

Paul Langford's polite and commercial Englishmen

This extract from *Paul Slack's* extended obituary of Paul Langford (1945–2015) discusses his two books that redefined 18th-century England



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Anyone who saw him in these years hard at work in the Upper Reading Room of the Bodleian in term-time, or in the two dozen and more provincial record offices he visited in the vacations, knew that he must be engaged on some large enterprise. But there was no prior indication of how substantial an advance on his earlier work it would turn out to be, both in the breadth of its historical vision and in the depth of its scholarship, until the appearance in rapid succession of the two books which made his name and by which he will always be remembered. The new breadth of vision was prompted by an invitation from John Roberts, the General Editor, to write a volume in the recently

planned 'New Oxford History of England', and it produced *A Polite and Commercial People: England 1727–1783* (Oxford, 1989). The fresh focus for his scholarship became evident when he received a later invitation to give the prestigious Ford Lectures in 1990, and this resulted in *Public Life and the Propertied Englishman 1689–1798* (Oxford, 1991). It was predictable of Paul that his New Oxford History volume was the first of the series to be published, and that *Public Life and the Propertied Englishman* was sent to the press as soon as the last of his lectures had been delivered.

The two books, on which he must have been working simultaneously, were very different in style and content, the first a novel interpretation of a whole society, with particular focus on the two themes in its title (taken from William Blackstone), the second a massive work of dense scholarship on a particular and particularly important topic. (He had hoped to publish



a shorter synopsis alongside the latter, in the shape of the Ford lectures more or less as delivered, but the Press demurred.) *A Polite and Commercial People* deliberately set out 'to emphasize the changes which occurred in an age not invariably associated with change'; and to underline the role as agents of change, not of a small aristocracy, but of 'a broad middle class whose concerns became ever more central to Georgian society and whose priorities determined so much both of debate and action'. Britain was no longer a traditional society in any sense. It was a 'plutocracy' in which 'power was widely diffused, constantly contested, and ever adjusting to new incursions of wealth, often modest wealth'; and it was held together by the commerce and politeness which were essential elements in what Paul called 'the peculiar modernity of the Hanoverian age'. There was nothing very unusual in pointing to new kinds of commerce and consumption when explaining rapid social change in the 18th century; but the stress on the importance of polite

modes of behaviour in regulating and conferring status across a broad social range was novel. It made politeness central to historical understanding of the 18th century for the first time.

The overall effect of the book was therefore to turn attention away from a landed elite and established church towards the middling and commercial classes who had left as indelible a mark on manners and attitudes as on the economy and politics. Paul confessed that the result was ‘a bias perhaps’ (p. xi), and there were reviewers who thought that sections of society above or below his very large middle class got short shrift, but all of them welcomed the book as giving new life to a much neglected period of English history. It contained some nicely quotable phrases in the author’s most assured style, to the effect, for example, that ‘a history of luxury and attitudes to luxury would come very close to being a history of the eighteenth century’ (p. 3). It was also very witty. Until we read Langford’s treatment of them, few of us ever supposed that the intricacies of English politics in the 1750s could be so entertaining. One review concluded that he had set a standard ‘in terms of scholarship, liveliness and sheer historical craftsmanship’ which later New Oxford Histories would find it difficult to match.

Public Life and the Propertied Englishman presented more of a challenge to its audience, a book, one reviewer said, that was ‘wonderful to own but dreadful to read’, because it was chock full of the results of original research undertaken in every corner of England. John Brewer agreed that it deployed ‘a learning that is as formidably deep as it is breathtakingly broad’, and while it might not be an easy read, it was ‘an astonishing achievement, a new anatomy of eighteenth-century England’. Langford’s anatomy was based once again on the broad middle ranks of society, and he concentrated here on the importance of their property, the many forms which it took and its role in giving them political identity and agency, in what was increasingly a propertied rather than a status-based society. In his Preface he was careful to make clear where he differed from the views taken by other historians of the 18th century:

I hope in some measure to have provided a corrective to the view that Georgian politics was overwhelmingly controlled by its aristocracy, as conventionally defined ... and to argue that our perception of eighteenth-century life has been dictated rather too much by the patronage preoccupations of the gentry, by the retrospective appeal of plebeian revolt, and by the long-standing English obsession with party politics.

Here he was not only distinguishing his interpretation from the old Namierite paradigm of an 18th century dominated by the power and patronage of its landed aristocracy, which had never had any appeal for him. He was also separating his approach from more recent interpretations in terms of political parties and popular radicalism which were equally far removed from Namier’s model. As he explored how property was defined, contested and defended at every level of the political structure, he had come to realise the special character of the politics created by the growth and diversification of a large and propertied governing class. As he said in his

Preface, his research in the archives, local as well as central, had led him away from ‘high politics’ to an appreciation of ‘politics in its fullest and authentically “highest” sense, as the means by which communities organise themselves for what they perceive to be the public good’.

He was also at pains to explain that he was, as he had always been, ‘a political historian concerned primarily with relationships of power and influence, with the ways in which individuals and groups obtained and exercised authority’. He acknowledged a great debt to social historians (and he might have added economic historians) who had illuminated some of the relationships between property, social class and power which contributed to the peculiar character of Georgian society. But he was never very sympathetically disposed towards their kinds of history, despite his own interest

in property and its social distribution. He did not need to be. He was a political historian through and through, and *Public Life and the Propertied Englishman* had a major impact across the whole field because it was demonstrably authoritative in its own terms. It spoke to different historical constituencies and offered all of them new arguments and a vast amount of new material to ponder. Critics might find fault with its neglect of one or another kind of property, or of the centre as opposed to the localities on which it lavished so much attention, and question whether property was quite so overwhelming a political preoccupation as its author seemed to suppose. It was sometimes underappreciated also because its arguments were too buried in its text. But it was, and remains, undeniably a great book. There was no disputing the fact that it made all those working on the 18th century ‘think differently and think better’, and together with the recent Oxford History it marked ‘a historiographical breakthrough in our understanding of eighteenth-century England’. ■

The full text of the obituary can be found via www.britishacademy.ac.uk/memoirs

