

**(People who have influenced me most, by Alan Macfarlane)**

**Peter Laslett (1915–2002)**

Peter Laslett was a major intellectual figure in the world of political philosophy, social and demographic history and the organization and communication of knowledge in the second half of the twentieth century. (q.v. '100 thinkers'). I first encountered him through his book *The World we have lost* (1965). This came out in the middle of my D.Phil on witchcraft at Oxford and caused a great stir. I remember it had an enormously stimulating effect on me, along with his famous article on English listings, 'Clayworth and Cogenhoe'. It was a time when a new social history, based on local historical documents, was being born. Peter's combination of broad questions, no-nonsense approach, interest in social structure and demography fitted well with a growing interest in the French social historians like Bloch, Braudel, Ariès, Goubert, Ladurie and was a breath of fresh air.

I remember arguing with Christopher Hill, who was very dismissive of his attempt to reject the Marxist class war model and of Peter's scholarship. I also remember starting to encounter the exciting works of Peter's colleagues at the newly formed 'Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure', in particular Tony Wrigley, at this time. I remember a walk through the Parks at Oxford with Charles Phythian-Adams, when he introduced me both to Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood*, and Wrigley's method of family reconstitution.

In my research on witchcraft I was already using local records, parish registers, ecclesiastical court records, quarter sessions and assize records. I had already decided to do a detailed micro-study of three adjacent Essex villages where there were a cluster of witch trials, Hatfield Peverel, Boreham and Little Baddow. Now the method of linking baptisms, marriages and deaths (family reconstitution), suggested to me the idea of a 'total reconstitution' using all the records, which also drew on the idea of 'one fact one card', which I was developing during my D.Phil. (see under Keith Thomas).

I think the fact that Peter himself came from another, broader, background in political theory (as an editor of Locke's works and discoverer of Locke's library) gave him his broad approach. Certainly his interest in family structure came to a considerable degree from the dispute between Locke and Filmer about the nature of power in the family. So he had interesting questions, had discovered new sets of data, and was an enormously curious and energetic person. He was also a crusader.

Peter's crusade was to open up a new type of demographic, social structural, history, and to open up academic life to a wider public. Being interested in collaborative work, another encouragement to me later in my various collaborative efforts – he made a distinguished contribution by helping the formative phase of the B.B.C. Third Program, helping to set up with Michael Young the 'Open University', starting the 'Cambridge Group' with his students Tony Wrigley and Roger Schofield, and later founding the 'University of the Third Age' in England.

Most British historians are in what Keith Thomas describes as the *prima donna* tradition. They read and write alone. Yet certain kinds of questions, especially those

requiring large data sets, need the kind of research teams and collaborative, almost lab-based, research one finds in certain sciences. This is almost unknown among historians, though perhaps more common in France and Germany. Much of my own work over thirty years has been based on team work, with small groups of four or so people working together on a project. I suspect that Peter's example was important in encouraging this. His influence also acted indirectly since Jack Goody (q.v.) was also an associate and friend of the Group and his own research and encouragement of my projects was probably influenced by their presence.

So Peter's influence was deep even before we met. I remember writing to him in the early 1970's and getting a rather illegible scribbled note back. But we must then have met and got on. So when Sarah Harrison (q.v.) and I decided to start our first major project, transcribing, linking and indexing all the records of Kirkby Lonsdale parish in Westmorland and setting up a sort of 'Centre' in Sarah's barn in Dent, both Peter Laslett and Roger Schofield visited us to look at it in the early 1970's. The very good 1696 listing of inhabitants in Kirby Lonsdale, which we started to work on, brought us closer to Peter's work and both he and Roger were very encouraging.

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When we moved to Cambridge, Peter and Janet his wife became friends. One of many abiding memories over the years was of being invited every year or two to lunch or dinner at the Laslett's, usually to meet some distinguished foreign scholar (here we met Osamu Saito and many others). There was a ritual to the evening. Sherry and nibbles in the house at 3, Clarkson Road, of which Peter was so proud (having won various awards as a piece of innovative architecture in the early 1960's). Always there was a large painting on the wall which Peter and Janet had recently bought in their annual mission to the Royal Academy sales. A few select recent books were on a table, for review or reading. In winter a modest fire crackled in the grate, in the summer we were taken for a tour of the largish garden, shown the small limes which had originated from those planted by a west country gentleman from seeds sent to him by John Locke. In the summer we would also start the evening with drinks on the terrace.

Peter was good at warming up the occasion through his transparent warmth, enthusiasm and often outrageous remarks and theories. He would startle a younger scholar by asking them their views on some crack-pot scheme or dubious theory. But Peter loved arguing and never minded disagreement. In the background the quiet, protective and very Scottish Janet would bustle around getting a meal. So we would eat and talk and then retire for a little spirits, chocolate and the fire, where the arguments and hypotheses would become even more extreme. One always felt sad on leaving, as if a special occasion was over.

Peter was also very proud of his Fellowship at Trinity College, and took me to lunch and dinner on a number of occasions, when I again met a number of interesting academics, including Garry Runciman and I suspect John Hajnal the demographer and statistician who became a friend. I would also meet him at the Cambridge Group, either in his book-lined room (a different set from the fine library of leather-bound seventeenth and eighteenth century classics, including first editions of Locke and Malthus and a famous portrait of Locke, in his room in Trinity). Or I would meet him

in the Cambridge Group coffee room, where he went regularly to chat to students and visitors. I also attended many Cambridge Group seminars in the 1970's, as well as a number of international conferences, which Peter organized, on the household, bastardy etc.

So we discussed and argued about many issues concerning the family, household, sexuality and methodology over the years and I learnt a great deal from these discussions and formed an international network of contacts. Indeed that was another way in which Peter influenced me. Like me, he started with English local history, but soon he had spread out all over Europe, with especially strong connections with Italy, Austria and France. Then in the 1980's he moved further afield, influencing Japanese demography through collaborative work with Akira Hayami (another contact I owe to him) and to China. He visited both China and Japan several times and though he found it often stressful (and overdid the foreign travel until the end), he early saw the potential for real international collaborative research on comparative problems.

The developing findings of Peter and the Cambridge Group always influenced my writings. Although I will not deal with Tony Wrigley separately in these pen portraits, it was Tony's theoretical work on Malthus and on demography which impressed and influenced me most from a theoretical viewpoint.[for my assessment of his work, see under his name on my web-site, where there is a long unpublished article]. A number of my books, in particular *Marriage* and *Savage Wars of Peace* were to a certain extent dialogues with Tony's work. I have written about his work as a whole elsewhere in an extended way. (q.v). I always found his writing (and conversations with him), clear, enlightening and innovative. We never became close friends, but he was always friendly and took me to dine a few times at Peterhouse and later when Master of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge.

The final thing I admired and hence influenced me about Peter was his desire to communicate. This could be seen in relation to his input into the B.B.C, the Open University, University of the Third Age, journalism and a desire at every moment to communicate. He believed in the democratisation and spread of knowledge. He would have agreed with an adaptation of the Yorkshire saying about money: 'knowledge is like muck. No good unless spread.' It may be that my constant desire to find ways to communicate, through television, writing, videodisc, the Web or whatever, was partly inspired by Peter. Although his amazingly rich diaries (which Sarah my wife bound for him) reveal a tortured and often pessimistic inner man, on the outside he was charming, egalitarian and warm. A remarkable man.