

STUDIES IN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL HISTORY

This series, specially commissioned by the Economic History Society, provides a guide to the current interpretations of the key themes of economic and social history in which advances have recently been made or in which there has been significant debate.

Originally entitled 'Studies in Economic History', in 1974 the series had its scope extended to include topics in social history, and the new series title, 'Studies in Economic and Social History', signals this development.

The series gives readers access to the best work done, helps them to draw their own conclusions in major fields of study, and by means of the critical bibliography in each book guides them in the selection of further reading. The aim is to provide a springboard to further work rather than a set of pre-packaged conclusions or short-cuts.

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DONALD N. MCCLOSKEY

*Professor of Economics and of History,
University of Iowa*

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Preface

The introduction of economic thinking into economic history, overdue in 1957, is largely accomplished by now. What follows is an account for the benefit of non-economists of what has been done so far. The bibliography, long for a book in this series though short by comparison with a complete one, will suggest the scale of the accomplishment. The text amounts to a running commentary on the bibliography: a specialised bibliography of what has been done by historical economists on a particular theme might begin with the citations in the text.

The account is written by a participant, which gives it the advantages and disadvantages of contemporary history. I have tried to be fair, but it is impossible at this range to be Olympian. We will not know for another century or two where the cycle of revisionism on American slavery or British entrepreneurial failure will come to rest. In the meantime we can only note the ways in which economists have altered the terms of the debates.

For no very good reason the piece has taken embarrassingly long to write, in odd moments over many years. The three editors who have seen it from conception to creation – L. A. Clarkson, T. C. Smout and the late Michael Flinn — were extraordinarily patient with my delays. Stanley Engerman and Lance Davis provided me with useful comments on the penultimate version. Various seminar audiences have heard versions of it, and set me on the right path. I thank especially the long-suffering members of the Economic History Workshop at the University of Chicago, who have heard versions of it several times.

Editor's Preface

When this series was established in 1968 the first editor, the late Professor M. W. Flinn, laid down three guiding principles. The books should be concerned with important fields of economic history; they should be surveys of the current state of scholarship rather than a vehicle for the specialist views of the authors; and, above all, they were to be introductions to their subject and not 'a set of pre-packaged conclusions'. These aims were admirably fulfilled by Professor Flinn and by his successor, Professor T. C. Smout, who took over the series in 1977. As it passes to its third editor and approaches its third decade, the principles remain the same.

Nevertheless, times change, even though principles do not. The series was launched when the study of economic history was burgeoning and new findings and fresh interpretations were threatening to overwhelm students – and sometimes their teachers. The series has expanded its scope, particularly in the area of social history – although the distinction between 'economic' and 'social' is sometimes hard to recognise and even more difficult to sustain. It has also extended geographically; its roots remain firmly British, but an increasing number of titles is concerned with the economic and social history of the wider world. However, some of the early titles can no longer claim to be introductions to the current state of scholarship; and the discipline as a whole lacks the heady growth of the 1960s and early 1970s. To overcome the first problem a number of new editions, or entirely new works, have been commissioned – some have already appeared. To deal with the second, the aim remains to publish up-to-date introductions to important areas of debate. If the series can demonstrate to students and their teachers the importance of the discipline of economic and social history and excite its further study, it will continue the task so ably begun by its first two editors.

The Queen's University of Belfast

L.A. CLARKSON

Editor