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Studying Local and Regional History in Britain and Ireland. The Open University MA in History

Ian Donnachie

Let me begin with two quotes from distinguished practitioners which provide useful pointers to what this new OU course is all about:

*No society in the past should be viewed in isolation, not only because hardly any of the societies that historians have studied were isolated in reality, but because many of their most significant features prevailed over a wide area at the same time. (John Tosh with Sean Lang, *The Pursuit of History*, p.162)*

Singular events can only be understood by being connected in a structured cause and effect way. It is this process of developing general as opposed to single-event explanations that has distinguished constructionist historical understanding. This process recognises that historical knowledge and explanation can be derived not only inductively, that is reasoning from the singular instance to the general, but also deductively, that is reasoning from the general premise back to the specific instance. (Munslow, pp. 118-119)

Not all would necessarily agree with either, but since debate is one of the most interesting things that drives the work of historians, these precepts seems highly appropriate for a course with a strong emphasis on the exploration of major historical themes in communities and localities. With that in mind the OU History Department set about designing a Taught Masters course, do-able anywhere in Britain and Ireland which teaches a range of historical skills and opens up the opportunity to undertake an appropriate project in local or regional history.

Introduction

This is a highly practical course which introduces students to seminal works of history using local and regional sources and yet regarded of national, indeed, international importance, teaches the diverse sources which historians use in their work, shows how to deploy a wide range of historical skills, introduces the historiography of England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland, and provides the opportunity to study some major

historical themes that have particular relevance in localities and regions of Britain and Ireland and offer scope for a research project undertaken in the final third of the programme.

The members of the team are all highly experienced historians, and, while not necessarily specialising in local and regional history *per se*, have worked on topics drawing heavily on the resources of many of the libraries and archives students are likely to use in their project. All have wide experience of teaching historical research skills and are experts on the themes. Equally important, their interests have invariably extended over different parts of Britain and Ireland (and in most cases beyond) so they bring specialist knowledge of one or more of the constituent countries and invaluable comparisons to their contributions.

Overview

The course begins with a challenging task, a close reading and study of Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*, a substantial and seminal work, which even twenty years after it appeared remains enormously influential because of the new agendas it addressed and its use of local and regional research, mainly but not exclusively in the English Midlands and East Anglia, to elucidate many of issues which historians had at that time had either previously neglected or were only beginning to investigate more closely. In particular, as the title suggests, the authors set out to examine the roles of families, and especially women, in enterprise, since in business as much else in history women up to that point had been essentially invisible. Students are guided through the reading of Davidoff and Hall, see how the book was received, read the critiques of other historians, and how the authors responded, thus sharpening awareness of changing historical discourse and approaches to the past.

Secondly, there is a substantial component dealing with skills and resources. By close engagement with the teaching material and carrying out the practical exercises incorporated in the teaching students learn about searching the internet, finding secondary sources, the growing range of electronic resources, including academic journals, and the use of reference works and finding aids. We then move on to examine online primary sources (including newspapers and periodicals), legal and social history collections, ephemera, such as directories, historical statistics and the census, maps and visual sources. Finally students are given detailed guidance on the gathering of online sources, citations and how best to plan and benefit from archival visits that will become an essential basis for later research on a local project. Students will also be using another

set book, Philip Riden's *Local History. A Handbook for Beginners*, which we chose from a range of similar guides because it was not only short, but very practical. While it covers only England and Wales, we think it has universal utility and provides an excellent handbook for this section of A825 (and, incidentally, further excellent advice about sources, archives and project planning).

Because we know students will be working locally or regionally we expect that they will devote considerable attention to this dimension of the work, hence our units on historiography in England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland. Regardless of location we expect people to study all four components, because in their different ways and with different approaches, they highlight the many comparisons and contrasts between the four nations. Although developments in the discourses of history and in historical agendas in England undoubtedly influenced those elsewhere it by no means provided the template and we want students to be aware of that no matter where they are studying the course and will embark on a piece of research. We think the reviews of local and regional historiography are useful research background for a project, but inevitably further reading in the numerous works will be required.

The final and most substantial undertaking is a study of the major course themes, four of six options, chosen from: crime, policing and penal policy; the roles of families; poverty and welfare; industrialisation; religion; and urbanisation. We chose these after much deliberation because each offers an interesting range of topics in social, cultural, economic and religious history across the period and also provide good opportunities for local projects drawing on local libraries and archives.

Local/Regional Historiography

As to the historiography, we introduce issues in local and regional history and the discourses of history in each of the four nations of England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland, with reviews of relevant literature and sources for further study and research. By the time people have completed this they should have an appreciation of the ways local and regional histories have been approached and described. They will notice the influence of new agendas and approaches in historical studies, especially within English history where the distinction between local, regional and national history is more clearly defined. Students will also have some appreciation of the writing of history and the major issues that have been discussed in each context, and the distinctive literatures and

sources that will help provide the context for studying the course themes and later project planning.

While there are many issues surrounding definition we see local history covering communities and localities and the study of the developments and institutions that helped to shape them. A distinguished proponent of the genre, John Marshall, was anxious to move local history from what he called ‘an obsession with the discrete parish’ and ‘the origin, growth, decline and fall of a local community’ and to place it in a wider context.¹ One of the key aims of the course is to help see the bigger picture and position students own work and research in a national framework.

Regional history is concerned with much larger geographical areas having distinctive cultural, social and economic identities. For example, Stobart and Raven see regions as shaped by an already established socio-economic landscape, in this case given identity by the growth of towns and by industrialisation in the English Midlands.² But as Lord observes this is a definition which actually welds the local and the regional, as it does in the more recent *Victoria County Histories* and many journals devoted to the subject in each country. In the units students will encounter further discussion and can follow up some of the debates about the boundaries of the subject.

Beyond coping with definitions another thing that emerges from all four units is the long tradition of local history, invariably promoted by amateur local studies. The national and county societies, many of which were established in the nineteenth century, united amateurs and professionals and this relationship was enhanced in the twentieth century by the teaching of local history in university under-graduate and extra-mural classes. As Riden points out, a complex mix of enthusiasms was harnessed up to more systematic research on a much wider range of topics, including social, economic and cultural histories, the results being published in journals and monographs.³ Not only this, but professional historians setting out to produce case studies that would enhance greater understanding of national developments were increasingly attracted to local history which, as a result, gained greater respectability.

In the units we are dealing with four different templates, but like the tools that are required to construct the historical models for each nation, they

¹ Quoted in Lord, p. 69.

² J.Stobart and N. Raven, *Towns, Regions and Industries: Urban and Industrial Change in the Midlands*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2005.

³ Riden, especially pp. 16-19.

all have a great deal in common. While England cannot be taken simply as a template for the others, many of the themes covered by local and regional history have been explored there more consistently and systematically than elsewhere. This comes over very clearly in Kate Tiller's review of the way local and regional studies have developed in England where there has been a strong focus on teaching, increasing professionalization, and research cascading down to local history societies and enthusiasts. The more recent emphasis on social and economic history, has helped expand the subject and extend its coverage to new areas of enquiry, among them family and community history or oral history which often lead into research on other topics.

There was a similar upsurge and interest in the subject in the other three nations, though as the authors point out there are sometimes problems identifying what is local and what is national. Trevor Herbert and Helen Barlow in their contribution rightly observe that much local history in Wales is actually Welsh national history, while the same could be said for Ireland and for Scotland. As in England there was a long tradition of local studies in all three countries with subjects like history, archaeology (and often natural history) promoted by the national and local societies, the latter often on a county-wide basis. Many of these are still active and have been joined by an array of newer societies including umbrella organisations promoting the subject, such as the British Association for Local History, Scottish Local History Forum, Federation of Ulster Local Studies, Federation of Local History Societies (in the Republic of Ireland) and other specialist societies interested in local studies. As in England the academic status of the subject has improved and if one takes account of the numerous courses in Welsh, Scottish and Irish history with local content in each context it remains a vibrant subject with a growing literature. For example, Janice Holmes highlights the changes that have taken place in Irish studies, as local and regional histories on both sides of the border have become more professionalised. As everywhere there was a long tradition of civic, county and provincial histories, which have not entirely disappeared. But thanks partly to the new agendas the discourses have shifted more towards the idea of people and place over time and put an increasing emphasis on community history drawing more extensively on social, economic and cultural history.

In the national context regional history, as I've suggested, can be a tricky concept. In my own contribution about Scotland I suggest there are many 'Scotlands' and the same caveat applies to the generalisations that one can make about the other three countries. While the Highlands 'fit in' to Scottish history generally, the area has a highly distinctive history, though

parallels can be drawn with the demographic, linguistic and cultural histories of north and mid-Wales and the west of Ireland. There are also many distinctive English regions, often corresponding with the old shires or counties, which have quite particular histories often as far removed from each other historically as they are geographically. The city and the region is another concept that helps to extend the boundaries of the subject from the local to the regional as many urban histories, such as that of Cardiff or Newcastle-upon-Tyne, clearly demonstrate. London is highly distinctive as the largest urban place as well as the political centre of England and unmatched by any other cities except perhaps Edinburgh and Dublin which also share functions as major regional centres and national capitals. Beyond these examples, there is a large literature on regional history which needs to be assimilated in most local studies.

While there are many challenges of definition and scope, the contributions help explain local historiography in the four contexts, showing not only the enormous range of research that has been undertaken, but also suggesting the tools that can be used for exciting and potentially path breaking work in future.

The Six Themes

Historians studying Britain and Ireland during the period 1750-1950 have identified many important themes which they have explored across two centuries of dramatic political, economic and social change. The thematic approach many historians have adopted allows us to focus, selectively, on a series of major themes, examining in each case the key developments, major issues and historical debates they have provoked. We can identify short, medium and long term trends, seeing developments and changes over time, as well as comparisons and contrasts in different periods of time. A good example which we do not examine is national identity, an issue that has pre-occupied historians of the whole period. We are also interested in examining some of the relationships between the themes and so far as space and time allow other related developments.

The six themes have been chosen because they present an interesting range of topics of national importance, but with considerable local significance throughout Britain and Ireland. The research approach taken by each author has been influenced by the new approaches of recent years, some of which are encountered in the skills and historiographies blocks. Finally, all the themes are likely to provide a range of do-able projects drawing on the resources of local and regional history libraries and archives.

Crime, policing and penal policy, as Clive Emsley points out, is a relatively new area of enquiry. It has grown rapidly in recent years, thanks partly to the efforts of Clive and his associates in and beyond The Open University. This theme looks at the history of crime and policing in the context of social change, and outlines the development of the underlying institutions and the legislation designed to pursue, prosecute and punish offenders. It introduces some of the theories, current debates and problems, for example, reasons for changes in the criminal statistics and their validity at different points. A review of the research agenda and of primary sources indicates potential subjects for enquiry and possible research projects for those who ultimately select this field.

All of the themes affected families and communities and vice-versa. Dan Weinbren introduces the debates about what is meant by family, then explores such topics as the demographic trends that influenced family size and structure, gender issues and responsibilities, and occupational and class roles. A wide variety of sources are identified and detailed guidance and suggestions are offered on oral history, which as Dan says can bring the past to life in a thought-provoking way, illuminate society's understanding of the past and help us understand the richness and complexity of the subject. Many suggestions are made for further research on the roles of families.

Like crime and policing, our third theme, poverty, has always been present in rural and urban societies, but was greatly influenced by both industrialisation and urbanisation. Paul Lawrence examines the development of welfare legislation, the relief of the poor and changing perceptions of poverty. Many of the issues surrounding the Old Poor Law, the introduction and operation of the New Poor Law and subsequent nineteenth and twentieth century legislation are addressed. This is followed by a review of debates about the relief of poverty, taking account of variations between the different countries. Who were the poor and how were they perceived? What were they able to do for themselves and how did they interact with the mechanisms of welfare? Finally Paul suggests avenues for further research in this fascinating topic.

Industrialisation provides the economic backcloth to the other themes, since there were few communities which were not touched to some degree by the changes it brought in its wake. Here I introduce definitions of the industrial revolution and the debates surrounding it, examine the validity or otherwise of economic models historians have used to help explain the processes at work, look at the relationship between the

economy and the state, and between agriculture and industrialisation. We then discuss regions and industries, covering topics like demography and labour, consumption, class and gender. I close with some case studies and a review of sources and potential projects.

Another wide ranging and controversial topic, religion, is addressed by Janice Holmes. Here Janice covers the major developments in the religious history of Britain and Ireland from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries. Using local and regional examples this block surveys the various approaches that historians have used to interrogate the field. It looks at key historiographical debates including topics in the new religious history such as secularisation and religious decline. Arising from the case studies and the review of both literature and sources students will find considerable scope for worthwhile investigations if they choose to work on this theme.

Chris Williams deals with the study of urban history, the emphasis being on the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. One of Chris's central concerns is what has been called the 'Urban Renaissance', which in the period 1700-1850 saw the dramatic growth of towns and cities. This coincided with the agricultural and industrial revolutions and the profound demographic changes such as population growth and migration which accompanied them. Chris shows how these changes expressed themselves in the social and built environments. We are also introduced to methodologies, debates and a wide range of sources which will allow us to research urban developments in this and later periods.

As I suggest, there are significant overlaps and relationships between the themes, many of which will emerge in study. For example, urbanisation and industrialisation both had profound effects on families through migration, occupational shifts, and working and living conditions; they affected levels of poverty and crime and the responses of authorities to such social problems. Both also had very important cultural effects, notably on religion, which beyond theological and sectarian concerns drew the churches into the debates about social and moral behaviour and the numerous reform issues which dominated much of the period like those concerned with welfare, education, public health and temperance. Take any of the themes and a complex web of inter-relationships can be constructed. Realistically we cannot address all of these in detail, but they will undoubtedly be more apparent when students have completed thematic work and are beginning to think about a potential project.

Students will study four of these themes in detail, working through appropriate set books, learning materials, web-based resources and exercises, supported by on-line forums and interaction with tutors. Although not obliged to, we think many will read all six and we recommend this if time can be found. This likely to give further insights into the chosen specialism and ultimately added depth to project planning, research and dissertation.

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