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Paul Vinogradoff

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Villainage in England

Russian historian and jurist Sir Paul Vinogradoff (1854–1925) maintained throughout his life a serious scholarly interest in the history of Great Britain, his adopted country. Elected to a professorship at Oxford in 1903, to the British Academy in 1905, and knighted for services to the realm in increasing Anglo-Russian understanding during the war (1917), Vinogradoff demonstrates in this book of 1892 both his interest in feudal England and his historiographic approach, which relied on detailed research using primary sources to examine individuals, communities, and social structures. Divided into two essays – ‘The Peasantry of the Feudal Age’ and ‘The Manor and the Village Community’ – the work used England’s extensive feudal records to draw a general character of the period. *Villainage* will interest students of English or European medieval history and scholars of mediaeval legal history and of developments in nineteenth-century historiography.

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Essays in English Mediaeval History

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Villainage in England

ESSAYS

IN

ENGLISH MEDIAEVAL HISTORY

PAUL VINOGRADOFF

PROFESSOR IN THE UNIVERSITY OF MOSCOW

Oxford

AT THE CLARENDON PRESS

1892

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P R E F A C E



A FOREIGNER'S attempt to treat of difficult and much disputed points of English history requires some justification. Why should a Russian scholar turn to the arduous study of English mediaeval documents? Can he say anything of sufficient general interest to warrant his exploration of so distant a field?

The first question is easier to answer than the second.

There are many reasons why we in Russia are especially keen to study what may be called social history—the economic development of nations, their class divisions and forms of co-operation. We are still living in surroundings created by the social revolution of the peasant emancipation; many of our elder contemporaries remember both the period of serfdom and the passage from it to modern life; some have taken part in the working out and putting into practice of the emancipating acts. Questions entirely surrendered to antiquarian research in the West of Europe are still topics of contemporary interest with us.

It is not only the civil progress of the peasantry that we have to notice, but the transformation and partial decay of the landed gentry, the indirect influence of the economic convulsions on politics, ideas, and morality, and, in a more special way, the influence of free competition on soil and people that had been fettered for ages, the passage from 'natural husbandry' to the money system, the substitution of rents for labour, above all, the working of communal institutions under the sway of the lord and in their modern free shape. Government and society have to deal even now with problems that must be solved in the light of

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history, if in any light at all, and not by instinct groping in the dark. All such practical problems verge towards one main question: how far legislation can and should act upon the social development of the agrarian world. Are economic agencies to settle for themselves who has to till land and who shall own it? Or can we learn from Western history what is to be particularly avoided and what is to be aimed at? I do not think that anybody is likely to maintain at the present day, that, for instance, a study of the formation and dissolution of the village community in the West would be meaningless for politicians and thinkers who have to concern themselves with the actual life of the village community in the East.

Another powerful incitement comes from the scientific direction lately assumed by historical studies. They have been for a long time very closely connected with fine literature: their aim was a lifelike reproduction of the past; they required artistic power, and stirred up feelings as well as reflective thought. Such literary history has a natural bent towards national tradition, for the same reason that literature is attracted by national life: the artist gains by being personally in touch with his subject; it is more easy for him to cast his material into the right mould. Ancient history hardly constitutes an exception, because the elements of classical civilisation have been appropriated by European nations so as to form part of their own past. What I call literary history has by no means done all its work. There is too much in the actions of men that demands artistic perception and even divination on the part of the historian, to allow this mode of treatment to fall into decay. But nobody will deny that historical study is extending more and more in the direction of what is now called anthropology and social science. Historians are in quest of laws of development and of generalisations that shall unravel the complexity of human culture, as physical

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and biological generalisations have put into order our knowledge of the phenomena of nature.

There is no subject more promising from this point of view than the history of social arrangements. It borders on political economy, which has already attained a scientific standing; part of its material has been fashioned by juridical doctrine and practical law, and thereby moulded into a clear, well-defined shape; it deals with facts recurring again and again with much uniformity, and presenting great facilities for comparison; the objects of its observation are less complex than the phenomena of human thought, morality, or even political organisation. And from the point of view of the scientific investigator there can be no other reason for taking up a particular epoch or nation, but the hope of getting a good specimen for analysis, and of making use of such analysis for purposes of generalisation.

Now I think that there can be no better opportunity for studying early stages of agrarian development than that afforded by English mediaeval history. The sources of information are comparatively abundant in consequence of the powerful action of central authority; from far back in the feudal time we get legal and fiscal documents to enlighten us, not only about general arrangements but even about details in the history of landed property and of the poorer classes. And the task of studying the English line of development is rendered especially interesting because it stands evidently in close connexion with the variations of the same process on the continent. Scandinavian, German, French, Italian, and Spanish history constantly present points of comparison, and such differences as there are may be traced to their origins just because so many facts are in common to start with. I think that all these considerations open a glorious vista for the enquirer, and the interest excited by such publications as those of Fustel de Coulanges proves that the public is

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fully alive to the importance of those studies in spite of their dry details.

What could I personally undertake to further the great objects of such investigation? The ground has been surveyed by powerful minds, and many controversies show that it is not an easy one to explore. Two main courses seemed open in the present state of the study. A promising method would have been to restrict oneself to a definite provincial territory, to get intimately acquainted with all details of its geography, local history, peculiarities of custom, and to trace the social evolution of this tract of land as far back as possible, without losing sight of general connexions and analogies. How instructive such work may become may be gathered from Lamprecht's monumental monograph on the Moselland, which has been rightly called by its author 'Deutsches Wirtschaftsleben im Mittelalter.' Or else, one might try to gather the general features of the English mediaeval system as embodied in the numerous, one might almost say innumerable, records of the feudal period, and to work back from them into the imperfectly described pre-feudal age. Such enquiry would necessarily leave out local peculiarities, or treat them only as variations of general types. From the methodical point of view it has the same right to existence as any other study of 'universalities' which are always exemplified by individual beings, although the latter are not made up by them, but appear complicated in every single case by additional elements.

Being a foreigner, I was driven to take the second course. I could not trust myself to become sufficiently familiar with local life, even if I had the time and opportunity to study it closely. I hope such investigations may be taken up by scholars in every part of England and may prosper in their hands; the gain to general history would be simply invaluable. And I was not sorry of the necessity of going by the second track, because I could hope to achieve something

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useful even if I went wrong on many points. Every year brings publications of Cartularies, Surveys, Court-rolls; the importance of these legal and economic records has been duly realised, and historians take them more and more into account by the side of annals and statutes. But surely some attempt ought to be made to concentrate the results of scattered investigation in this field. The Cartularies of Ramsey, Battle, Bury St. Edmunds, St. Paul's, the Hundred Rolls, the Manorial Records of Broughton and King's Ripton, give us material of one and the same kind, which, for all its wealth and variety, presents great facilities for classification and comparison¹. I have seen a good many of these documents, both published and in manuscript, and I hope that my book may be of some service in the way of concentrating this particular study of manorial records. I am conscious how deficient my work is in many respects; but if by the help of corrections, alterations, additions, it may be made to serve to some extent for the purpose, I shall be glad to have written it. I may say also that it is intended to open the way, by a careful study of the feudal age, for another work on the origins of English peasant life in the Norman and pre-Norman periods.

One pleasant result the toil expended on mediaeval documents has brought me already. I have come into contact with English scholars, and I can say that I have received encouragement, advice, and support in every case when I had to apply for them, and in so large and liberal a measure as I could hardly hope for or expect. Of two men, now dead, I have to repeat what many have said before me. Henry Bradshaw was the first to lay an English

¹ Miss Lamond's edition of Walter of Henley did not appear until the greater part of my book was in type. I had studied the work in MS. So also I studied the Cartulary of Battle Abbey in MS. without being aware that it had been edited by Mr. Scargill Bird. Had Mr. Gomme's Village Communities come to my hands at an earlier date I should have made more references to it.

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MS. cartulary before me in the Cambridge University Library; and in all my travels through European libraries and archives I never again met such a guide, so ready to help from his inexhaustible store of palaeographical, linguistic and historical learning. Walford Selby was an invaluable friend to me at the Record Office—always willing and able to find exactly what was wanted for my researches.

It would be impossible to mention all those from whom I have received help in one way or another, but I should like to speak at least of a few. I have the pleasant duty of thanking the Marquis of Bath for the loan of the Longleat MS. of Bracton, which was sent for my use to the Bodleian Library. Lord Leigh was kind enough to allow of my coming to Stoneleigh Abbey to work at a beautiful cartulary in his possession, and the Hon. Miss Cordelia Leigh took the pains of making for me some additional extracts from that document. Sir Frederick Pollock and Mr. York Powell have gone through the work of reading my proofs, and I owe to them many suggestions for alterations and improvements. I have disputed some of Mr. Seebohm's opinions on mediaeval history; but I admit freely that nobody has exercised a stronger influence on the formation of my own views, and I feel proud that personal friendship has given me many opportunities of admiring the originality and width of conception of one who has done great things for the advancement of social history. As for F. W. Maitland, I can only say that my book would hardly have appeared at all if he had not taken infinite trouble to further its publication. He has not only done everything in his power to make it presentable to English readers in style and wording, but as to the subject-matter, many a friendly suggestion, many a criticism I have had from him, and if I have not always profited by them, the blame is to be cast entirely on my own obstinacy.

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