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Introduction: local history in the twenty-first century

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No branch of history thinks and writes about itself as much as does local history. Political history, social history, economic history, cultural history and the rest have their introspective moments, but local historians, in books and in the pages of such journals as *The Local Historian*, constantly engage in discussion of their subject. They debate its roots, seek to justify its existence, worry about its content and methods and wonder about its future. Tens of thousands of people throughout the country belong to local history societies, attend lectures and read books and articles on local history topics. Thousands of these take their activities a stage further by engaging in research and writing their own local history. This activity is not new, as is shown by Hoskins's correct assumption that there would be a large readership for his handbook on how to write local history. Changes in printing technology have provided new outlets for these enthusiasts. Alongside the established journals and publication series there now exist numerous small-scale newsletters and ephemeral journals, together with short-run editions of pamphlets and books. The Internet has opened up another range of opportunities for the distribution of written material and illustrations. All these forms of publication are catering for a numerous public who would not regard themselves as committed in any specialised way to local history, but have some curiosity about the places in which they live. An even larger audience read the 'Our past' column in local newspapers, or hear and see the various versions of local history to be found on radio and television.

Local history is found throughout the world, and attracts much public interest in very old and stable countries such as Norway, as well as in relatively new post-

colonial societies. A recent international symposium on the subject showed that local history seems to thrive when the past is insecure and debatable. In countries where large numbers of migrants came from the Old World, such as Australia, there is much anguished concern for the indigenous peoples who have been displaced or downgraded by the waves of new settlers, while among the various groups of migrants there is a necessity to establish and celebrate their identity in a new setting, which has given rise to histories of the Italian communities in various parts of Australia, for example. Problems of ethnicity and belonging are encountered in acute forms in eastern and central Europe, where minorities assert their own language and culture. Hungarians in modern Romania write about places which they inhabit and value, but for which there is another history in the view of the Romanian majority. Norway did not attain its full national independence until 1905, and lost it again in 1940–45, which may help to explain the enthusiasm of its people to have their roots in their farms and landscapes researched and published. There are obvious parallels in different parts of Britain. The resurgence of historical interest in Scotland and Wales has been stimulated by a growing consciousness of nationality which bears some resemblance to the commitment to history among the various minorities and relatively newly independent countries in parts of continental Europe. In England the awareness of regional differences, most obviously in the north or in Cornwall, has not yet been a great spur to political activity, as Counce demonstrates in his contribution to this book, which implies that regional loyalties now have a limited influence on the writing of local history.

However, the national and regional ‘questions’, and anxieties about ethnicity and ownership, are not the main reasons for the discussions and disagreements about the role of local history in Britain. One obvious cause for concern, to which Dymond refers in his essay, is the co-existence among those practising the subject of both academics employed in university history departments and those who do not earn their living from their work in the subject. The parallel activities of these two types of historian are obviously liable to lead to resentments and misunderstandings. In depicting these two strands of practitioners the present editors prefer to avoid the words ‘professional’ and ‘amateur’, as these imply a value judgement about the quality of the work done. Many of those who pursue the subject in their spare time are ‘professionals’ in their full-time employment and are capable of higher levels of thought and skill than some of those who are qualified historians. One of the contributors to this book, for example, is a retired professor of psychology, though he falls between the two camps as he has acquired a postgraduate degree in local history. Perhaps there is no need for disquiet about the division into camps, as they seem to learn from each other and

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have developed a degree of interdependence. The two organisations which came together to plan the 2009 conference from which this book grew are both dependent on the participation of academics and those who are not specialist local historians. The Centre for English Local History at Leicester is staffed by academics, but many of its adult students who work for part-time postgraduate degrees are enthusiasts, many of whom have no first degree in history. The same is true of other graduate local history courses offered in a number of universities. The British Association for Local History brings together members of many voluntary local history societies as well as academics, and encourages best practice through its activities and publications.

The conference of 2009 celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of *Local history in England* by W.G. Hoskins, and he epitomises the fusion of those who work inside and outside academic institutions. In the 1930s he was employed at Leicester in the social science faculty, where he gave lectures in economics, but he taught classes in local history to adult students in his spare time and published much of his early work in the pages of the journal of the local society: the *Transactions of the Leicestershire Archaeological Society*. His 1959 book was intended to provide advice, guidance and encouragement for local historians scattered all over England. Herbert Finberg, Hoskins's successor as Head of the Department of English Local History at Leicester, had been a printer and had taught himself historical methods. While at Leicester one of his missions was to foster the groups of adult students who researched their locality with the guidance of an extra-mural or adult education tutor. 'Group work in local history' was a way of pooling the efforts of busy people who had limited time for research, and also made use of the varied talents and expertise available in such a class. A recent example of the successful development of this approach has been that organised by the *Victoria County History* in forming volunteer groups to contribute to the research for the England's Past for Everyone paperback series, which is funded by a grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund. Now volunteers are being drawn into all parts of the *VCH's* activities, including work towards the famous 'red volumes'.

With such examples before us, the local history community might be tempted to say that there is no problem, and that the division across the subject is not as profound as is imagined. There are difficulties, however, partly because university history is becoming more specialised and is under new pressures. Hoskins's successor today would be criticised for publishing as he did in a county journal, as the aspiration now is for articles to appear in 'international peer-reviewed journals'. Academics are being encouraged to develop the skills needed to mechanise their research and increase their output by using online sources, as

Ell urges in his contribution. Scholars used to pride themselves on writing with clarity, and even with wit and elegance, but now some branches of history use a specialised language and do not give high priority to communication with outsiders. Perhaps the folly of this lapse into obscurity has been recognised, as academics are now being urged to make the results of research available to a wider public, and to collaborate with organisations outside the academic institutions. The normal practice of university local historians in previous generations of publishing in local journals and giving lectures to local history societies has become acceptable again. Unfortunately the educational administrators who urge academics to communicate with the general public to increase the 'impact' of academic research imagine on the one hand a superior professional provider of knowledge and on the other a receptive audience of amateurs. They do not realise that in the local history world the potential audience is sophisticated and skilled. The local journals, for example, which are often edited by well-qualified professionals, keep one step ahead of the bureaucrats by refereeing articles systematically. County journals have for many decades had a subscription list covering libraries in all parts of the world which give them a much larger potential international readership than many 'professional' journals. Ironically, an important channel of communication has been lost because of the action of governments driven by a utilitarian agenda: the adult education movement which made local history and archaeology a major dimension of its work has diminished and even died in many regions.