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G.M. Trevelyan

The discovery of 'modern' England and of the 'modern' family had proceeded a long way between the death of Maitland and the start of the Second World war. The foundations for a new view of English history had been laid. The best description of what had been achieved is in G.M. Trevelyan's **English Social History**, published first in 1942. Professional historians now may be dismissive about Trevelyan, but not only was his book very influential and is still a best-seller which has just been re-published, it reveals very clearly the transition from the old view of continuity, to the new view of the great break between 'medieval' and 'modern' England. It distils the 'spirit of an age', for Trevelyan as Regius Professor of History at Cambridge had access to the work of many of the best scholars of the thirty years after Maitland's death. And it goes some way to avoid the dangers of why the past and the present...it is not for the historian is the education of the unlikenesses between one age and another...¹ If we look at the bibliographical citations in his work, we find a roll-call of many of the senior scholars whose detailed research re-shaped our view of the past. For the medieval period he used works by Postan, Rich, Carus Wilson, C.S. Lewis, Bennett, Lipson, Owst, H.W.C. Davis, Rashdall, Darby, Ernle. The book was dedicated to Eileen Power, whose work was widely cited, in his chapter on the early sixteenth century he acknowledges the 'advice and notes' of John Saltmarsh. Apart from the significant omission of Stubbs and Maitland, there are no obvious gaps. For the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries he relies on the work of Tawney, Notestein, Habakkuk, Leonard, Ernle, Cunningham, Lipson, Nef, Rowse, Darby, Godfrey Davies, Margaret James, Willey, Ogg and others. It is a good cross-section of the leading scholars. Nor does he rely on secondary authorities alone, making use of literature from Chaucer onwards and of letters from the Pastors on. Thus it is a considerable work of synthesis. Yet there is an unresolved tension for, like England during the centuries he is surveying Trevelyan seems to be trying to escape from one world-view into another.

Presumably brought up in the tradition of Stubbs and Maitland, even though he does not cite them, Trevelyan is half unwilling to see a great divide between the medieval and the modern. He approvingly cites Pollard to the effect that 'of all the schisms which rend the woven garment of historical understanding the worst is that which fixes a deep gulf between medieval and modern history.'² The only place I have discovered him actually taking issue with another scholar in the whole book is when he mildly disagrees with Tawney as to whether the sixteenth century is a 'watershed' arguing that he cannot really see the 'end of the Middle Ages' then.³ He feels that even by the end of the sixteenth century

¹Butterfield, 17

²Trevelyan, Soc. Hist. 99

³p.97

'society, politics, and economics still very much more closely resembled those of the fourteenth than of the twentieth.⁴ He thinks that if there is a real beginning to 'modern times' it will probably 'be allocated to the growth of the Industrial Revolution rather than to the Renaissance and Reformation.⁵ His uneasiness to accept the Tawney-Weber thesis of the great divide in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries does not arise out of that Victorian blindness the basic difference between 'medieval' and 'modern'. He accepted that 'in the Thirteenth Century, English thought and society were medieval, and in the Nineteenth Century they were not.⁶ But he seems unable to place the break so firmly partly because he still half clung on to that idea of continuity of basic institutions which he had inherited. He pointed out that 'even now we retain the medieval institutions of the Monarchy, the Peerage, the Commons in Parliament assembled, the English Common Law, the Courts of Justice interpreting the rule of law, the hierarchy of the established Church, the parish system, the Universities, the Public Schools and the Grammar Schools...there will always be something medieval in our ways of thinking, especially in our idea that people and corporations have rights and liberties which the State ought in some respect to respect...'⁷ Thus he saw the roots of Protestantism in medieval religion, and the roots of sixteenth century law and trading in the sixteenth century.⁸ His worries over this led him to write a whole special section on 'The End of the Middle Ages', in which he admitted that he could not find exactly when they ended.⁹ To this extent there linger traces of the older vision. But in his practical treatment of social history, he tends to forget this continuity view and to paint a picture of the transition between two worlds.

The history starts in the second half of the fourteenth century, the 'Age of Chaucer'. It is clear to Trevelyan that there is here a radical break between the medieval and the 'modern' and it is perhaps for this reason that he found it difficult to accept the thesis about the sixteenth century as a 'watershed'. His book starts with the statement, 'In Chaucer's England we see for the first time the modern mingling with the medieval, and England herself beginning to emerge as a distinct nation...'¹⁰ We are told that 'Wycliffe hammered out red-hot a programme of change' and 'in the economic sphere also the medieval was beginning to yield to the modern, and England was beginning to develop social classes peculiar to itself.

⁴p. 99

⁵p. 98

⁶p. 97

⁷p. 97

⁸pp. 46-7, 96-7

⁹p. 94

¹⁰p. 1.

The break-up of the feudal manor and the commutation of field-serfdom were proceeding apace. The changes were momentous indeed, for 'The demand advanced by the rebellious peasants...cut at the base of the existing social fabric.'¹¹ It was at this time that 'new classes of substantial yeomen came into existence...'¹² Thus the social structure altered, as did the tenorial situation, for the later fourteenth century 'mark the gradual change from a society based on local customs of personal service to a money-economy that is nation-wide...'¹³ The movements occurred at every level, for even Parliament was 'already on the way to be modernized.'¹⁴ At the village level, there was beginning that great transition from a community-based, subsistence, closed world, to one based on cash farming and individualism. 'Farm leases and money wages were increasingly taking the place of cultivation of the lord's demesne by servile labour, so beginning the gradual transformation of the English village from a community of semi-bondsmen to an individualistic society in which all were at least legally free, and in which the cash nexus had replaced customary rights.' This was indeed the beginning of a 'great change' which 'broke the mould of the static feudal world and liberated mobile forces of capital, labour and personal enterprise.'¹⁵ Trevelyan then proceeds to paint a picture of the 'medieval village community' from which the world was turning. In such a world 'peasant cultivators, in relation to each other, were a self-governing community, but in relation to the lord of the manor they were serfs...the freemen were few and far between.'¹⁶ Other features of the 'traditional' medieval period are described - the peasants bound to the soil, forced to grind their corn at the village mill etc. These were self-sufficient, subsistence, communities, 'the farm and the cottage...produced their own food, while almost all their clothing, furniture and farm implements were home-made either by the peasant family itself or by the craftsmen of the village.'¹⁷ Thus everywhere, 'In men's dress, as well as in so much else, the beginning of the change from medieval to modern might be ascribed to the age of Chaucer.'¹⁸

What Trevelyan had discovered was that 'medieval man' and 'modern man' were different species even

¹¹p. 2

¹²Soc. Hist. 10

¹³p. 11

¹⁴p. 4

¹⁵p. 4

¹⁶p. 6

¹⁷p. 27

¹⁸p. 26

in England. This could be seen, most importantly, in the way that they thought and felt. In the age of Chaucer, we are in the half-way world between the two. Half is intelligible to us, half not, 'For these ancestors of ours, in one half of their thoughts and acts, were still guided by a complex of intellectual, ethical and social assumptions of which only medieval scholars can today comprehend the true purport.'¹⁹ While we can speak of 'the new England of Chaucer's day'²⁰ in which 'great changes...were taking place...in the structure of society...modern institutions were being grafted onto the medieval'²¹, there was still a good deal left that was 'pre-modern'. For it was only really in the sixteenth century that people's minds were 'set free from medieval trammels.'²² One of these trammels was their peculiar attitude to wealth; they still believed that the ethical and the economic were intertwined, they had no concept of the pure pursuit of wealth. This was manifested in the attitude towards lending money at interest: 'Society had at last, very gradually, in the course of the Tudor reigns, abandoned the medieval doctrine that it was wrong to lend money on interest...'²³, as Tawney and Weber had so brilliantly shown. Yet this was a slow and painful business, for still in the sixteenth century 'Catholic and Protestant alike still applied medieval ethical judgments to economic actions.'²⁴

The change took place at every level though in complex ways. At the material, the 'primitive'²⁵ living conditions which had prevailed up to the early Tudors gave way to new wealth and sophistication. 'The squalor of the medieval village' by the eighteenth century had 'long been in retreat before the homely dignity of the rural middle class.'²⁶ At the level of morals and personal behaviour 'the cruel habits of centuries were not easily or quickly to be shed...' One of the springs of the new society was London, a modern citadel in an old social structure; 'a society that was purely bourgeois, inside the larger England that was still monarchical and aristocratic.'²⁷ The change penetrated to every level and during the

¹⁹p . 4

²⁰p . 16

²¹p . 40

²²p . 140

²³p . 223

²⁴p . 121

²⁵p . 132

²⁶p . 305

²⁷p . 144

sixteenth and seventeenth centuries it 'gradually got rid of the peasant himself'²⁸, it destroyed the 'village community'.²⁹ One of the most significant features of the change was the movement to an 'open' social structure. As a result of the fact that 'the relation of the landlord to the tenant...was assimilating itself year by year to modern practices', the 'new age was bringing into increasing prominence not only the yeoman, but the squire'.³⁰ The new middle classes of the C15-C16 were all men of the new age, not hankering after feudal ideals now passing away³¹, such a man as William Caxton 'a product of the new middle class...He was an early and a noble example of a well-known modern type...the individualistic Englishman'.³² Certain parts of the country were more backward on the path from medieval to modern, thus comparing Wales and the borders, he found that 'Wales had recently moved farthest along the road leading to modern life'.³³ But what is without dispute is that England changed from one kind of society, based on a feudal peasantry and closed communities, to another 'open', democratic and humane one. It may be that 'the change from the one form of society to the other was long-drawn-out through centuries, from the Twelfth to the Nineteenth'³⁴, but there can be no doubt of the gradual and secular emergence of one kind of world from another, Trevelyan noticing how 'our study of the English scene emerges from medieval into modern times..'

Trevelyan's evolutionary picture and particularly his description of 'medieval man' would have made little sense to Maitland, but Trevelyan was saved from the difficulty of having to dismantle Maitland's picture of the thirteenth century. Maitland's thirteenth century would not have provided the right back-drop to his study but by starting half a century after the end of the thirteenth Trevelyan avoided a direct confrontation. He also managed to avoid a clash with those Victorians who had argued that there had been something special about English society since the thirteenth century. Trevelyan implied that the difference was invented during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. It seems clear from the work that Trevelyan had grasped a fact which had eluded earlier writers, namely that all the nations of Europe were travelling down the same road, but England was further ahead. He believed that this was because other nations had got 'stuck' in a medieval phase for longer. Thus 'sixteenth century England was ahead

²⁸p. 119

²⁹pp. 168, 215

³⁰p. 125

³¹p. 128

³²81-2

³³p. 151

³⁴p. 16

of Germany and France in having got rid of the servile status of the peasant...³⁵, and the 'thrifty peasant of fifteenth century England' was 'like the peasant of Nineteenth Century France.'³⁶

Speaking of marriage for love, he wrote 'This change has actually taken place in England in the gradual evolution of the idea and practice of marriage. It was not an inevitable change. In France, for instance, the arranged marriage is still normal, though of course the civilized French parent pays far greater consideration to the wishes and mutual compatibility of the young people than did Mistress Agnes Paston.'³⁷ Or again, 'Under the old system of life...in the England of the past, as in the France of today, the wife was often her husband's partner.'³⁸ Trevelyan's only explanation for this divergence, which meant that England became 'modern' to a large extent several centuries earlier, lay in the area of legal and social structure. There was no rigid 'caste' structure in England, 'owing to the habit among the gentry of apprenticing their younger sons to trade, our country avoided the sharp division between a rigid caste of nobles and an unprivileged bourgeoisie, which brought the French **ancien regime** to its catastrophe in 1789. Unlike the French, the English gentry did not call themselves "nobles"...' ³⁹ Maitland and Freeman had argued that this was a perennial feature of English society, but it is clear from the context that Trevelyan thought that it was something new in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Yet there is ambivalence here also and Trevelyan does come closer to Maitland's view of a deep difference when he explains that 'In foreign countries the old feudal law was not so good a system as the Common Law of medieval England, and could not be adapted to the uses of modern society. And so the feudal law of the Europe and with it the medieval liberties of Europe were swept away in this epoch, by the 'reception' of Roman law, which was a law of despotism. But in England the medieval law, fundamentally a law of liberty and private rights, was preserved, modernized, supplemented, enlarged, and above all enforced...' ⁴⁰ Trevelyan is caught between two major theoretical systems. One stresses the continuity of English history and, while minimizing the break between the thirteenth and nineteenth centuries, maximizes the difference between England and the Continent. The other, newer, view sees a basic similarity of European systems up to the fifteenth century, and then the detachment of England from Europe. There is no evidence in his work that Trevelyan was aware that behind the difficulties which he failed to resolve there stood the figures of Maitland and Stubbs and the Scottish philosophers on one side and Marx, Weber and most modern historians and sociologists on the other. Nor did he see that

³⁵p. 119

³⁶p. 64

³⁷p. 68

³⁸p. 491

³⁹p. 127

⁴⁰p. 171

only when this larger doubt had been answered would it be possible to make sense of the history of the family. Since he was still ambivalent, his account of the family is still only half developed. He has moved well beyond the Victorians, but he is still unable to fully comprehend how very recent our family system is.

To a certain extent Trevelyan stressed that there had been a revolution in the family and marriage, which would accompany the major transformation which he half-reluctantly documented. There was a movement away from the large, open, extended and 'patriarchal' household to a more private and intimate unit among the gentry, though he dated this a couple of centuries earlier than some historians would now do. In the later fourteenth century 'Now for the first time in our country, gentlemen's families retired from the great hall where they used to feed in patriarchal community with their household, and ate their more fashionable meals in private...'⁴¹ Marriage, which had been regarded with disfavour by medieval clerics was growingly brought into favour by Protestants who allowed their clergy to marry.⁴² These same Protestants stressed family religion and the bonds of the conjugal unit.⁴³ With this there was a growth of affection and sentiment. Comparing the seventeenth century Verneys with the fifteenth century Pastons, 'we are aware of the general resemblance, but we are aware also of higher moral instincts and traditions, of greater kindness and less hard outlook (sic) on family relationships...'⁴⁴ There was also probably an improvement in the position of spinsters, for in the late medieval period 'there was little welcome extended to a superfluity of maiden aunts or elderly spinsters...'⁴⁵ Yet Trevelyan was unable to locate this change precisely in the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, where we have now come to find it, for he discovered evidence of a number of 'modern' features well before. This hesitation is best displayed in the treatment of the one topic in family relations to which he devotes a lengthy passage, namely that of romantic love and marriage.

He pointed out that 'modern readers will find strange' certain features of 'family life, love and marriage' that emerge from fifteenth century letters, for example 'the extreme and formal deference that children were made to show to their parents, the hardness of home and school discipline, the constant 'belashing of boys and girls'. There are, he believes relics of an earlier age, 'equally or yet more characteristic of earlier ages which have left no such intimate records.'⁴⁶ But what will really shock the modern reader is

⁴¹p. 26

⁴²p. 128

⁴³p. 128

⁴⁴p. 252

⁴⁵p. 73

⁴⁶p. 65

the fact that 'in the knightly and gentle class, the choice of partners for marriage had normally nothing whatever to do with love.'⁴⁷ We are assured that 'To the educated medieval man and woman, marriage was one relation of life, love another.' This was 'not an ideal state of things, but for centuries it served to people England.' Trevelyan was, of course, aware that 'these old-established medieval customs' do not, at first sight seem to fit with medieval literature. In the fifteenth century, 'for three centuries past poetry had been the analysis of love-longing.' But this love poetry 'had seldom anything to do with marriage.' Yet a change was beginning, 'in the Fifteenth Century things were slowly moving' and there was the occasional love match.⁴⁸ He documents the 'slow and long contested evolution towards the English love match goes on throughout our social history, until in the age of Jane Austen and the Victorians free choice in love is accepted...'⁴⁹ Yet significant steps were taken early on, for Trevelyan believed that 'When we reach the age of Shakespeare, literature and the drama treat mutual love as the proper, though by no means the invariable basis of marriage' and he comments that 'clearly the love marriage was more frequent by the end of the Tudor period' though 'child marriages were still all too common.'⁵⁰ The reason for the change is not given, but it is possible that Trevelyan thought that it was all part of the growing freedom of the society. Nor was it difficult for him to see where the new views could have come from. Trevelyan was not sufficiently aware of sociological work on peasant societies to know that the kind of medieval peasantry he described would also be without romantic love. He seems for a moment to have lapsed into a sentimental, non-evolutionary view, which more recent social historians have corrected. For he believed that 'Among the poor', by which he clearly means all those below the middling yeomanry, 'it is probably that marriage choice had always been less clogged by mercenary motives.' He admits that 'We have but slight evidence on the subject' but 'we may presume that among the peasantry in the Middle Ages, as in all ages, Dick and Nan walked together in the word and afterwards to church for reason of love-liking, added t the belief that Nan would make a good mother and housewife, and that Dick was a good workman or 'had a pig put up in a style' besides some strips in the open field.' Added to these romantic and practical reasons, there was lust, for 'marriage to legalize the consequences of incontinence was exceedingly common, especially in the lower ranks of society where maidens could not be so carefully guarded at all hours.'⁵¹ Thus there was an underground tradition of love connected to marriage, a widespread sentiment and attachment; 'lyrics and love-songs were sung as the common music and sentiment of the people' in Shakespeare's day.⁵²

⁴⁷p. 65

⁴⁸p. 69

⁴⁹p. 70

⁵⁰p. 70

⁵¹p. 71

⁵²p. 203

The presence of a 'modern marriage system at the lower levels of society throughout all time, when at a different level the whole social, economic and ideological structure was being radically altered is an inconsistency which later historians could now allow. It is just one of the reasons why Trevelyan's picture strikes them as old-fashioned, still bringing back memories of the old views of the glorious and unique and continuous evolution of England. In the thirty years after Trevelyan's work, the new vision which had partly informed his work and which can at least partly be traced to Max Weber and modern sociology was further strengthened. For in those thirty years a new and even more powerful advocate of the 'great divide' theory had influenced historians, namely Karl Marx.