childhood was spent in Oxford but his secondary education took place in the Grammar School at Watford, where his father had become minister. Both his paternal grandparents belonged to the Plymouth Brethren, while his mother's family, the Aldens, were closely connected with the Alden Press. Peter himself saw his upbringing as puritanical (no dancing, no cinema), and retained throughout his life a stern critical distance from the English establishment, along with a keen (and sometimes gleeful) interest in its workings: an instinctive nonconformist, if no sectarian. At school he showed early promise as an historian, but much regretted in later life that he was obliged to give up mathematics before learning the calculus, 'leaving me at a permanent disadvantage'.¹

In 1935 he went up to St John's College, Cambridge to read history, graduating with a double first in 1938. Despite some irritation at the condescension of wealthier public school contemporaries, he played an active part in college life, rowing at Henley for the Lady Margaret boat club. After graduation he spent eighteen months in research in the History Faculty before joining the Fleet Air Arm in 1940. Of the men who appeared in his degree photograph, Peter subsequently noted, seven did

¹ English transcript of an interview with the Italian journal *Passato e Presente* (1989).

not survive the war. He himself had little confidence in doing so after the horrors of a Murmansk convoy. But later he was taken out of active service to learn Japanese for naval intelligence, working at Bletchley Park and afterwards in Washington as an expert on Japan.

On his return to Cambridge after the war Peter spent a brief period in Peterhouse, where Herbert Butterfield sought to further his career. The London School of Economics had been evacuated to Peterhouse during the war, giving him the opportunity to meet luminaries like Tawney and Laski. He was, however, somewhat ill at ease in a college setting and greatly welcomed the opportunities which opened up when he left Cambridge to join the BBC Third Programme.

In 1947 he married Janet Crockett Clark, who provided the secure and happy foundation for all his other activities over the next half century. Janet was a charming hostess who made their home the scene of innumerable agreeable dinner parties, and helped him endlessly in his many ventures, academic and otherwise. Undaunted by the legendary illegibility of Peter's handwriting, she converted it imperturbably into elegant typewritten prose. With their two sons, George and Robert, Peter and Janet took great pride in their elegant Clarkson Road home. Peter, a keen student of contemporary architecture, had commissioned Trevor Dannatt to design the house and found much pleasure in showing off its carefully conceived attractions to their many visitors. As an enthusiastic gardener he also spent a great deal of time for the rest of his life enhancing its immediate surroundings.

From his childhood, well before showing any special aptitude for formal historical study, Peter was intensely fascinated by the past inhabitants of England. His interest set out from the visible traces which they left behind them—landscapes, churches, streets—but it reached out insistently towards the figures who had created these settings and lived their lives among them. 'I wanted to see those long lost individuals, to talk to them, understand their society, their aims and their experiences.'² What was most characteristic in that interest was the force of his passion to communicate what he discovered about them, and the acuteness with which he felt their continuing presence. In his subsequent career as a professional historian, the passion was duly tempered by the disciplines of research, but it was never absent and seldom seriously camouflaged. It found a natural expression both in his years as a talks producer for the BBC Third Programme before he entered academic employment, and in

² English transcript of an interview with the Italian journal *Passato e Presente* (1989).

his two great public campaigns in later decades to launch the Open University and the University of the Third Age.

The enthusiasm to establish contact with people in the past was evident in the research which he undertook as a graduate student in Cambridge before the outbreak of the Second World War and which later, in 1948, won him a Research Fellowship at St John's College in Cambridge. This centred on the life, milieu and thought of Sir Robert Filmer, John Locke's principal butt in the *Two Treatises of Government*, and the best known and most systematic of all exponents of patriarchalism as a theory of politics (or why there should be no such thing as politics). In his prewar inquiries, through the good offices of G. M. Trevelyan, Peter had had the good fortune to identify, and explore seriously for the first time, a large archive of Filmer's life and thought, still in the possession of his last surviving descendant, in the rambling Kentish manor house of East Sutton, in the parish in which Filmer had been born, and of which in due course he became the patriarchal head. The most striking single item in this collection was Filmer's own finely bound manuscript copy of his magnum opus *Patriarcha*, unpublished in his lifetime and in this form perhaps intended for presentation to Charles I himself, a volume since relocated in Cambridge University Library.

From these materials, Peter set himself to rectify, as he saw it, a set of injustices, to evoke a lost milieu of great historical importance and impressive cultural vitality, to pin down not merely how Filmer himself thought, but why he thought as he did, and to capture just why that thinking seemed to Locke to require such sustained criticism. The grouping he evoked was the community of Kentish gentry, linked by kinship and a common quest to preserve their family lands and fortunes, within the county itself in a shared burden of political and administrative tasks, and beyond it in continuing dialogue with the royal government, the Inns of Court, and the city merchants of London. There was nothing introverted or insulated about this community, as Peter was at pains to insist. It was at the centre of the intellectual and cultural life of the country, and the interests of its members stretched well beyond the metropolis to the most prosperous and dynamic of the new American colonies. What made them a community was less their common tasks or shared predicament than the vigour, assiduity and energy with which they discussed the challenges and opportunities they faced. Most of Filmer's works (including *Patriarcha* itself) were intended not for publication but as personal contributions to the ongoing conversation of this very practical community. Kent, for this reason, as Peter conceived it, was not a purely spatial category. Its gentry

formed an unmythical and dynamic grouping, a community in and for themselves, contributing critically, at some points by their actions and at others through their disorganisation or relative inactivity to shaping the politics of the nation, as England moved towards civil war. (The intended contrast, later made quite explicit, was with what he took to be the essentially mythic character of a national class defined by its position within the relations of production.)

All the concerns which arose from this research were set out with some bravura in two articles in 1948.³ A year later those which centred more narrowly on Filmer himself were presented at greater length and more systematically in an impressive edition of Filmer's writings.⁴ Each of Peter's major characteristics as a historian of political thought figure prominently in the brilliant and wide-ranging 'Introduction' to the texts, though the texts themselves perforce appeared without the bibliographical apparatus or depth of annotation on which he later insisted in his edition of Locke's *Two Treatises*.

The 'Introduction' immediately struck an unmistakable note:

For over two hundred years the name of Sir Robert Filmer has been a byword—a byword for obscurity. None, or almost none, of the thinkers or historians who have examined Filmerism, refuted it, anatomized it or simply dismissed it as stupidity have known exactly who Sir Robert Filmer was, when he lived, what he did and what he wrote. It so happens that all the important evidence about his life and his writings was preserved by the line of English baronets which descended from him and which persisted until 1916. It is set out here with two objectives. First, to fix him in his historical context and to make it easier to understand why he wrote as he did. Second, to correct the inaccuracies and misconceptions caused by this lengthy story of contemptuous neglect.⁵

The immediate purpose of recovering the context in which Filmer wrote was explanatory—to understand his reasons for writing and what it was about his thinking which gave it such resonance. But beyond this plainly professional task it linked historian and subject in a bond of solidarity, as much against the sting of contempt as against the stolid indifference of neglect. Here, as so often, Peter was every inch a partisan.

Few of the many who followed in his footsteps felt this impulse in quite the same way, let alone with comparable urgency. But the explana-

³ 'The gentry of Kent in 1640', *Cambridge Historical Journal*, 2nd ser., 9 (1948), 148–64; 'Sir Robert Filmer: the man versus the Whig myth', *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 5 (1948), 523–46.

⁴ Sir Robert Filmer, *Patriarcha and other Political Writings*, ed. P. Laslett (Oxford, 1949).

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

tory gain which his approach opened up is now very widely recognised, and the breadth of that recognition may owe as much to Peter's missionary eloquence as to the strictly cognitive merits of the line of thought that he sought to trace out. It certainly helped Peter to see clearly how much the impact of Filmer's patriarchal writings came from his combination of resolutely conventional assumptions with sharp critical intelligence unleashed on the presumptions of others.

In his own day Filmer had been a figure of limited political consequence, admired by some of his closer acquaintance for that critical ability, and no doubt reassuring to others because so many of his assumptions were widely shared in the circles in which he moved. He became of some political importance largely posthumously, at the time of the Exclusion controversy, when England's monarchy was once again under pressing political attack. In this new context the combined appeal of imaginative solidarity with the Royalist gentry and corrosive scorn for the intellectual coherence of the beliefs of their Whig assailants and for their personal sincerity proved potent enough to prompt at least three systematic and urgent attempts to demolish Filmer's intellectual credentials.

It was the most enduring and decisive of these antagonists, John Locke, who furnished Peter with the main theme of his researches for at least the next decade and conferred on his life many of its principal entanglements and preoccupations over this period. During the year which he spent in St John's College on leave from the BBC he once again had the good fortune to locate and explore a very large body of books and manuscripts left behind by a writer of great historical importance: in this case the half of Locke's library and papers which he left at his death to his young cousin Peter King. It was principally this discovery which prompted the decisive shift in Peter's interests and in due course earned him a reputation which was unmistakably international. It also put him in touch with some remarkable contemporaries, notably the great American philanthropist Paul Mellon, subsequently an Honorary Fellow of the Academy, and responsible, with Peter's enthusiastic prompting, for donating many of Locke's manuscripts along with a large proportion of his surviving library to the Bodleian. By the time that Mellon had completed his benefactions, the result, in Peter's boast, was 'the most complete collection of the literary possessions of a great British intellectual which has ever come into existence.'⁶

⁶ P. Laslett, 'The recovery of Locke's library' in G. A. J. Rogers and S. Tomaselli (eds.), *The Philosophical Canon in the 17th and 18th Centuries: Essays in Honour of John W. Yolton* (Rochester, 1996), p. 81.

The discovery brought Peter both a lectureship in the History Faculty in Cambridge and also a Fellowship at Trinity College which he was to hold until his death. In this setting he settled down to a new and, as it proved, exceptionally rewarding line of work. At the Third Programme he had revelled in the opportunity to draw into public hearing the most stimulating voices he could find among his contemporaries. The BBC at the time, as he noted, enjoyed such prestige that even as a young man 'you could ring up anybody in Britain or Europe from Jean-Paul Sartre, to Jan Masaryk, to Bertrand Russell or Arnold Toynbee and request a broadcast at short notice'.⁷ In his work on Locke he devoted the same ready social initiative (and comparable social assurance) to building a personal network of intellectual relations with philosophers, intellectual historians, sociologists, librarians and political theorists across North America and western Europe.

His initial discovery of the residue of Locke's library in the damp Highland shooting lodge of Ben Damph Forest was the prelude to years of strenuous scholarship. It was also a prelude to years of spirited improvisation and painstaking negotiation between the Lovelace family, who owned the library and by this stage little else of comparable value, the Bodleian Library, the British Treasury and Paul Mellon himself. It made a story, often retold by Peter himself with characteristic breathlessness, as one of high adventure, eked out by plenty of low comedy.

His work on Locke produced two enduring achievements, each of immense value to any future scholar of Locke: an edition of the *Two Treatises of Government* which set new standards of editorial precision for a modern text of political theory, and a catalogue of Locke's library, edited in close collaboration with the librarian John Harrison, based on Locke's own library catalogue and incorporating much of the rich information which Paul Mellon's generosity and interest had helped to assemble.⁸ Peter himself consciously intended the edition of the *Two Treatises* as exemplary in deploying the highest standards of textual presentation and bibliographical analysis to a major work of political philosophy, and in combining with it an exhilarating demonstration of the transformative insight into the work itself which close attention to historical context could provide.

⁷ See above, n. 1.

⁸ John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. P. Laslett (Cambridge, 1960); P. Laslett and J. R. Harrison, *The Library of John Locke*, Oxford Bibliographical Society, NS, 13 (1965) and 2nd edn. (Oxford, 1971).

Applied to the *Two Treatises* the two together enabled Peter to make his best known and most widely acknowledged historical discovery. This great retrospective apologia for England's Glorious Revolution, he showed beyond reasonable doubt, had been written by Locke almost in its entirety under the very different circumstances of almost a decade earlier when his great Whig patron and friend the first Earl of Shaftesbury had pressed his cause by threatening Charles II with revolution. In itself this was a striking historical insight. But Peter himself was confident that it carried much wider implications about the relations between political experience and political thinking at even the very highest level. Most subsequent scholars have accepted the discovery with little demur, although the precise dating of different sections of the text remains subject to considerable dispute. Peter's sense of its implications for any wider vision of the impact of political and social experience upon the most powerful of political thinking was greeted with less warmth, and was not only less widely shared but also probably less clearly understood.

In retrospect it seems plain that this aspect of Peter's agenda was not merely a little beyond him but also appreciably beyond any one else before or since. It had most in common with the approach of the distinguished émigré sociologist, Karl Mannheim, author of *Ideology and Utopia*, with whom Peter worked for a time in the months before he entered the navy and whom he greatly admired.⁹ From Peter's point of view his work on Filmer and Locke was far more than a picaresque adventure in the quest for sources and a demonstration of the potential contribution of techniques which his fellow historians had not previously taken the trouble to employ. It was also a conscious exercise in the sociology of knowledge, applied to the most focused and sophisticated interpretation of political experience. Viewed in this light Filmer and Locke offered a stimulating contrast, with Filmer the exponent of an unrelenting naturalism grounded on assumptions which were already so widely shared as to seem self-evident, and Locke the classic exponent of a vision of political society constituted and enacted through conscious reasoning and personal choice. Peter kept his critical distance from both viewpoints; but he responded keenly to the power of each; and much of his vivid sense of the drama of political thinking came from his awareness of the sharp tension between them.

⁹ P. Laslett, 'Karl Mannheim in 1939: a student's recollection', *Revue Européenne des Sciences Sociales et Cahiers Vilfredo Pareto*, 17 (1979), 223–6.

In the case of Filmer most subsequent historians shared many of Peter's preoccupations and most of his interpretative assumptions, and virtually none disputed the force and quality of his work. The range of scholars who had a serious stake in understanding and assessing Locke's political thinking was far wider: philosophers and political theorists every bit as much as historians. This led to a far more diverse response, sometimes prompted by contrasting initial interests, but often reflecting very different intellectual habits, tastes and commitments. It was clearly important to Peter that the historical discovery itself should be accepted as such, and that its excitement should carry to the audience it won him. It is less clear that he was either surprised or especially dismayed by the variety of responses to his own interpretation of its implications. He remained confidently didactic about the superiority of his technical innovations as an editor. He continued to follow closely subsequent academic writing about Locke as a political thinker, and to incorporate his judgement of its cumulative achievements in successive editions of the text itself. He also continued to militate strenuously for the standards he had tried to set as a member of the board of the Clarendon edition of Locke's *Collected Works*, and to do his utmost to hold its often tardy editors to the challenge set by Paul Mellon's generosity and imagination.

Peter also exerted a wider influence upon political theory by his editorship of a series of collections of essays devoted to the changing status and vitality of political thinking. The first volume of *Philosophy, Politics and Society* set a characteristically histrionic agenda with its opening claim that political philosophy, a tradition of some grandeur and considerable antiquity, was now dead, whilst displaying some indecision on who or what was to blame for its extinction.¹⁰ The second, published six years later, with Garry Runciman as co-editor, opened with a lengthy riposte by Isaiah Berlin disputing this verdict, and reprinted John Rawls's classic 'Justice as fairness', which did as much as anything to refute it.¹¹ Successive volumes, with a changing cast of fellow editors, presented most leading anglophone political philosophers of the last half century, along with contributions from various sociologists and historians of ideas.¹²

¹⁰ P. Laslett (ed.), *Philosophy, Politics and Society*, First Series (Oxford, 1956).

¹¹ P. Laslett and W. G. Runciman (eds.), *Philosophy, Politics and Society*, Second Series (Oxford, 1962).

¹² P. Laslett and W. G. Runciman (eds.), *Philosophy, Politics and Society*, Third Series (Oxford, 1967); P. Laslett, W. G. Runciman and Q. Skinner (eds.), *Philosophy, Politics and Society*, Fourth Series (Oxford, 1972); P. Laslett and J. Fishkin (eds.), *Philosophy, Politics and Society*, Fifth Series (Oxford, 1979).

The later, more thematic volumes focused on some of the larger themes of Peter's intellectual life, notably the twin issues of communication across, and justice between, succeeding generations. His individual contributions addressed these issues explicitly from 'The face to face society' in 1956 to 'Is there a generational contract?' in 1992.¹³ The arc from Filmer to the University of the Third Age spanned a huge space and brought him back in the last two decades of his life very close to where he began. History and political theory, for him, were just two ways of attempting to trace out the contours of community, and to sustain and enhance it by doing so. It was quite a conservative vision, and consciously at odds with many of his left wing contemporaries; but it was also sensitive, egalitarian and challenging, and fired by singular passion.

Trinity and the History Faculty remained at the centre of his career; but his relation to the first was warmer and more fulfilling. He revelled in the range, distinction and independence of its Fellowship, and the beauty of its buildings, but retained a degree of cultivated ambivalence in the face of its imperturbable privilege. He made it an exciting setting for the pupils and younger scholars he assembled around him, many of whom, increasingly, had come to Cambridge to work with him. In the Faculty, where he could be a disconcerting colleague (not least as a fellow examiner), he was appointed in 1966 Reader in Politics and Social Structure but never offered a Chair, a very odd judgement which distressed him considerably. His conception of the scope of historical research had always been sharply (and openly) at variance with some of the Faculty's more eminent and powerful figures; and it responded by preferring scholars who may have been less distinguished but were certainly less controversial. In a less parochial context he was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1979 and given a CBE for his services to historical demography in 1997.

Whilst firmly ensconced in Cambridge from the 1950s onwards, Peter travelled tirelessly, spending periods as a Fellow or Visiting Professor at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, Johns Hopkins, the Collège de France, Yale, and Nihon University in Tokyo. He continued to travel extensively deep into his retirement, always returning from a trip which most would have found thoroughly exhausting bursting with enthusiasm, energy, and new ideas. His international reputation was the

¹³ 'The face to face society' in Laslett (ed.), *Philosophy, Politics and Society*, First Series, pp. 157–84; 'The conversation between the generations' in Laslett (ed.), *Philosophy, Politics and Society*, Fifth Series, pp. 36–56; 'Is there a generational contract?' in P. Laslett and J. Fishkin (ed.), *Justice between Age Groups and Generations* (Oxford, 1977), pp. 24–47.

envy of his contemporaries; and he maintained close and highly productive links with scholars throughout the world, especially in France, the United States and Japan.

Peter was never entirely sure that he had made a wise decision in choosing a conventional academic career. He had been deeply disappointed when the BBC decided to reduce and eventually to end Third Programme broadcasts but continued to try to ensure that the Corporation remained true to its Reithian heritage.¹⁴ In 1962 he became the chairman of the Viewers and Listeners Association of Great Britain. He had greatly enjoyed his work for the Third Programme and remained certain that education should benefit the whole population rather than a minority, and that it should be a life-long process rather than being confined to youth and early adulthood. He devoted much of his time and energy throughout his Cambridge career to initiating and furthering attempts to fulfil these ambitious aims. Soon after his permanent establishment in Cambridge, he had published an article in the BBC journal, *The Listener*, in which he advocated the creation of a new university structure for Britain in which the staff of all universities would also be treated as members of Oxford and Cambridge which would become purely postgraduate research institutions. It need occasion no surprise that the proposal found only limited support but it was shortly followed by a new proposal which arose from his close links with Michael Young who had arrived in Cambridge as a lecturer in sociology in 1958. This initiative was to have a very different fate. Young and Laslett were central figures in the drafting of a proposal to create an institution which was to become the Open University. Harold Wilson was persuaded to adopt it as a Labour Party initiative. The combination of radio, television, and correspondence contact between teacher and student, which was a distinguishing mark of the Open University system, proved highly effective and has been much copied elsewhere. Peter served on the government committee which oversaw the creation of the Open University in the 1960s. He and Michael Young later collaborated in another venture with a similar aim two decades later when they were active and effective in the founding of the University of the Third Age. Here their intention was to ensure that people in later life should have an opportunity to develop and extend their interests across as broad a range of subjects as possible. They were determined to show that those of retire-

¹⁴ Humphrey Carpenter gives a range of striking vignettes of Peter in action in this struggle in his elegy to the Third Programme, *The Envy of the World: Fifty Years of the BBC Third Programme and Radio 3* (London, 1996), taking both his title and his epigraph from Peter's 1957 *Cambridge Review* accolade: 'a service which is literally the envy of the world'.

ment age could benefit as much as the young from exposure to new ideas and that it was mistaken to suppose that mental activity must atrophy in the third age.

Filmer and Locke had claimed most of Peter's attention in the first two post-war decades, but in the 1960s he turned to social structural history rather than the history of political thought, and in so doing again brought about a profound change in the received wisdom about a question of fundamental importance to the understanding of social and economic change in the past. This second area in which he made his mark had developed indirectly from his work on Filmer. How far, he wondered, were Filmer's prescriptive views about the patriarchal family mirrored by local practice in seventeenth-century England. The *Rector's Book* of Clayworth in Nottinghamshire provided him with answers which were to transform the prevailing view of pre-industrial family life and social structure. The rector, William Sampson, had made two detailed listings of the inhabitants of Clayworth in 1676 and 1688 in a form which enabled the composition of each family and co-resident group to be defined. His discovery, shortly thereafter, of comparable listings for the Northamptonshire village of Cogenhoe, where family and household characteristics were very similar, suggested that patterns found at Clayworth were likely to prove widely typical. Peter first published his findings about the two settlements and his reflections on their significance in 1963.¹⁵ His determination to follow through the implications of his preliminary findings gave rise to some striking achievements in the next two decades and absorbed most of his time and energy over the this period.

Peter published 'Clayworth and Cogenhoe' at a time when sociology in North America was riding high. It was widely assumed by American sociologists that the family forms characteristic of communities in western countries were of recent origin and were closely associated with the decay of agrarian, rural society and its replacement by the strongly urbanised communities which arose in the wake of the industrial revolution. The writings of scholars such as William Goode were taken as authoritative not only by his fellow sociologists but in other disciplines including history, either directly or at one remove.¹⁶ In the modern world families were small and the co-resident group rarely included members other than the nuclear family. Before the industrial revolution, in contrast,

¹⁵ 'Clayworth and Cogenhoe' (written in collaboration with John Harrison), in H. E. Bell and R. L. Ollard (eds.), *Historical Essays, 1600–1750, presented to David Ogg* (London, 1963), pp. 157–84.

¹⁶ W. J. Goode, *World Revolution and Family Patterns* (New York, 1963).

extended families were common and the co-resident group was frequently complex. Peter's work showed conclusively that in much of western Europe, and notably in England, 'modern' family characteristics were of long standing. Far from industrialisation having produced the modern family, it was possible that among the pre-existing features which helped to bring about the industrial revolution in England were its familial and demographic characteristics, an issue which Peter explored in several essays.¹⁷

It may be helpful to summarise the picture which emerged from Peter's work and that of John Hajnal (the two were in close contact throughout the period in which Peter worked on these questions; Hajnal's pathbreaking essay on European marriage patterns, comparable in its impact to 'Clayworth and Cogenhoe', was published in 1965).¹⁸ One might characterise a society at the opposite pole to that of early modern England as one in which marriage, at least for women, was early, universal, and closely linked to the attainment of sexual maturity; where newly married couples joined an existing household rather than establishing a new household of their own; and where, in consequence, household structures were frequently complex from either vertical or lateral extension, and the co-resident group was relatively large. How closely any given society conformed to this model became a matter for investigation wherever possible. Subsequent work has shown the danger of assuming that it was universal. Demographic constraints ensured that many households must be relatively simple even if complex households were formed readily where possible. To consider the opposite extreme was, however, useful at least in establishing the scale of the possible contrast between early modern England and most other societies. In early modern England, rather than marriage age for women being determined by their changing physiology, it was principally governed by the ability of the couple to acquire the resources necessary to establish a separate household since convention frowned on two or more married couples sharing the same household. This rule implied an economic barrier to entry into marriage high enough in practice to prevent a proportion of each rising generation of young men and women from marrying at all and to affect the average age at marriage of those who did marry. It proved possible to show that secular

¹⁷ For example, 'The European family and early industrialization' in J. Baechler, J. A. Hall, and M. Mann (eds.), *Europe and the Rise of Capitalism* (Oxford, 1988), pp. 234–41.

¹⁸ J. Hajnal, 'European marriage patterns in perspective', in D. V. Glass and D. E. C. Eversley (eds.), *Population in History: Essays in Historical Demography* (London, 1965), pp. 101–43.

changes in real incomes exerted a marked influence on long-term trends in nuptiality for both sexes.¹⁹

In general the pre-industrial English household was notably similar to the English household after the industrial revolution, consisting principally of one married couple and their children, if any. There was, however, one major difference. A large proportion of pre-industrial households included resident servants. Typically, adolescents left the household of their parents in their middle or later teens and spent most of the time before their marriage as servants in other households, usually staying for a year in any one household before being hired out for a further year at an annual hiring fair, often held at Michaelmas. Leaving the family home to spend years in service was as common for girls as for boys, and the practice was so widespread that probably more than half of each new generation spent time in service. The ending of life as a servant and the beginning of married life were closely associated. Hence the widespread surge in marriages in the late autumn when the service year ended and there was a new round of hiring fairs.

The prevalence of small and simple households containing a single nuclear family implied vulnerability to demographic accident, a topic which Peter explored when discussing what he termed the nuclear hardship hypothesis.²⁰ Where households were large, the extended family was common, and kinship links were strong and dependable, widows and orphans, the sick and the maimed, were, arguably, in a better position to secure help and support than where simple, nuclear families predominated. One of the most interesting and distinctive features of early modern England was the development by the central government of a system of support for those unable to help themselves, using the proceeds of local taxation based on statute. The poor law provided pensions for widows, apprenticeships for orphaned children, support for parents burdened by many offspring, even medical attention for the impoverished sick. Poor law provision varied widely from parish to parish and between the south and east on the one hand and the north and west on the other,

¹⁹ Evidence of the link between trends in real wages and a discussion of the possible causal connection between the two series may be found in E. A. Wrigley and R. S. Schofield, *The Population History of England 1541–1871* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. xx–xxx, and a review of more recent developments in E. A. Wrigley, ‘British population during the “long” eighteenth century, 1680–1840’, in R. Floud and P. Johnson (eds.), *The Cambridge Economic History of Modern Britain*, vol. 1, *Industrialisation 1700–1860* (Cambridge, 2004), 73–9.

²⁰ See, for example, ‘Family, kinship and collectivity as systems of support in pre-industrial Europe: a consideration of the “nuclear-hardship” hypothesis’, *Continuity and Change*, 3 (1988), 153–75.

but its existence and progressive development from Tudor times onwards was an important element in the growth of a distinctive structure of welfare provision in England independent of family and kin. Peter's work was a major factor in bringing about a fuller recognition of its significance.

Peter realised from a very early stage of his work on family and household that to draw out the significance of their features in England depended critically on the existence of parallel information about family structures in other places and periods. He was indefatigable in assembling comparative data, in organising conferences, and in editing joint publications to facilitate this process. All three activities are especially well exemplified in the background to the publication of *Household and Family in Past Time*.²¹ The work contained both methodological and substantive essays and involved scholars from several different European countries, North America, and Japan. Those who participated remained in touch with one another for many years thereafter and the network of scholars with similar interests extended considerably, always with Peter as a key link and inspirer. One of the contributors, Eugene Hammel, later collaborated with Peter in devising a standard system for describing and analysing family and household characteristics. The system was not without its critics, but its high value and utility is made clear by the fact that it has been very widely employed by scholars interested in family systems in many different countries and periods.²²

The importance of assembling comparative data on a large scale meant that research was best conducted by a research group rather than a lone scholar. Peter played the leading role in the creation of the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure. The Group began life on a very small grant from the Cambridge History Faculty but soon became the recipient of a substantial funding from the Gulbenkian Foundation and when this grant expired was for many years a research unit of the Social Science Research Council (later to become the ESRC). Peter was one of its directors from the beginning and remained very active in its affairs for the rest of his life. His ability to arouse the interest and enthusiasm of others, especially young research students, in social structural history while at the same time drawing stimulus and inspiration from them himself was never better exemplified than

²¹ P. Laslett and R. Wall (eds.), *Household and Family in Past Time* (Cambridge, 1972).

²² E. A. Hammel and P. Laslett, 'Comparing household structure over time and between cultures', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 16 (1974), 73–110.

at the daily coffee breaks which were such a prominent feature of life at the Cambridge Group. Although he could be occasionally didactic, Peter greatly valued the exchange of ideas in an informal setting: he was invariably approachable and frequently approached, not only by his fellow academics and by research students but by a host of amateur historians who became associated with the work of the Group and provided much of the research material analysed by the Group.

Peter's work, and that of his colleagues in the Cambridge Group, exemplified the importance of establishing a constant dialectical interchange between empirical work and the construction of explanatory models. He was vividly aware both of the necessity of assembling quantitative data which were free from bias and on a sufficient scale to permit significance testing and equally of the futility of doing so unless their assemblage made it possible to test an important hypothesis effectively. Success in securing research funding enabled him to employ research assistance to undertake the sifting and analysis of the very large data sets involved. He was particularly fortunate to enjoy the close collaboration of Richard Wall in this work.²³

One example of this aspect of his work was his interest in the history of bastardy in the past. He identified a number of features about the history of illegitimacy which were both of interest in themselves and whose significance in a broader context he discussed. For example, the demonstration that unmarried women had their first child at much the same age as married women served as a basis for the discussion of the notion of the procreative career and the range of possible explanations for the observed patterns. Or again, the fact that illegitimacy was least common when marriage was late and many women never married and most common *c.* 1800 when marriage was much earlier and more universal suggested interesting conclusions about the regulation of sexual activity outside marriage.²⁴ The finding was especially intriguing in that this pattern was reversed in eighteenth-century France where illegitimacy increased as the average age at marriage rose.

Peter himself had only a comparatively limited knowledge of statistical techniques, yet he was very quick to recognise the opportunities which more advanced techniques might offer in work on family structures and

²³ Wall collaborated with Laslett in the editing of *Household and Family in Past Time* and, together with Jean Robin, they edited *Family Forms in Historic Europe* (1983). Laslett had supplied the introductory essay for the earlier volume; their roles were reversed in the later one.

²⁴ See *Family Life and Illicit Love in Earlier Generations: Essays in Historical Sociology* (Cambridge, 1977).

related questions. He became particularly interested in the possibility of simulating the implications of different demographic regimes for the availability of different types of kin at each stage of the life cycle, and in related issues, such as the probabilities of extension or extinction of a patriline. He collaborated with Hammel and Wachter in pursuing these possibilities in the 1970s,²⁵ and, with the massive increase in the capacity of electronic computing, the use of simulation to further the understanding of dynamic processes in family formation has advanced greatly in more recent decades. Simulation has proved a very effective way in which to secure a better understanding of how, for example, any given improvement in mortality will affect the probability that a child will have all four grandparents alive on his or her tenth birthday, *ceteris paribus*. It is particularly valuable in pursuing topics of this kind when several of the relevant parameters change simultaneously. For example, what if the improvement in mortality is accompanied by a rise in the mean age at maternity? And so on.

Peter communicated his empirical findings on the family, household structure, co-residential groups, and the functioning of community support systems for those unable to fend for themselves and without family support in a long series of papers and edited volumes. He also explored with striking originality and intellectual vigour the implications of his findings for the understanding of the functioning of social systems in the past. But his best known and most controversial book, *The World We Have Lost*, published first in 1965, was still more ambitious in scope than his later writings, and dealt with many topics unconnected with his work on the family and household. It proved both highly successful, continuously in print and selling prolifically for a quarter of a century, and highly controversial.

A first draft of the book had been sketched before the analysis of the Clayworth and Cogenhoe listings revealed the extent of the clash between Filmer's view of appropriate family structures and contemporary English practice. Some of this new information was incorporated in the later drafts of the book and therefore in the published version and he was also able to include some of the early findings about the early modern demography of England. It was already possible to claim with confidence, for example, that young men and women married relatively late in life and that a significant number never married. He was very conscious of the difficulty of deciding when best to call a halt to the constant revisions,

²⁵ P. Laslett, K. W. Wachter, and E. A. Hammel, *et al.*, *Statistical Studies in Historical Social Structure* (New York and London, 1978).

noting in the introduction that it was 'almost impossible to decide when the time had come to pause and write down a summary of the knowledge acquired to date'.²⁶ It was not, however, primarily these new findings which made the book so influential and controversial. It was rather his development of the argument that seventeenth-century England was what he termed a one-class society and that the then prevailing explanations of the tensions which gave rise to the Civil War were untenable. To scholars whose models of social change and conflict were Marxist, such as Edward Thompson or Christopher Hill, such a view was anathema, and they were trenchant and unsparing in their criticisms.

The World We Have Lost was as much a series of essays as a conventional monograph, including, for example, a chapter on the transformation of English society in the twentieth century which was only loosely connected with the main themes developed elsewhere in the book. The final chapter was entitled 'Understanding ourselves in time'. In it Peter set out his vision of the proper scope and nature of historical scholarship. It was one of several essays in which he argued for the merits of what he termed 'sociological history'. He did not regard this as an ideal title, though adequate for his purpose.²⁷ The study of social structure, functioning, and change were, or should be, fundamental to every aspect of historical investigation yet such issues were treated by historians as capable of resolution merely by the exercise of common sense plus some elementary economic theory. He was determined to make clear the extent of his dissatisfaction with past practice. 'We have glanced back over our history books and found them full of the crudest sociological generalisation, of highly unconvincing speculation on the nature of social development'²⁸ Yet he was also anxious not to exaggerate the extent of the differences between his model of best practice and much that had been written in the established modes of historical narrative, showing himself to be especially conscious of the danger of supposing that quantification, however desirable in itself, was intrinsically more authoritative than traditional forms of description. Further, he was apprehensive about being thought to be interested only in the collectivity rather than individual men and women. 'Certainly', he wrote, 'the imaginative reconstruction of a former society can only foster an interest in its people as people. The shortcomings we have mentioned have been called failures in sympathy as

²⁶ *The World We Have Lost* (Cambridge, 1965), p. vii.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 230.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 232.

well as of method, and if the future is to see the historian in partnership with the other social scientists, it is important that he should never lose sight of his humanity.²⁹ Here, as in so many other contexts, he emphasised the importance of the comparative method and argued that instructive comparisons were possible no less with non-European than with European societies.³⁰

Perhaps the most telling indication of Peter's commitment to sociological history as the encompassing underpinning of all historical writing is to be found in the acknowledgements in the introduction to *The World We Have Lost*. He mentions relatively few historians (and most of them North American) but many sociologists and social anthropologists—David Glass, Tom Marshall, Max Gluckman, Meyer Fortes, Jack Goody, Audrey Richards, David Lockwood, John Goldthorpe, Edmund Leach, Edward Shils, Michael Young, Garry Runciman. Social science, and perhaps especially social anthropology, could not only afford invaluable insights into the functioning of all aspects of life in past communities but could provide incontrovertible demonstrations that work on one small community could be as important and instructive as comparable work on larger units. Such work need not be microscopic but could be micro-cosmic.³¹ Peter was antipathetic to what might be termed grand narrative schools of history which privileged, for example, political history seen largely as the activity of small élites. If it were demonstrable that a careful analysis of the rector's listing of the inhabitants of the obscure parish of Clayworth in 1676 and 1688 could lead to a revolutionary reassessment of the socio-economic structure of England in the pre-industrial period, it was also clear that a dialectic between model-building and empirical work could be built up as effectively for a small village as for a nation state, and the potential implications of work on all scales were similar. Peter returned to the advocacy of sociological history on many occasions, sometimes as an aside when discussing the implications of a new piece of research, sometimes making it the central theme of an article.³²

²⁹ *The World We Have Lost*, p. 239.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 231.

³¹ To make use of a distinction which Munia Postan deployed to excellent effect.

³² See, for example, 'Social structural time: an attempt at classifying types of social change by their characteristic paces', in M. Young and T. Schuller (eds.), *The Rhythms of Society* (London, 1988), pp. 17–36; 'The wrong way through the telescope: a note on literary evidence in sociology and in historical sociology', *British Journal of Sociology*, 27 (1976), 319–42; or 'Introduction: the necessity of a historical sociology' in P. Laslett, *Family Life and Illicit Love in Earlier Generations*, pp. 1–11.

At about the time of his own retirement, Peter's centre of intellectual gravity shifted once more. He became deeply interested in the history of ageing and the position of the elderly in society. He was also among the first to appreciate the immense significance of the very rapid change in the age structure of contemporary western societies which must follow from the striking fall in fertility which had occurred from the early 1970s onwards. In many countries the net reproduction rate was far below unity, and each successive generation, in the absence of substantial net immigration, could be expected to be no more than two-thirds the size of its predecessor. He stressed the importance of distinguishing between what he termed the third and fourth ages. The unexpectedly sharp improvement in mortality rates in the age range above the conventional age of retirement meant that a rapidly growing number of people could confidently expect perhaps a couple of decades of continued activity and sound health after retirement (the third age) before the restrictions and debilities of the final period of life (the fourth age). He was a passionate advocate of the importance of recognising the difference between these two phases of post-retirement life and of the immense contribution which those in the third age could and should make to every aspect of life in the communities in which they lived. In 1989 he published *A Fresh Map of Life*, setting out both the statistical background to the unprecedented rise in the proportion of elderly people within the population and at the same time advancing with great vigour his views on the part which they should play in the new situation which had arisen.³³ He was an implacable and effective denunciator of those conventions inherited from the past which might be invoked to limit the freedom of action of those in the third age. He was deeply involved in the promotion of the University of the Third Age. In some ways it came closer to embodying his educational ideals than any other venture. It was to be open to anyone who wished to remain mentally active and alert; it was to be free from the hierarchies which direct and constrain so much of the activities of universities (not excluding the Open University); and it was to encourage as many members as possible to be both learners and teachers.

Peter was a most effective communicator, especially perhaps when face-to-face in a small group. He could galvanise those who were initially only mildly interested by the urgency and clarity with which he put forward a hypothesis and outlined its significance, and would evoke from them a committed response. He served to stimulate and provoke in equal

³³ P. Laslett, *A Fresh Map of Life: the Emergence of the Third Age* (London, 1989).

measure. He was also a dynamic lecturer. Whereas attendance at a lecture for most undergraduates might be useful but was seldom electrifying, attendance at one of Peter's lectures was often anticipated with pleasure and frequently afforded stimulus unobtainable elsewhere. Several of his most distinguished research students were drawn into his orbit first in this fashion. His gift for finding a telling phrase stood him in equally good stead when communicating through the written word. He took great care, where possible, to find striking titles for his books. His prose style was often direct, simple, and persuasive but he was not uniformly successful in this regard. At times there were clumsy lapses.³⁴ Some of his literary devices could be distracting. For example, he used the pronoun 'we' very frequently, perhaps especially when he was less than sure of his ground. At times it was a royal 'we' but more often it appears rather as a device to associate the reader with the view of the author. He was also occasionally apt to bypass a major difficulty in the argument he was developing by remarking that space prevented him from dealing with it on that occasion.

Peter belonged to the very select group of scholars who can transform a subject by providing a new paradigm for its understanding; achieving this not once but twice in the course of his scholarly life. The world of early modern England appears very differently now from a generation ago and for this much of the credit rests with him. Yet any assessment of Peter's life and work should recognise that he was never simply an academic scholar; but also and primarily an advocate. A Cambridge colleague once remarked that he was a man who had made a conscious decision to be original. The remark was not intended kindly, though it could as easily be taken as a compliment. However interpreted, it captured something of his approach to his writing. He was a man not of the secluded study, but of the forum. Influenced perhaps by his period as a producer on the Third Programme, he wished to reach a wide audience and confront them with striking and thought-provoking ideas. A man who had spent the bulk of his life as an organiser in the Workers' Educational Association once said that no other book which he had recommended as reading to his classes had been so universally welcomed and admired as *The World We Have Lost*. This was the type of recognition which meant

³⁴ Some survived several revisions of an original text. For example in *The World We Have Lost Further Explored*, 3rd edn. (London, 1983), there are many awkward phrases such as: 'We shall find ourselves arguing in something like this way from time to time in this essay' (p. 74), or 'of the kind we found ourselves discussing' (p. 169).

most to Peter because it showed that he had bridged the gulf which so often separates the scholarly world from the general public. Much of his life was spent in opening passageways between them.

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