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978-0-521-10875-1 - Social Relations and Ideas: Essays in Honour of R. H. Hilton

Edited by T. H. Aston, P. R. Coss, Christopher Dyer and Joan Thirsk

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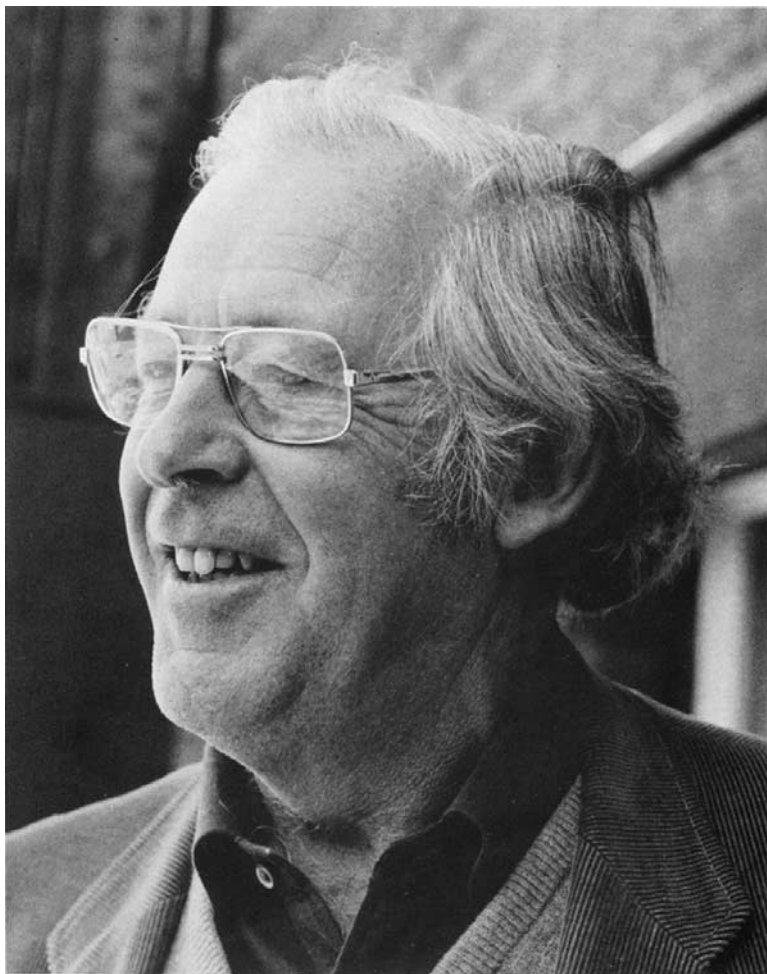
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R. H. Hilton

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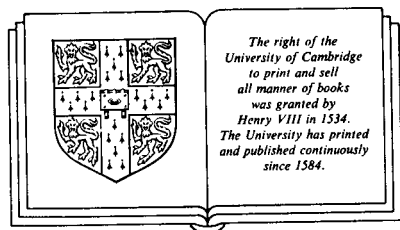
Social Relations and Ideas

*Essays in Honour of
R. H. Hilton*

Edited by

T. H. ASTON P. R. COSS

CHRISTOPHER DYER JOAN THIRSK



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Preface

This volume in honour of Rodney Hilton is published to mark the occasion of his retirement in the autumn of 1982 from his Chair of Medieval Social History at the University of Birmingham which he held with such distinction from his appointment in 1963. It has a dual origin. In the first place, some of his many pupils, friends and colleagues wished to show their appreciation of his work, his influence and his inspiration. In the second place, the Past and Present Society, while also paying tribute to an outstanding medievalist, wanted more particularly to register its gratitude for his services to *Past and Present* and its associated activities over the years: he was one of the founders of the Journal in 1952, and has been a member of its Editorial Board ever since, being Chairman from 1972. Dr P. R. Coss and Dr Christopher Dyer represent, so to say, the first area of origin among the Editors, while Mr T. H. Aston and Dr Joan Thirsk represent the second.

It can never be easy to make a *Festschrift* a unified whole. Especially is this so with a scholar such as Rodney Hilton with his wide-ranging interests: these include the social structure, the rural economy and the *mentalité* of the middle ages; and on the side of source material not just the customary vocabulary of social history, but for example medieval literature with which he has been much concerned, and medieval archaeology in which he has played an active and pioneering role. Rodney Hilton has combined these various concerns with apparent and enviable ease and made of them a coherent and penetrating historical approach pursued with the greatest success, thereby exercising a very important influence on the way we look at medieval history as a whole. Thus we hope that in this volume, with its intentional diversity and range, we have caught at least something of the spirit which has inspired the scholar in whose honour it has been produced.

T. H. ASTON, P. R. COSS,
CHRISTOPHER DYER and
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We are most grateful to Mrs Angela Coss for kindly compiling the index to this volume; to Lady Cynthia Postan and Dr John Hatcher for assistance in the article by the late Professor Sir Michael Postan; to Professor Philip Rahtz for providing the frontispiece; and to Mr Charles Philpin, Assistant Editor of *Past and Present*, and Dr Michael Aris, Sub-Editor of *Past and Present*, for their help throughout the preparation of the volume. We are also grateful to the President and Fellows of Corpus Christi College, Oxford, for permission to reproduce the picture on the jacket. We are additionally grateful to our printers, the Pitman Press, and to the staff of the Cambridge University Press for all their assistance and in particular for their meticulous attention to detail. We are finally grateful to all the contributors for agreeing to participate in this expression of regard for an outstanding scholar.

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Introduction

EDWARD MILLER

From one point of view no introduction to a collection of essays for presentation to Rodney Hilton is called for: the very fact of their presentation is itself indicative of his standing and reputation among the economic and social historians of his generation, not only in this country but throughout Europe and beyond. The essays, however, will be read in the future as well as in the present, a prospect which makes appropriate a few preliminary words about Hilton and his work. The outline story of his career can be quickly told. Born in 1916, he was educated at Manchester Grammar School and from there went on to Balliol College and later Merton College, Oxford. It was at Oxford that, under the guidance of R. V. Lennard, he was launched into research on the social and economic history of the medieval English countryside. His book on the Leicester and Owston abbey estates during the later middle ages, indeed, was all but completed when in 1940 he was absorbed, like so many of his contemporaries, into the armed services. As an earnest of future intentions, however, he also left behind him a short article on a thirteenth-century poem about disputed villein services. In due course it appeared in the pages of the *English Historical Review*, the first of his many works illuminating the condition of the medieval English peasantry. In the meantime he was continuing his education in very different circumstances to those of pre-war Oxford. As a by-product of service in the Middle East, he was able to observe peasant societies at close range and developed the sympathetic knowledge of 'third world' problems that has persisted as a background to so much of his work.

Hilton returned to civilian life in 1946, taking up an appointment at the University of Birmingham. There he has remained, first as Lecturer, then as Reader and since 1963 as Professor of Medieval Social History. His contribution to the University he has

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served for thirty-five years could only adequately be evaluated by a colleague; but even an outsider may recognize the fact that the Birmingham School of History has become one of the most active centres of research into medieval social history in this country and appreciate, too, the distinction of many of Hilton's pupils in that School. The outside viewer, however, is no less likely to be impressed by Hilton's own record of publications. He has been and continues to be a prolific author, whose writings possess a certain intrinsic unity. His interests have kept their original focus upon the late medieval English countryside. This countryside is viewed in breadth and in depth, and its denizens include the inhabitants of market towns as well as of villages, rural craftsmen as well as agriculturalists, clerics as well as laymen, landlords as well as tenants. On the other hand Hilton's instincts and sympathies lead him to view this 'fair field' from the angle of the peasant majority. It was logical, therefore, that when he was invited to be Ford's Lecturer at Oxford in 1973 he should have chosen to discourse upon the English peasantry in the later middle ages.

It is appropriate to dwell for a moment on these Ford lectures. They illustrate better than anything else Hilton's approaches to the social history of the middle ages; they sum up a number of the conclusions to which he has been led; and they also face certain of the theoretical questions which a study of the medieval peasantry is likely to raise. Evidently, here and elsewhere, Marxism provides no small part of his own theoretical framework. It is a Marxism the 'classical' doctrines of which have been modified and developed particularly by the work of those sociologists and social anthropologists who have expanded our knowledge of the social structures and transformations in the recent or contemporary 'third world'. This framework of discussion Hilton developed even more fully in his earlier book, *Bond Men Made Free*, where it is seen in its application to a wider European context, and this again is entirely characteristic. Even when his concern is with England, he constantly draws our attention to the larger European background and to comparisons with what was happening in the other western lands. Probably, indeed, he would acknowledge some initial inspiration from Marc Bloch; and since then he has been one of an international group of scholars (they have included E. A. Kosminsky, M. M. Postan, Georges Duby and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie) who have formulated the questions we now ask about

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medieval society. The outcome may not have been total agreement or even consensus, but there are whole areas in which a deeper understanding has been attained. This is no single scholar's achievement, but Hilton has made a distinctive and substantial contribution to it. That, in turn, makes no more than natural the close personal association he has enjoyed with so many leading social historians in so many countries.

The quality of Hilton's contribution to the study of medieval society, however, is also rooted in another of his characteristics: his unwillingness to divorce abstract ideas from the real world of people and places. His points of departure are always the medieval sources, scrutinized with patience and in scrupulous detail. A characteristic example is to be found in the pages of *Bond Men Made Free* dealing with the revolt at St Albans in 1381. Sources that would illumine the social structure of St Albans itself fail him, but he has found in the Public Record Office fourteenth-century tax returns for neighbouring Watford and Barnet which provide pointers to the kind of small-town society which, at St Albans, had to face the great abbey which dominated the town. These returns give a point and precision to his discussion of the revolt at St Albans which would otherwise have been lacking.

This rooting of description and analysis in the sources is characteristic of virtually everything that Hilton has written, and by no means least of his Ford lectures. The evidence out of which these lectures were constructed, he tells us, 'is mainly drawn from the documentation of thirty or forty villages in the counties of Stafford, Worcester, Warwick and Gloucester', that west midland area the sources of which he knows with a unique intimacy. Some of them (the Stoneleigh leger book and minister's accounts from the Clarence estates in Warwickshire) he has himself edited; and he has also encouraged a liberal attitude as to what sources are. He has done much to further medieval archaeological investigation, as well as making effective use of its results. Even in an area as fortunately endowed as the west midlands, written records need supplementation, so that visiting historical monuments is one of the ways in which he adds to them. He also goes beyond those documents which are apt to be the normal fare of the historian. Nearly twenty years ago the poem, *A Good Short Debate between Winner and Waster*, was put under contribution in his paper on capital formation in feudal society; and what could be learned

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from literature was likewise demonstrated, with all due caution, in the Ford lectures. In his discussion of the social structure of villages recourse is had to fourteenth-century sermons, Gower's *Vox clamantis*, Langland and other writers in his tradition, the Towneley plays and *Mum and the Sothsegger*. Hilton's sense of literature as historical evidence makes his contribution to the perennial debate about the Robin Hood ballads no more than a natural extension of his interests.

His intimate familiarity with the west midland sources in particular has borne two sorts of fruit. One was the book *A Medieval Society* published in 1966: an attempt to take a total view of 'the society of peasants, townsmen, knights, barons and clergy' inhabiting the region in the years around 1300. There is no other regional study for this period that in any way compares with *A Medieval Society*. It remains a model still awaiting imitators. The other fruit of Hilton's mastery of the west midland sources is the readiness of the denizens of his 'fair field' to take on a human face and human attributes. We know much more about the peasant cultivator after encountering John Mashon of Ombersley and learning of the crops he had sown in the fields, his livestock, his poultry, his implements, his firewood, the bacon in his larder. It is almost a disappointment to learn that he owes his immortality to the fact that he was a horse-thief on the run. There is also enlightenment about the costs of war in what Hilton tells us about Painswick in 1442. In that year the widows of the manor cried out against its lord, the earl of Shrewsbury, who had taken sixteen of his tenants with him to the French war and brought only five of them home again. The widows of those who did not return lost not only their husbands but their holdings, although happily their outcry ended in the righting of this last injustice.

In 1940, when Hilton was completing the draft of his study of the Leicester and Owston estates, the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were something of a neglected age in English rural history, if only because this was the time when the rich vein of earlier seigneurial records was becoming attenuated. This neglect has ceased, and for that much of the credit and responsibility must go to Hilton. He has established outlines of social development that are both credible and of profound significance for the evolution of a later society in England; he has done so without losing sight of the fact that the actors in these historical dramas

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were individual human beings; and he has stimulated others to pursue parallel or converging lines of enquiry. These are good reasons for offering him this present tribute.

To those of us who have been privileged to enjoy Rodney Hilton's friendship or acquaintanceship the compilation of this volume is also a happy inspiration, a timely remembrance of the man as well as the scholar at the point when he relinquishes many of his more onerous responsibilities. Remembrance of the man will be, no doubt, a reflection of all sorts of personal equations; but few will deny him a splendid capacity for gusto, a mastery of the throw-away line, a down-to-earth common sense, a willingness not to see everything in too serious a light. These are perhaps some of the qualities that have made him so successful as a teacher as well as so acceptable as a friend. It may also not be too fanciful to think that he has dwelt so long with peasants that he has taken on a somewhat rustic appearance, so that a village hostelry appears a perfectly natural setting for him. Not least characteristic of him, however, is his instinctive sympathy with the young, and this as well as his qualities as a scholar has contributed to the influence which this volume demonstrates.