

Introduction: Richard Smith pays tribute to the late Peter Laslett¹

Richard Smith²

Peter Laslett, who died on November 8th, 2001, at the age of eighty-five, pursued more than one career as a professional historian and in each was a pioneer in a field that thrived as a result of the stimulus he gave to it. Laslett was part of a remarkable cohort of undergraduate historians at St John's College, Cambridge in the late 1930s which included the likes of John Habbakuk and Edward Miller. He graduated in 1938 having gained firsts in both parts of the History Tripos, but unlike his distinguished peers was not drawn immediately towards economic and social history.

As with so many of his generation, his initial progress was halted by war-time service before he returned to Cambridge in 1948 as a fellow of St John's College. There he began a period of work on the history of political thought in the seventeenth century that was to help establish Cambridge as a centre of excellence for research on the history of political ideas. The focus of his work was on those writers who were influenced by the key political happenings of that turbulent century. He was concerned to establish new standards for critical commentaries on the philosophies of the period, recognising that there were no reliable modern editions of the writings of such figures as Locke and Hobbes. Furthermore, he was committed to placing these authors within their

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own political contexts. His first significant contribution was an edition of Sir Robert Filmer's, by then largely ignored, *Patriarcha and Other Political Works* (1949). This work was interrupted somewhat by spells as a talks' producer with the BBC *Third Programme* before Laslett returned to Cambridge with a lectureship in the History Faculty and a fellowship of Trinity College in 1953. From this point he embarked on the study of Locke whose library he had discovered, leading to its purchase by Paul Mellon and subsequent gift to the Bodleian Library. Throughout this period Laslett had privileged access to manuscript materials in this collection which assisted him in preparing a masterly edition of John Locke's *Two Treatises of Government*, which appeared in 1960. Laslett's work on Locke set new scholarly standards and established an approach that has been developed by a number of his students, who have forged for themselves careers of international distinction.

In the early 1960s Laslett's interests moved on, although still linked with his early work on Filmer. Filmer's prescriptive views of the household structured around a dominant patriarch and enclosing a large number of kin seemed at variance with what Laslett discovered in the Rector's book of Clayworth (Nottingham-shire) which contained late seventeenth-century village censuses suggesting that households on average contained four persons who were most likely married couples with their children. Few villagers were married under twenty years of age. Resident unmarried servants (a previously neglected element in the social structure) were surprisingly prevalent and the village population turned over rapidly from year to year as people frequently migrated across parish boundaries. These findings were revelations to Laslett and their implications were developed in his most famous book, *The World We Have Lost* (1965). His advocacy of a new approach to social history that focused around the household and the links between the processes that created it and the larger social structure reflected interests that few within the historical profession then shared. Little was known about popular marriage and sexual behaviour, geographical mobility, popular literacy or vulnerability to harvest failure. This book certainly polarised opinion about the acceptability of promoting such work in the universities as opposed to leaving it to the classes of the Workers Education Association or university extra-mural boards. University-based sociologists were writing about these matters but were inclined to stylise the past in terms of models that resembled the prescriptive writings of Robert Filmer, rather than the parish listings carefully drawn up

by pre-industrial clergymen or the calculations of Gregory King, the seventeenth-century political arithmetician whom Laslett admired and upon whom a core of his own methodology is based.

Laslett realised research of this type needed the assembly of evidence on a scale that could not be achieved alone. He teamed up with E.A. Wrigley, then a lecturer in the Cambridge Geography Department, who had distinguished himself in both history and geography triposes as an undergraduate. Wrigley was keen to domesticate within England the kind of demographic analysis of the parish register that French scholars had pioneered in the 1950s. Laslett's focus on the household and Wrigley's interest in marriage, birth and death in England before the Industrial Revolution proved a fruitful combination and helped set in place the *Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure*, which they had co-founded in 1964 and which still thrives. That group's emergence was aided by Laslett's use of the radio broadcast to encourage local volunteers to collect and analyse evidence from parish records. With this unpaid workforce Laslett and Wrigley succeeded in attracting research funds for the analysis of this mass of historical material that was flowing to Cambridge. Laslett advocated group-orientated research in a setting more like the scientific laboratory where results were discussed by the 'team' over coffee and were then written up collaboratively. He was also keen to promote comparative history and his initial findings on the character of the pre-industrial English household were used as a catalyst for consideration of the same phenomena in an international gathering in 1969 that gave rise to the volume *Household and Family in Past Time* (1972).

Laslett's interests extended to the comparative history of population turn-over, the age of sexual maturity and illegitimacy. A major work under his co-editorship, *Bastardy and its Comparative History* (1980), contained evidence showing systematic links between the age of marriage and pre-marital conceptions, which suggested that illegitimacy in England was most common when marriage was early for women and least common when late - though a contrary relationship held in many Continental countries. He worked with the anthropologist Eugene Hamel to establish a widely used system of household classification for the analysis of census documents that underpinned the volume, *Family Forms in Historic Europe* (with Richard Wall, 1983). Laslett was also aware of variation in household patterns from village to village, which he viewed suspiciously since he was alert to the influences of chance in

determining residential arrangements in small populations. He therefore pioneered with Ken Wachter, a mathematical demographer, the use of probabilistic microsimulation for the study of processes determining household structure. This demanding work was never popular among historians, although Laslett always regarded the book he co-authored on this subject, *Statistical Studies of Historical Social Structure* (1978), as his most significant analytical achievement.

Laslett was a very effective communicator, a trenchant writer and at times an explosive lecturer. These talents he deployed with great effect in his new career as a family and demographic historian after 1960, when he also worked tirelessly for the reform of higher education, leading to the establishment of the Open University by Wilson's Labour Government of 1964. One of the earliest and most successful courses taught by the Open University was that on Historical Data and the Social Sciences, which promoted the use of Cambridge Group methods. Its graduates provided a rich flow of articles for the journal *Local Population Studies* that Laslett had helped to found. Such developments were central to Laslett's desire to open up research on the history of English social structure to all and to mobilise the interests of the public in their familial past, although shunning approaches that were introspectively genealogical.

It is characteristic that in his own retirement Laslett's considerable energy was directed to the history of ageing and the elderly. He had written a pioneering article on the subject in 1976 but it was in the 1980s that his enthusiasm for this subject grew, long before it became a fashionable subject. Laslett showed that the English family system in the past had not created a context within which the elderly were revered, but one in which they had frequently relied on support from a wider community that extended out beyond the kin group and not infrequently entailed poor relief. Work of this kind required a fundamental rethinking of ideas about modernisation. Laslett as historian was not afraid to make sense of the massive changes that were occurring in his own society as more and more persons lived on into the 'third' and 'fourth' ages. His book *A Fresh Map of Life* (1989, 1996) was a major historical sociological assessment of the novelty of this type of society, and a passionate plea for promoting social values in which the elderly and the retired were not marginalised. He did much himself to counter such forms of exclusion through his role in the founding of the University of the Third Age in 1982.

Laslett's success as a historian and his popularity in Britain and abroad resulted from his ability to move between disciplines with consummate ease, his talent for communicating the significance of his ideas to the widest possible audience and to the enthusiasm which he showed in obliging us to understand across time some of the most important social relationships in our everyday lives. Few historians have brought past and present so effectively together in their work without succumbing to the sin of anachronism.

