Reviews in History

Published on *Reviews in History* (http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews)

The Origins of the English Gentry

Review Number:
402
Publish date:
Thursday, 1 April, 2004
Author:
Peter Coss
ISBN:
521862673X
Date of Publication:
2003
Price:
£50.00
Pages:
341pp.
Publisher:
Cambridge University Press
Place of Publication:
Cambridge
Reviewer:
Michael Hicks

Professor Coss has written a splendid analysis of the changing aristocracy of the two hundred years after 1150 that will be required reading for the next century or so. What he has also attempted is even more bold and original, nothing more nor less than to explain the evolution of the English gentry. From the Dark Ages into the nineteenth century and beyond all European countries have possessed a noble elite. England differed from its neighbours, each with a single broad *noblesse*, because its aristocracy were divided between a numerically restricted, titled nobility, who sat in the House of Lords, and the gentry, who were merely genteel and eligible for election to the Commons. The gentry were thus 'a kind of lesser nobility' whom, as K. B. McFarlane long ago suggested, were what remained when the parliamentary baronage were defined in the fourteenth century. Professor Nigel Saul has traced the emergence of ranks within the gentry. The present reviewer discerned changes in nomenclature rather than in numbers and in composition between the magnates, barons, and knights of the Norman era and the parliamentary peerage, knights, esquires and gentlemen of the fifteenth to nineteenth centuries. To argue that the English gentry were 'formed between the mid-thirteenth and the mid-fourteenth century' (abstract, p. iii), as Coss does, is therefore controversial. If his important book is indeed 'the first sustained attempt to explore the origins of the gentry and to account for its contours and peculiarities as a social formation' (abstract, p. iii), it is not likely to enjoy universal acceptance.

Coss is especially well equipped for such an ambitious project. His own research on thirteenth-century

Warwickshire stimulated his hypothesis of 'a crisis of the knightly class' and generated both a massive edition of early records of Coventry and a monograph on aristocratic society 1180-1280. He has written both on the medieval knight and lady and piloted his current thesis in the journal *Past and Present*.(1) Warwickshire often features in his examples and footnotes and so too do his early papers, on the knightly crisis itself, on contemporary terminology, bastard feudalism, and the diffusion of ideas, on occasion adapted or restated in the face of valid criticisms. He ranges across five centuries, expounds convincingly on topics as varied as Anglo-Saxon honour, exemptions from office, knightly seals, and the emergence of heraldry, and deploys as appropriate (and critically) the most up-to-date academic literature. His discussions of recent historiography are especially clear and illuminating. Coss the innovator, hypothesiser, and controversialist is underpinned by Coss the meticulous researcher, analyst, and open-minded searcher for truth in what is in many ways an exemplary and undoubtedly far-reaching scholarly monograph.

The term gentry as commonly used by historians, so Coss argues, is a construct that historians have applied loosely to rather different societies. Any particular model may not fit a specific society, yet a single definition nevertheless remains desirable, even if Coss rejects as unsatisfactory several devised by previous historians. Contemporary usage, of 'gentilesse' *circa* 1240 and 'gentleman' in 1413, respectively postdate and antedate the phenomenon itself. 'It seems certain that gentility was widely felt and articulated within society long before legislation was in place to tell us so'.(p. 4) To define the gentry as lesser landowners is also unsatisfactory, both because the qualifying income of £20 was too restrictive and because Rosemary Horrox long ago pushed Alan Everitt's pseudo- or urban gentry back into the central middle ages. The mere holding of crown office is also too vague to be useful. Neither the three medieval estates, nor heraldry, nor even the notion of an aristocracy that encompasses both nobility and gentry are useful touchstones. Instead Coss offers four criteria, all of which must be satisfied before the gentry can be said to have emerged: his book is really a commentary on these criteria and demonstrates how and when they were achieved. 'If the meaning of gentry is obvious', he tartly writes, 'it is certainly not obvious from our sources'.(p. 7)

What distinguishes the gentry are four facets of its 'collective territoriality': 'collective identity'; status gradations; public office-holding; and collective authority over the people. The gentry, Coss asserts, have always expressed themselves collectively through national and/ or local organs. It was crucial that they ranked themselves in horizontal bands rather than vertically by ties of lordship. 'There can be no doubt that collective responsibility for the administration of justice is an important facet of the gentry' and that it was their way of exercising 'social power'.(pp. 10-11) Coss conceives of the gentry therefore as a type of lesser nobility, based on landholding, but accommodating townsmen and professionals. It was a territorial elite that exercised public authority in the locality and that

> seeks to exercise collective social control over the populace on a territorial basis, reinforcing individual status and power . It has a collective identity, and collective interests which necessitate the existence of some forum, or interlocking fora, for their articulation[.] (p. 11)

Angevin legal reforms and the 'regular petitioning' to parliament of late thirteenth-century county communities were important preconditions, but it was the explosion of commissions around 1300 that was 'in large measure' the cause of the gentry. 'The first half of the fourteenth century was crucial in terms of the development of collective control over the populace'.(p. 16) Judicial authority was the crucial source 'of the social control without which income and status, that is to say lordship, could not be assured'.(ibid.) It was also at this time that county sentiment and territoriality in all its aspects were consolidated.

The first chapter sets out Coss' argument that the gentry emerged around 1300. The second chapter, 'The Roots of the Gentry', discredits alternative hypotheses that the gentry originated earlier, before the Norman Conquest or alongside the legal reforms of Henry II. Both these periods witnessed some of the distinctive characteristics of the gentry and established some of the foundations for the gentry, yet, so Coss argues, no gentry had yet emerged. Thus the code of honour, gradations of rank, endogamous marriage, and the manorial system that Blair and Gillingham identified in Anglo-Saxon England did indeed contribute to the

emergence of 'a broad seigneurial class' (p. 29), that was already characterised by hall-house and proprietary church. But Anglo-Saxon 'society was dominated by vertical lines of association'(p. 31), and Anglo-Saxon England was a state of the weak Carolingian type that lacked the widespread public offices and powerful assemblies of the thirteenth-century gentry. Neither the local public office nor powerful assemblies of the thirteenth century yet existed. Anglo-Saxon county courts were not representative and were dominated by bishops and magnates.

'There can be no doubt whatsoever that the concept of nobility was widening and deepening in twelfth-century England' (p. 35), Coss emphatically asserts. It was under Henry II that Hugh Thomas has identified many features familiar later, such as bastard feudalism, bastard feudal perversions of justice, county solidarity, and service to the crown. To these Coss adds heritability of land and primogeniture, the development of toponymic surnames, hereditary heraldry, chivalry, the restriction of the title dominus to knights and the formal dubbing of knights, and the proliferation of seals amongst even the petty knights (*milituli*). An exclusive knighthood was being born. Horizontal ties become more visible. 'Heraldry belongs to a highly aristocratic world', he writes. 'A fully chivalric knighthood was born'.(p. 37)

At this stage Coss seems to have proved the case for a twelfth-century gentry. And yet it is not enough for him. 'The power of lordship remained extremely strong', he laments.(p. 40) 'The most significant form of political organisation in England in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries was', he approvingly quotes Crouch, '"a form of power focused on a discrete region and a dominant personality who sought to control it"'. Here horizontal ties have been elevated above being an accompaniment or alternative to lordship, to a development from lordship and a succession to it that are essential prerequisites for Coss' definition of the gentry. Such an argument appears both perverse and anachronistic. Also, of course, twelfth-century aristocrats had not yet fulfilled the thirteenth-century criteria that Coss feels essential to the gentry.

Thirty years ago Coss postulated a crisis of the knightly class in the thirteenth century.(2) His case for an economic crisis is untenable, he now concedes, but the 'knightly class' was nevertheless transformed. The number of knights fell during the thirteenth century, from perhaps 5000 to a quarter of that number, as military service declined and the costs of knighthood both in time and money increased. Most families of *milituli* gave up being knighted. They thereby resigned themselves to reduced status - presumably reluctantly, since knighthood carried a social cachet and 'few people relish downward mobility'.(p. 95) Those who still opted to become knights became an exclusive elite of those with coats of arms, fully conversant with 'the panoply of ideas surrounding chivalry' that they shared with the magnates, with whom they were associated most memorably at the 1306 Feast of the Swans. 'In sum, there is abundant evidence to illustrate both the exclusivity and the binding force of knighthood in and around the time of Edward I'.(p. 146) This 'realisation of a more exclusive knightly class' was a fundamental change, of 'momentous importance in the history of gentility', a crisis of a different kind, and 'an important stage in the development of the lesser nobility and a significant step towards the formation of the English gentry'.(pp. 70, 108)

The Angevin legal reforms that had placed almost all knights on juries, which however took up little of their time, had nevertheless converted very few into trusted agents of the state. A. B. White's notion of 'self-government at the king's command' (3) has been pushed too far back in time and is applied anachronistically to the thirteenth century: 'The result is that an embryo has been mistaken for a mature organism, that is to say the gentry'.(p. 44) Not yet a cohesive class capable of pressing their interests nationally, rather ranged under (and perhaps represented) by their lords, early-thirteenth-century knights seldom attended county courts, which were certainly not forums of debate, and sought not to influence the crown but to protect themselves negatively against royal intervention. It was the wars of Edward I that created more tasks to be performed, that caused an 'explosion of commissions' of array, subsidy, and the peace, and that brought the shires under the rule of 'amateur landlord-magistrates' that endured until 1889 and beyond. By 1307 most knights held such 'major local office'. As partners in county government, they had royal authority to control their tenants; and as county communities they petitioned together to parliament. The percolation down to the esquires and eventually to mere gentlemen of their knightly culture and its symbolism, such as heraldic seals, crystallised the gentry into an elite group clearly demarcated from peerage and peasantry alike.

This lengthy survey undoubtedly fails to represent adequately the subtlety, tenacity, and virtuosity of Coss' arguments. He successfully substantiates most of the developments he reveals. It can be no surprise that Coss is at his most magnificent and most convincing for the era within which he is an acknowledged master. Appropriately demanding to read, his highly academic book deserves to be re-read and re-read, as this reviewer has done, new insights emerging on each occasion from both text and footnotes.

What is much less certain however is whether his findings deserve the significance he attaches to them. Coss asserts his own arguments and dismisses those of others more readily than the evidence permits. He appears to locate many decisive changes much earlier in time than would the historians of later eras: the gentry rule over the localities, effective county communities, and the substitution of intra-class relations for feudal or bastard feudal lordship are obvious examples. The explosion of commissions was surely ephemeral, the experience of particular war-time generations, even if never fully reversed. Edward I's commissioners certainly had less to do than their more numerous fifteenth-century counterparts, still less the Tudor JPs administering stacks of statutes in week-long quarter sessions and almost full-time out of court. If only then were the inactive drones weeded out, in office for prestige rather than service, if many fifteenth-century commissions and most commissioners were inoperational, what evidence has Coss that appointments equated to actual activity around 1300? Was it yet necessary for local standing and material security to hold royal office? Two centuries later Richmond's John Hopton famously did not. If representation had to be expressed through county institutions, such expressions need not indicate county sentiment. It is telling here how little evidence of active representation even Derek Hirst could find under the early Stuarts and how self-interested and negative were the motives Conrad Russell has attributed to them as officeholders. There were unquestionably more horizontal than vertical ties in all periods and the former did ultimately supersede the latter, but surely long after 1350. Even for the fifteenth century, few historians accept Christine Carpenter's argument that witnessing deeds was as potent a tie as retaining. All of Coss' knights were lords, all his gentry were masters, employers, and heads of households, and all commanded men, as did their successors into the seventeenth century and beyond. Lordship over the gentry and by the gentry had centuries yet to run.

Given Coss' definition of the gentry and criteria for the gentry, which were designed to fit what he perceived as the mature model of his own period, it is not surprising that he has successfully traced and even sometimes explained the emergence of these criteria by that date. Whether his definition and criteria are the right ones, however, is a very different matter. He makes only the most superficial of comparisions with what follows. At one level, Coss is highly prescriptive. All his chosen criteria have to be fulfilled for the gentry class to exist: late in the thirteenth century, when most but not quite all are, he prefers to write of a proto-gentry. There is surely much to be said for the definition of the gentry more broadly as a lesser aristocracy that existed at any time between the late Saxon and Victorian eras and yet underwent considerable evolution and development in between. The continuities that Coss himself reveals from the pre-conquest and Angevin eras look more significant than any differences. Since rank and status at all times depended on command of manpower and wealth, which derived principally from land, surely aristocrats before 1250 could remark the differences in local standing that resulted just as decisively as did their counterparts in 1565, Peter Laslett's early modern villagers, or Richard Gough at Myddle in 1698? Even the development of exclusive knighthood may not have been such a profound change. There were certainly more gentry families circa 1500 than knights circa 1200. Many families worth £20 a year chose to be distrained rather than accept promotion. If their assessment of the pros and cons - an assessment shared by most of their peers - placed material prosperity and survival ahead of status, as Coss indicates, it also demonstrates that knighthood was not worth much pain. Most heirs of *milituli* surely retained such other aristocratic attributes as leisure, hospitality, and ideology as Chaucer's Franklin evidently did. A generation later he would have counted as a gentleman. Some who paid fines to avoid knighthood accepted it when really honourable, on the field of battle or at royal hands: witness all those northerners who had paid their fines and yet accepted knighthood on the Scottish campaigns of 1481-2. Furthermore Coss' 'knightly class' is his own construct: it was not a class at all, but rather an intermediate (albeit significant rung) within a broader English aristocracy.

At another level, the choice of criteria is contentious. Is it true that 'magnates were always trying to make

their power truly territorial'?(p. 41) The evidence often suggests not. Did the gentry really seek (or need to seek or feel the need to seek) to control the populace territorially? Here, as elsewhere, Coss asserts what appears a somewhat tendentious Marxism. It certainly is not demonstrable that via control over their tenants, judicial authority gave the gentry the material wealth without which they were nothing, nor that this was particularly bastard feudal or undesirable. For almost any later historian the gentry was especially a hereditary caste. Early modernists would surely assert that a gentleman does not work with his hands. Trade is ignoble, it was often declared into the eighteenth century. The One-Class Society - an undivided aristocracy - and the essentially rural values that Laslett identified in a England that contained pseudo-gentry seem as valid for Coss' era as the seventeenth century that he was writing about. An aristocratic lifestyle was essential both for Sir Thomas Smyth and K. B. McFarlane. Coss' argument does not appear to allow for the numerous barons (however insignificant) whose heirs did not become fourteenth-century peers, nor for what happened to those families that abandoned knighthood without sinking into the peasantry.

In rebuffing those un-named historians (including the present reviewer) who stand for long-term continuities, Coss has argued for momentous changes. 'Admittedly, there are many continuities; but equally, there is hardly any area of life in which the fifteenth-century world, for example, was not radically different in some respects from that of the eleventh and twelfth'.(p. 8) Historians of course always believe that the changes that they perceive in their specific period were fundamental. They are justified insofar as contemporaries also felt that what they were experiencing was novel, important, and moreover the results of their own actions. Hindsight however does have a place in history. How many generations of fundamental and momentous change are compatible with a ruling class (the aristocracy) that persisted for over a thousand years? There is a proprietary air to Coss' work, a desire to locate the crucial changes within his particular patch and to see off any rivals that is familiar to all historians. There is also a certain Whiggish determinism in focussing on what existed at a particular moment. On his larger canvas, therefore, as he intended, Coss has written not 'a history of the gentry per se, but . a contribution to that history'.(p. xi) It is however the most significant such contribution to date.

Notes

1. *The Lady in Medieval England, 1000-1500* (Stroud: Sutton, 1998); 'The formation of the English gentry', *Past & Present*, 147 (1995), 38-64; *The knight in medieval England, 1000-1400* (Stroud: Sutton, 1993); *Lordship, Knighthood and Locality: a Study in English Society c.1180-c.1280* (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 1991); idem and Trevor John, eds,. *The Early Records of Medieval Coventry, with the Hundred Rolls of 1280*, Records of Social and Economic History, ns 11 (1986).Back to (1)
2. 'Sir Geoffrey de Langley and the crisis of the knightly class in thirteenth-century England', *Past & Present*, 68 (1975), 3-37.Back to (2)
3. A. B. White, *Self-Government at the King's Command: a Study in the Beginnings of English Democracy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1933).Back to (3)

Other reviews:
[2]

Source URL: http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/402

Links:
[1] http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/2045
[2] http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews