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Hrothgar John Habakkuk (1915–2002)

F. M. L. Thompson

1 Introduction

An outstanding economic historian, greatly admired Principal of Jesus College, Oxford, for seventeen years, and a distinguished Vice-Chancellor of Oxford, Hrothgar John Habakkuk was born on 13 May 1915 in Barry, Glamorgan. His very rare name, which was to cause spelling problems for generations of undergraduates, he owed to a seventeenth-century ancestor's choice of surname, in which he had given free rein to the Welsh sense of affinity with Old Testament Prophets. Hrothgar, as he was always known by his friends before the 1970s, derived from the chance that his father, Evan Guest Habakkuk, happened to be reading *Beowulf* at the time of his son's birth, and this forename was also to cause trouble, not only with its spelling. Later on, as will transpire, he experienced the sea change of becoming "Sir John" and "John" as a response to the euphonics of a knighthood and to spare the anxieties over how to handle "Hrothgar" of a public which was increasingly unfamiliar with the *Beowulf* story. His mother, Anne, was by all accounts a strong and determined, not to say formidable, woman—in this most rationalist of

This chapter is reprinted from Thompson (2004) with the permission of the British Academy. I [Thompson] am grateful to Hrothgar's children, especially David and Alison, for providing me with information about his life, and letting me have copies of the MSS of his major speeches. My debt to Keith Thomas's Address at the Memorial Service is inadequately acknowledged in the footnote references.

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families she told her son when he not unreasonably objected to going to Sunday school, that it was far better than mooning around the house reading the newspaper, and packed him off to good effect; well over three-quarters of a century later he remembered clearly that it was his Band of Hope teacher who first introduced him to St David.¹ Anne's mother, Hrothgar's maternal grandmother, died in 1884 when her daughter was eighteen months old, and this catastrophe—along with cheap American grain—drove his maternal grandfather, a Welsh-speaking Montgomeryshire farmer, to work in the Aberfan colliery. Hrothgar's paternal grandfather, a mining engineer, was killed in a mining accident in 1887. These family misfortunes gave Hrothgar an abiding sense that life is precarious and that chance may bring some unforeseen disaster. This—and of course the experience of coming to maturity in the 1930s—goes a long way towards explaining the streak of caution and circumspection in both his scholarship and university administration.

The move off the land and down the Aberfan mines was not an unmitigated downward slide for the family, as it provided the setting and means for Anne to become a pupil teacher at the age of thirteen, to go on to teacher training, and to become a school teacher in Barry. She always bitterly regretted that the general public-service rule of the times compelled her to abandon her teaching career on marriage. This undoubtedly was a powerful influence on Hrothgar's determination, when he had the opportunity, to further the education of women. The importance of education was the central lesson of his childhood. His father had been obliged to leave school at fourteen, but later through the support of an uncle was able to go to University College of Wales at Aberystwyth, although not able to afford to stay long enough to get an honours degree. After a spell of school-teaching, Evan Guest then became a local government official, as Secretary to the Education Committee of Barry Council and clerk to the governors of Barry County School and of its sister girls' school. This parental combination of learning and teaching furnished an upbringing in which books, serious discussion and argument, and a nonconformist ethic tempered with the agnosticism fostered by rationalist thinking were the main formation influences. His great schoolfriend, Bryan Hopkin—later Chief Economic Adviser to the Treasury—on his first visit to the Habakkuk home was disconcerted when Hrothgar asked him what he thought was the most important common element in the world's religions, not a subject which figured in the Hopkin household's normal discourse (nor a subject which much occupied Hrothgar's mind in later life).

¹ Sermon delivered by Habakkuk in Jesus College, Oxford, on St David's Day, 2000.

Alongside his family, Barry and Barry County School were the important formative factors in his early years. Barry, he later pointed out, as an entirely new town was very special in having a precise birthday: 14 November 1884 when the excavation of the dock and the construction of the Barry Railway began. Hrothgar's father, although born on a farm, was brought to live in Barry in 1886, and he was brought there because after his father was killed in a mining accident his mother remarried to a miner, who then came to work as a coal-tipper in the Barry dock. This was John Hughes, Hrothgar's step grandfather, still working as a tipper in the 1920s when step grandson talked with him at the docks.² Barry in the 1920s still felt like a pioneer town, its oldest inhabitants all incomers from the Welsh hinterland or from across the Severn (there was a regular paddle-steamer service between Weston-super-Mare and Cardiff), and something of the feeling of excitement, novelty, and intensity of living on a frontier in a boom town had survived the First World War, even though Barry had lost forever its pre-1914 atmosphere of headlong expansion as one of the largest coal-exporting ports in the world. Barry was being reinvented as a seaside resort with the beaches of Barry Island, but the docks and coal remained the core of the town's economy. Hrothgar recalled that an east wind on a Monday was still a major menace—the coal dust from the coal-tips played havoc with the washing on the clothes lines. The atmosphere was not all grime and hard work: a community was being forged by very active music, literary, and dramatic societies, sports clubs, and lively local politics. There is no record of any sporting interest—beyond a recollection of the town's devastation when the local doctor's horse, Little Titch, came last in the Derby—but Hrothgar did recall taking part when he was only ten years old in fierce arguments over the merits of candidates in a local council election; his performance as Orsino in *Twelfth Night* was long remembered; and he sang with gusto the school song, 'To our town where mighty Severn opens to the Ocean Blue...'

The institutions which shaped the community were the churches and chapels, more than forty of them, and the schools. The influence of the former is problematic, while that of Barry County School is unambiguous. It is true that in his St David's Day sermon Habakkuk spoke in personal terms of religion 'as we experienced it' in the inter-war years. He sang the great Welsh hymns, took to heart the message that 'we are pilgrims through a barren land', and witnessed the fervour and austerity of Welsh nonconformity at first hand. He experienced religion, however, as a moral code and system of ethics, not as something entailing faith, doctrine, theology, and worship; it provided a set of

² MS notes of a speech given by Habakkuk at the launch of *Barry: The Centenary Book*, by D. Moore (1984).

rules for the conduct of life. These rules were replete with prohibitions: ‘There were a great many “thou-shall-nots” ... There was no talk of self-fulfilment and a great deal about duty, obligation, and conformity’.³ Undoubtedly these rules did much to shape Hrothgar’s own work ethic and sense of duty; but at the same time their narrowness and joylessness contributed to his youthful rebellion against what he felt to be the parochialism of life in Barry.

Barry County School, on the other hand, was the gateway to the wider world. His father, as secretary to the governors, may have sat at a table in the playground collecting the admission fees from new boys, but Hrothgar got into the school entirely through his own success in the competitive scholarship examination. Barry had a notably progressive local education authority, and the County School had an outstanding headmaster, Major Edgar Jones, “the Thomas Arnold of Wales”. Both the history masters, David Williams and Ifor Powell, later became university lecturers and professors, and they started a Barry tradition of schooling distinguished academic historians, which over the twentieth century included David Joslin (Cambridge Professor of Economic History, 1965–1970), Sir Keith Thomas FBA, and Martin Daunton FBA, as well as Hrothgar himself. His contemporary schoolfellows included Glyn Daniels, future Cambridge Professor of Archaeology, as well as Bryan Hopkin. He and Hrothgar in 1931 won two of the four “Geneva Scholarships” offered each year by the Welsh League of Nations Union to sixth-formers, scholarships which financed their attendance at a Summer School in Geneva devoted to the League of Nations and international relations. This cemented the Habakkuk-Hopkin axis and sharpened their interest in, and knowledge of, international affairs (see Hopkin 2003: 7). Together they won scholarships to St John’s, Cambridge, in 1933, Hopkin to read Economics, Habakkuk History.

Hrothgar, already a teenage socialist who had been active in the school debating society, spent much time as a Cambridge undergraduate discussing politics, and went to many meetings with Bryan Hopkin—whose friendship doubtless kept him abreast, also, of the new economics of Keynes and Joan Robinson. Hrothgar was strongly anti-communist, having been greatly impressed by a talk in the local chapel early in 1933, given by Gareth Jones (son of headmaster Edgar Jones) who had just spent the winter in the Ukraine: he spoke of the catastrophic famine caused by forcible collectivisation that he had seen at first hand. Hrothgar was also influenced by his dock-side conversations with his step grandfather, who greatly disliked the local communists and thought they were dishonest rogues. At Cambridge he used to argue with

³Habakkuk sermon, St David’s Day, 2000.

his brilliant contemporary John Cornford, the communist poet and womaniser later killed in the Spanish Civil War, whose irresponsibility shocked Hrothgar almost as much as his politics. ‘What I most hated about the communists’, he wrote in the last month of his life, ‘was their millenarian element—the belief that a million or so deaths were well worth the coming of the age of prosperity and peace which they would inevitably bring about. I used to argue with Cornford whom I now think was much less sensible and well informed than my father’s stepfather’ (Habakkuk to Hopkin, 21 October 2002).⁴

Hrothgar’s experience of “red Cambridge” was exhilarating, but limited: he had no contact with the famous Cambridge spies, though he did know George Barnard, also at St John’s, ‘the chief local commissar of the student Communist Party’—who ended up as Professor of Mathematics at Essex University and President of the Royal Statistical Society (see Hobsbawm 2002: 116).⁵ The academic experience was decisive in shaping his life. Hrothgar distinguished himself in the Tripos, and what he remembered years later were the lectures of the Professor of Economic History, J.H. Clapham, packed with information, a descriptive treatment of Britain’s economic history from before the Conquest to the end of the nineteenth century, replete with anecdotes and curious facts; but above all he recalled the sheer ebullience and intellectual excitement of Munia Postan’s lectures, darting from nineteenth-century movements of capital and labour to fourteenth-century agrarian crises, and grounded in the latest Continental teachings of figures—Sombart and Bloch, for example—who were virtually unknown in Cambridge. It was, Hrothgar recalled in his address at the Memorial Service for Sir Michael Postan, ‘an entirely fresh vision of economic history’.⁶ All the same when he decided in 1936 to stay on at Cambridge to do historical research, he at first proposed as his field, for reasons he failed to recall, not any economic history, but Dutch Arminianism in the seventeenth century. He rapidly dropped that idea, and Clapham, who was to be his supervisor (but not for a PhD, for which he never registered, it not being the done thing at that time for high-fliers) suggested that he should research the Industrial Revolution in South Wales. He rejected that topic also, partly because he regarded the history of South Wales as parochial, and perhaps partly because in his socialist phase he was out of sympathy with the great industrial capitalists like the coal owner David Davies, the creator of Barry. Looking back in retirement it was a decision he rather regretted, maybe

⁴ For a sympathetic, not to say adulatory, view of Cornford, see Hobsbawm (2002: especially Chapter 8).

⁵ Habakkuk had picked up this reference, a sign of the enduring alertness of his mind, and his voracious reading (Habakkuk to Hopkin, 21 October 2002).

⁶ Address delivered by Habakkuk at the Memorial Service for Sir Michael Postan, 13 February 1982 (*Peterhouse Record*, 1981/82).

a lost opportunity. For the rest of us it was a decision which cleared the way for Hrothgar to become the pioneering historian of English landownership, although he claimed that this happened completely by accident. Postan returned to Cambridge one day from the newly formed Northampton Record Office (virtually the single-handed creation of Joan Wake), where he had been immersed in manorial records, bubbling over with enthusiasm for the richness of the sources there, and announced that Hrothgar positively had to seize the opening for creating a completely new field of historical enquiry, the history of the eighteenth-century Northamptonshire gentry from their private family records.

When reminiscing in his eighties about this momentous step, he claimed it was taken entirely under the almost hypnotic influence of Postan's supremely confident and exuberant pronouncements. An interest in landowners, however, was not without some roots in Hrothgar's own youth, for he remembered as a boy speculating about the vivid contrast between the new Barry of the coal-tips and the old Barry of neighbouring Porthkerry Park, 'the almost feudal estate of Lord Romilly', where he often went walking. And he claimed that an interest in the effects of the marriages of Welsh heiresses to English and Scottish husbands was a question 'which occurred naturally to a school-boy in Glamorgan in the 1920s when the Marquess of Bute, the Mackintosh of Mackintosh, the Earl of Dunraven, and the Earl of Plymouth were still great names'.⁷ In later life, he wondered whether it had not been a mistake to plunge into the landownership subject at the deep end, into the vast piles of extremely wordy and abstruse title deeds—which were also physically difficult to handle—that formed the bulk of the available family records, when it might have been better to start with the more easily accessible printed private estate acts (a series starting in the later eighteenth century) with their random national coverage and their evidence about the legal deficiencies in the circumstances and powers of individual landowners which they were concerned to remedy.⁸ It is certainly true that his path-breaking contributions to the history of landownership all came to derive fundamentally from close scrutiny of legal instruments—marriage settlements, wills, conveyances, and the like—where later historians would tend to use other sources, such as family or business correspondence, and estate accounts, as their starting points. Thus, it came about that Hrothgar was launched into research where the key to understanding the documents was some familiarity with the technicalities not

⁷ MS notes of a speech given by Habakkuk at the launch of *Barry: The Centenary Book*, by D. Moore (1984) and Habakkuk (1984: 182).

⁸ Video interview with Sir John Habakkuk by Negley Harte, 17 March 2001, for the Economic History Society series. Available at: <https://www.ehs.org.uk/multimedia/interviews-with-historians>.

simply of the laws of real property, but of obsolete laws of real property. For the rest of his life, he was enthralled—though not continuously—by this austere discipline: in his retirement in the 1980s, it is recorded, ‘a colleague remembers seeing him in the Law Library [of the Bodleian], poring over abstruse works on land law, with, on his face, a look of beatific contentment’.⁹

The last four years of the 1930s were spent in preparing for his dramatic arrival on the academic scene (if overshadowed by other events), with the publication in 1940 of two substantial pieces, one an acutely perceptive treatment of an established subject, the chapter on “Free Trade and Commercial Expansion, 1853–1870” (Habakkuk 1940a) in the *Cambridge History of the British Empire*, and the other the highly original article on “English Landownership, 1680–1740” (Habakkuk 1940b) which opened up an entirely new field of study. In 1938 he became a Fellow of Pembroke College, and it is possible that his venture into imperial economic history arose out of lectures and tutorials [sc. supervisions in Cambridge] he was giving on nineteenth-century subjects. Although it was an excursion into territory to which he never returned, this chapter has all those qualities of clarity, lucidity, logical exposition, and judicious employment of economic theory, which were to become the hallmarks of his scholarship. Moreover, it contains distinct anticipations of concepts such as informal empire, and multilateral settlements of international payments, which were only to be fully articulated, many years later, by other historians. This capacity for initiating or anticipating future lines of enquiry and interpretation, cultivated by his mentor Postan, was also to be characteristic of Hrothgar’s most influential work.

The bulk of his research time, however, was spent on the Northamptonshire records. Some of the time was in Lamport Hall, where Joan Wake was busy establishing a private enterprise county record office. Here Hrothgar was startled by the abrupt and hectoring manner with which Joan Wake treated a scruffily dressed old man who kept asking for her help in deciphering the medieval Latin script of documents he was studying, telling him he ought to try to master some elementary palaeographical skills before wasting her time. Curious to find out who the victim of this bullying was, Hrothgar stole a glance at the visitors’ register, only to see the cryptic signature ‘Spencer’. The hapless researcher was none other than the donor of most of the records Joan Wake had collected, engrossed in looking at his own family papers and enjoying her badinage. This episode doubtless led eventually to Hrothgar’s gaining access to the Althorp muniments that had not yet been transferred to Lamport

⁹Address delivered by Keith Thomas at the Memorial Service for Sir Hrothgar John Habakkuk, 8 February 2003 (printed by All Souls College, Oxford): 13.

Hall, and to his legendary encounter with the law. It seems that in the early days of the blackout in the autumn of 1939, while hurriedly completing the research for his landownership article, he was working far into the evening when a policeman saw a light in the muniment room and a figure crouched by the safe. Asked what he thought he was doing, he replied that he was studying eighteenth-century landownership. Naturally such an implausible activity aroused the suspicions of a rural constable, who then demanded to know his name. On being told it as Habakkuk, he remarked, 'And I suppose your first name is Jehovah', to which the innocent reply was 'No, it's Hrothgar', which confirmed the constable's sense that he was being mocked. So, Hrothgar was marched off to the police station, where his attempt to establish his identity by citing the equally improbably named Munia Postan as his referee simply prolonged his detention, until straightforward Sir John Clapham could be contacted to vouch for him.

The seminal landownership article marked out both a lifelong interest and the starting point for a group of followers who have developed the modern history of the subject in the same way that followers of Postan developed the history of medieval landownership and tenure. In this article, he announced the social and economic significance of Orlando Bridgeman's invention of the legal device of trustees to preserve contingent remainders—the essential feature of what became known as "strict settlements" of landed families' estates, as distinct from the more easily overturned and unreliable instruments that family lawyers had been using before the Interregnum to provide for the line of possession and succession to estates. The purpose of these new-style trustees, normally created in the dispositions for succession to the family estates contained in the deed of settlement made on the marriage of the heir to an estate (hence known as "marriage settlements") or in his will, was to protect the rights of succeed of specified children, most probably as yet unborn, or of more remote relatives, and thus to prevent the owner for the time being (or tenant-for-life) from selling off the family estate, or frustrating these "remainders" through any other action. The relatively rapid adoption of this new form of settlement, which by the end of the seventeenth century had become normal practice in all landed families, Habakkuk argued, was a major factor in halting a previous tendency for landed estates to be broken up or subdivided through sales and inheritance patterns, and in establishing a new tendency for estates to be preserved intact from generation to generation, with younger sons and daughters provided for in portions secured as charges on the family estate, rather than in mini-estates or parcels of land carved out of father's property. Coupled with the willingness of the courts to uphold the "equity of redemption", which made lenders on mortgage more wary in calling in debts

from landowners, these developments in land law, consolidated during the Restoration, played a major part in favouring the growth and security of large estates. At the same time, the argument ran, the greater landowners were better able to cope with the rising taxation of the Marlborough wars, especially with the new land tax, than either the country gentry or more especially the smaller freehold landowners—what remained of the former English peasantry. Hence, the sixty years after 1680 witnessed the rise of the landed aristocracy at the expense of both gentry and peasantry. Thus was sketched a neat counterpoint to the coming doctrine of the rise of the gentry as the key feature of the century 1540–1640, although Tawney's classic article was not published until a year after Habakkuk's.¹⁰

Over the following half century, the Habakkuk thesis of the rise of the great estates generated great interest, stimulating ever more rigorous research as more and more landowners' archives became accessible, and sustaining a large volume of publications, many of them increasingly controversial. In contrast to the sometimes vitriolic controversy over the "rise of the gentry" the debate over the "rise of the great landowners" developed rather slowly, and came to focus on the nature and effects of marriage settlements. Hrothgar enlarged on his views of marriage settlements in his 1949 paper to the Royal Historical Society, in which speculation on the effects on the wealth and landholdings of the recipients of the portions that brides brought to their marriages, through using them to acquire more land (somewhat to the neglect of the contrary effects on the fortunes of the brides' fathers), led to the further thesis that the class of greater landowners was in effect 'raising itself by its own bootstraps' (Habakkuk 1950: 28). Critical comments on his thesis came from C. Clay, J.V. Beckett, and Lloyd Bonfield, and with the arrival of feminism and gender history debate homed in on marriage settlements and was dominated by notable exchanges between Lawrence Stone and Eileen Spring.¹¹ Hrothgar took on board those findings of fresh research in the archives which he considered helpful, and as was his invariable habit paid little attention, at least in print, to the more combative and aggressive arguments, with the result that he was sometimes thought to be arrogant in not deigning to engage in controversy—quite the opposite of the truth, for he was by disposition courteous as well as diffident. Over the years, Hrothgar modified and altered his views about marriage settlements, and about the rise of the great estates, absorbing some of the findings of other scholars, and refining and sharpening his own analysis of

¹⁰By later standards it was an essay, or sketch, since it contained no footnotes or references. See Tawney (1941).

¹¹The best guides to this literature are in Bonfield (1979, 1986: especially p. 342, fn. 7). See also Spring (1993).

their impact, until in his final statement much of the 1940 thesis was stood on its head.¹² Constant development of his thinking, rather than reiteration of a static position, was another of his strengths.

That is to jump ahead. The Second World War abruptly interrupted many careers. Hrothgar had a short spell with the code-breakers in Bletchley, but spent most of the war in the Board of Trade. It would indeed have been too good to be true if temporary civil servant Habakkuk had been involved with the crazy project known as, and misspelt as, Habakkuk. This was to have been an alternative to the Mulberry harbours: a floating airstrip 2000 feet long, weighing 2.2 million tons, and made of frozen seawater mixed with sawdust. It appealed strongly to Lord Mountbatten, but alas, Hrothgar was not the controller of sawdust, and the codename was adopted because the Old Testament book refers to 'a work which you will not believe though it be told to you' (see Lampe 1959: 128–162). It is only a little less astonishing to find that Hrothgar finished the war drafting briefs on the trade treaty negotiations which accompanied the Bretton Woods Conference on post-war international currency mechanisms.¹³ This may well have sharpened his interest in the historical background of the pre-1914 operation of the gold standard and convertible currencies, but apart from that—and the cementing of his friendship with Postan (also a wartime civil servant, in the Ministry of Economic Warfare)—it is not easy to discern direct influences on his later academic career of his wartime experiences.

That is, if one excepts his meeting with Mary Richards, whose own wartime experiences, while waiting to go up to Girton, were in working with deprived children at the East End settlement, Cambridge House, where in 1944 she met Hrothgar who was also living there. It is reported that they first held hands on VE Day. Mary then took up her place at Girton, and they did not marry until after she graduated, in 1948. This was indeed the decisive event in Hrothgar's personal life, the foundation of a partnership of more than fifty years. Mary complemented Hrothgar: she came from the other side of the Bristol Channel; her upbringing was in an Anglo-Catholic family (her father was a priest, and she went to a convent school) and she remained an active Anglican; and although he wrote about technology, Hrothgar never moved beyond writing with pen and ink, with numerous additions and amendments pinned and paper-clipped to his manuscripts, while Mary was fluent on a typewriter, and later taught herself word-processing on a computer. So, she became Hrothgar's essential support, not only in their family life bringing up

¹² See below pp. 434–436.

¹³ Video interview of Habakkuk by Harte.

four children, but also in his professional life. Her assistance when he was editor of the *Economic History Review* was especially valuable, since his spelling was pretty unreliable. She was an excellent hostess when he was Principal of Jesus, and Vice-Chancellor, ‘a great believer in breaking up little groups at parties; though not everyone responded with equal enthusiasm to her cheerful invitation to “come across the room and meet the mathematicians”’.¹⁴ In his retirement, it was Mary who urged him on to finish his great book on landowners, and who typed, revised, and indexed it. He was bereft when she died—mercifully, that was only a few months before his own death.

While Mary went to Girton, Hrothgar returned to Pembroke College, as Director of Studies in History and University Lecturer in Economics, his lectures on British economic history being directed at both economists and historians. He shared with Postan a special subject on the British economy, 1886–1938, a virtually contemporary subject well-suited to the home of Marshallian and Keynesian economics and a reminder that Hrothgar, as well as Postan, had no narrow chronological limits to his interests. His collaboration with Postan was close: in 1946 he became assistant editor of the *Economic History Review*, Postan having been sole editor since 1934, and in 1950 began a ten-year period as joint editor with Postan, inaugurating the continuing *Review* practice of joint editorship. This intensely active post-war period in Cambridge, which left precious little time for his own writing, saw his reputation advance to the point where his election to the Chichele Chair of Economic History at Oxford, in 1950, was an obvious choice, even though his publication record then stood at no more than three articles. Thereafter, although retaining certain Cambridge features in his work, he became devoted to Oxford, with the passionate loyalty of an adopted son.

He spent seventeen highly productive years in the Chichele Chair, regularly publishing an article a year while vigorously developing economic history at Oxford, especially through his graduate seminar; previously the subject had been left to London, Cambridge, Birmingham, Manchester, and Glasgow. He introduced the practice of having a full minute of each seminar paper and discussion, and as his first graduate student and seminar secretary I found this exercise an invaluable way of getting to grips with the take-off into self-sustained growth, trade cycle theory, Kondratiev cycles, and other mysteries. He continued to build his reputation in the Postan manner, through a string of articles, rather than through writing the large books favoured by his initial supervisor, Clapham; but it was the publication of his first book, in 1962, *American and British Technology in the Nineteenth Century*, which not only

¹⁴Thomas Memorial Address: 6.

consolidated his position as one of the leading figures on the international stage (alongside Postan he had been involved in the creation of the International Economic History Association in 1959), but also created a whole school of (mainly) American economic historians, who have paralleled in their vigour and significance the school of (mainly) British historians of landownership which grew out of his 1940 article. A posthumous article by Rothbarth in 1946 had initiated the academic discussion of the effects of labour scarcity on the American economy, but it was Habakkuk's book which launched this American cottage industry, and which drew upon economic theories dealing with the choice of techniques (see Rothbarth 1946; Habakkuk 1962a). This book was the fruit of lectures given in visits to Harvard, Columbia, and Berkeley, in which he speculated on the links between factor endowments and the frequently contrasting prevailing technologies in the two economies. It remains the most brilliant example of Hrothgar's historiographical methodology, the "marriage of history and theory" expressed in the elegant prose of a master of the logical deduction of theoretical explanations from concrete empirical observations. The starting point was the observations of British visitors to the United States in the 1850s that in specific industries, woodworking and small arms manufacture, the Americans were commonly using more advanced and more automatic machinery than their British counterparts. The general explanation Hrothgar offered was in terms of labour scarcity, specifically the comparative scarcity and high cost of unskilled labour in America attributable largely to the abundance of "free" land which attracted labour into farming; alongside this he argued for a secondary scarcity of capital to account for the "flimsy" and short-life nature of much American machinery and infrastructure (particularly noticeable in railway equipment) in comparison with British emphasis on solid and immensely durable machines. He toyed with cultural explanations, that something about American society produced more innovative and adventurous entrepreneurs than did Britain, only to reject them in favour of structural economic differences. This book confirmed his distinction as an economic historian of international importance, and was swiftly followed by his election as a Fellow of the British Academy in 1965 and as a Foreign Member of both the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the American Philosophical Society.

Hrothgar did not make any further contributions to this technology debate and its close connections with the mechanics of the operation of the nineteenth-century Atlantic economy, beyond a 1962 article on the somewhat fortuitous complementarity of building cycles in Britain and America (Habakkuk 1962b). The large body of literature generated by the technology book was analysed by Peter Temin in the Festschrift for Hrothgar's seventieth

birthday, paying generous tribute to him for having ‘transformed the concept of labour scarcity...into a serious research topic’ (Temin 1994: 257). It was Peter Temin, however, who—no doubt quite unintentionally—had scared Hrothgar away from having anything more to do with the subject. Already faintly alarmed by the rise of cliometrics, Temin’s 1966 article “Labor Scarcity and the Problem of American Industrial Efficiency in the 1850s”, which contained a formal theoretical presentation of Habakkuk’s argument and a highly algebraic appendix that mounted a mathematical proof of inconsistencies and paradoxes in the Habakkuk treatment of labour scarcity, convinced Hrothgar that the practice of economic history, at least in the United States, had moved beyond his intellectual reach. Reflecting in old age, he claimed that the invitation in 1968 to become Principal of Jesus College came in the nick of time to prevent a serious collapse in his self-confidence as an economic historian; at the time it would have seemed more like a welcome change from the sometimes rather uncongenial life of All Souls.

He had, after all, other irons in the fire besides his interest in theories to explain the choice of technologies. Landownership, in England and in comparison with European countries with different property systems, had remained a strong interest in many of the articles he wrote while Chichele Professor. These ranged from the market in monastic lands in the sixteenth century through to the land market in the late eighteenth century, passing on the way the impact of the Civil War, Interregnum, and Restoration on landed estates, and developing theories about changing relationships between the rate of interest and the price of land which came to occupy a prime place in his thinking alongside the marriage settlements.¹⁵ He was also developing a third main interest in historical demography and the relationships between population movements and economic growth (and decline). It would be an exaggeration to claim that he founded a third group of disciples for historical demography had many other influential contemporary leaders. But his 1953 article “English Population in the Eighteenth Century” (Habakkuk 1953) was as stimulating and path-breaking as his dramatic entries into the other two fields. When it was reprinted in 1965, the editors of the volume commented:

It may be said to have marked the revival...of interest in the unsolved questions concerning population growth in the eighteenth century, and it influenced subsequent work by raising the possibility that this growth might after all have been due to changes in fertility to a much greater extent than had previously been thought possible (Glass and Eversley 1965: 269).

¹⁵There is a complete bibliography of his works in Thompson (1994: xi–xiii).

In 1953, the received view was that population growth in the second half of the eighteenth century was caused by a falling death rate brought about by medical and public health improvements. The notion that eighteenth-century medical improvements were considerable enough to have reduced mortality had been recently demolished, but a declining death rate resulting from improving living conditions and nutrition remained the favoured explanation. Habakkuk did not produce any new demographic evidence, but simply by reasoning power and logic, advanced arguments for supposing that a rising birth rate, consequent on a fall in the age at marriage or more likely a decline in the proportion of women who never married, could have been the main-spring of population growth. What mattered to him as an economic historian was whether economic developments produced population changes, or vice versa, and he satisfied himself that something like the run of abundant harvests, and cheap bread, of the 1730s and 1740s could well have produced earlier marriages and increased fertility.

He sharpened this argument in his 1958 article on “The Economic History of Modern Britain” (Habakkuk 1958) in which changes in fertility and nuptiality figured as the key mechanisms of population growth and in some circumstances the triggers of economic change while in others possibly its main consequences, and this thesis was developed to cover alternating and contrasting demographic trends over several centuries in Arthur Pool Memorial Lectures he gave in Leicester University in 1968.¹⁶ Demographers, however, were sceptical of inference and hypotheses unsupported by new hard evidence, and generally remained attached to death rate explanations. Even those disposed to look at changes in fertility as the chief agent of change were doubtful about some of his unsupported speculations on their origins in rational calculations by parents about the eventual size of surviving families in the light of their supposed knowledge of infant mortality. As the most expert of the book’s reviewers commented: ‘In a field of study where new knowledge and new means of testing old hypotheses are both growing apace, it may prove to wear less well than some of Mr Habakkuk’s earlier and excellent discussions of demographic, economic, and social structural history’ (Wrigley 1973: 728). Nevertheless, when the new evidence eventually arrived, from a vast exercise in cooperative research in parish registers, family reconstitution, and back projection, it was Hrothgar’s birth rate thesis which was broadly confirmed, albeit with modifications and refinements of both the chronology and the causal chain which he had originally proposed (see Wrigley and Schofield 1981).

¹⁶The Arthur Pool Memorial Lectures were published as Habakkuk (1971).

By 1981 he had long moved on from both technology and demography, increasingly occupied with university administration and politics from his position as Principal of Jesus. At All Souls he had been rather out of sympathy with the lack of academic seriousness of some of his colleagues, and frankly dismayed by the decision that the pioneer historian of the making of the English landscape, W.G. Hoskins, had been deemed not good enough to become a fellow. Since his early days in Oxford, Hrothgar had been in demand for public service, serving on the Grigg Committee on Departmental (Whitehall) Records, 1952–1954, the Advisory Council on Public Records, 1958–1970, and then on the Social Science Research Council, 1967–1971, and the National Libraries Committee, 1968–1969. This committee work with colleagues from other disciplines and different professions proved to be an excellent preparation for becoming an energetic and successful head of house, a position he regarded as ‘the height of human felicity’.¹⁷ If he had previously rather moved away from his Welsh origins, he rediscovered and acknowledged them from the Jesus perspective, at once recognising in the portrait of the Founder, Hugh Price, a reminder of the elderly Vale of Glamorgan farmers he had known as a boy. To coincide with his translation, he published an article in the *Welsh History Review* (see Habakkuk 1967).¹⁸ In 1975, he became Principal of University College, Swansea. He would have ranked his greatest achievement as Principal the acceptance of the “Jesus scheme” in the early 1970s, under which five men’s colleges were allowed to admit women undergraduates on a trial basis; this turned out to be a decisive move in Oxford’s painfully slow recognition of women’s education so that within a generation only one single-sex college was left in Oxford, that being a women’s college. From a purely college standpoint, Hrothgar’s cultivation of good relations with old members, crowned with the Edwin Stevens benefaction which enabled Jesus to house all its students for all of their three years in residence, would be his most memorable legacy.

Sometimes rather intimidating to undergraduates whom he would engage in intellectually taxing conversation at parties (where Mary would provide welcoming and less demanding small talk), Hrothgar was so clearly tolerant, liberal, and fair-minded that the student eruptions of 1968 caused him very little trouble. He took in his stride the attendance of a goldfish at Governing Body meetings, it being the solemnly elected President of the Junior Common Room, but was understandably exasperated when an ex-public schoolboy

¹⁷Thomas Memorial Address: 12.

¹⁸Habakkuk explained that he chose to examine the acquisitions of a group of Welsh soldiers because one of the history masters at Barry County School, David Williams, had endowed the Civil War period with a special interest which he [Habakkuk] never lost.

made the absurd claim that the College's charges were forcing him to live at "subsistence level", a state which Hrothgar had seen at first hand both in the breadlines of South Wales in the 1930s and in India in the 1960s. In 1973, he became the first Vice-Chancellor of Oxford from Jesus College for 275 years, and one of the early holders of the four-year term of office that had recently been introduced as one of the reforms recommended by the Franks Commission (1966). 'As Vice-Chancellor', it was remarked, 'he had the great advantage of usually being the most intelligent person in the room, as well as the one who had most closely studied the papers'.¹⁹ Little wonder then that as a committed and skilful exponent of academic democracy he persuaded the endless committees of university governance to reach sensible, liberal, decisions on the issues of his time: a student sit-in at the Examinations Schools; a tied vote over a proposed honorary degree for Bhutto of Pakistan; above all, the beginnings of the slide in university funding which came as a shock after the post-Robbins (1968) euphoria. He was equally enchanted with the ceremonial dimension of vice-cancellarial life, developing into a much sought-after speaker with a fund of good stories from Barry and Cambridge days, and apparently relishing the experience of official limelight: 'We have quantities of photos', Mary wrote, 'of topping out a building in construction (Hrothgar's faced contorted with passionate eloquence), or robed for some ultra-dignified occasion'.²⁰

Unlike many of his successors he actively enjoyed being Vice-Chancellor. As he neared the end of his term, the Senior Proctor commented that 'when we took over, we expected to find a tired man, haggard, in the autumn of his office. We were left wondering if this was autumn, what on earth spring could have been like'.²¹ 'Spring', as an interview in *The Times Higher Education Supplement* recorded in 1974, had seen him confessing to finding the administrative duties as Vice-Chancellor 'rather fun', even regarding the need for cheeseparating after the recent cuts in government funding 'almost with relish'.²² There were moments, though, when the 'fun' was of the adrenalin-coursing, confrontational variety. There was once a demonstration in the Broad chanting 'Habakkuk out, Habakkuk out!' and with 500 booing students outside the Clarendon Building he and the University Registrar stood grasping their umbrellas ready to do battle. When the students invaded the Indian Institute, the Vice-Chancellor and Registrar with a posse went to Hertford College, got

¹⁹ Thomas Memorial Address: 11.

²⁰ Mary Habakkuk to Thompson, 2 May 1993. He told some of these stories in the video interview with Harte.

²¹ Quoted in Thomas Memorial Address: 12.

²² *The Times Higher Education Supplement (THES)*, 7 June 1974: 7.

ladders, and climbed into the upper floor of the Institute, charging downstairs and evicting the invaders. Prudently, the Vice-Chancellor had been restrained from climbing the ladder; he insisted in the face of noisy demonstrations that nineteen students who had been identified among the invading force should be brought before the Proctors and be sent down for a year. Thus, was order restored.²³

Energetic, resourceful, companionable, with a spring in his step that belied his sixty years, widely respected for the cogency and vigour of his defence of the idea of a “liberal university”, in 1976, he was elected as the first Oxford Chairman of the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals (later to rename itself Universities UK). He articulated for a wide audience his passionate, radical, and closely reasoned attachment to the independence of the institutions which embodied and protected the freedom of the world of learning, scholarship, research, and teaching, most notably in his great speech to the meeting of the International Association of Universities in Moscow in August 1975. He warned the 900 delegates from eighty-six countries that the role of universities as centres for the “unfettered exchange of ideas” was under increasing threat from the interference of governments using their control of the purse strings, with the increasing demands that universities should concentrate on activities relevant to national needs meaning that society could easily lose sight of the unique function of universities as centres of learning and free inquiry. He foresaw that the university population would continue to expand in the next twenty-five years, perhaps at a slower pace than before, until something approaching half of the age group were receiving a university education, many no doubt on courses less specialised than traditional honours degrees. He concluded that if, through this expansion,

the university is compelled to conform to the views which happen to be fashionable or dominant at the moment, if it is induced to direct too many of its resources to meeting the immediate needs of society as these are interpreted by the State at a particular point of time—then we shall find that the ability of the university to perform its central function has been impaired, and its capacity to produce creative and original work weakened.²⁴

Hrothgar received a knighthood in the 1976 New Year’s Honours, and chose to be known as “Sir John”. Americans, in particular, who had difficulty in coming to terms with either the spelling or the pronunciation of Hrothgar,

²³Video interview with Lady Habakkuk by Pat Thane, 7 March 1997, archive at Girton College, Cambridge.

²⁴*THES*, 22 August 1975: 1.

had for some time been in favour of the manageable “John”. When he retired as Vice-Chancellor in 1977 (in the event he returned temporarily for a few months in 1978), it was reported that ‘Sir John’s final view from the top is gloomy’ because of the squeeze on university finances and the implication that the government did not expect or want student numbers to grow.²⁵ Personally and as a historian he was far from gloomy. When he became Vice-Chancellor, he thought ‘the trouble is that my subject is going econometric. By the time I finish being Vice-Chancellor it will be completely beyond me’.²⁶ He had been working on the recent history of the steel industry but he was never satisfied with this and it remained an unpublished manuscript when he died. In 1977, keen to resume activity as a scholar, it is true that he kept well clear of econometrics. Instead he returned directly to his academic starting point, English landownership; he became President of the Royal Historical Society, and in November 1977 delivered his first Presidential Address, “The Land Settlement and the Restoration of Charles II” (Habakkuk 1978). Remarkably, while the paper must have been written while he was still a full-time Vice-Chancellor, it dealt with an entirely fresh aspect of a subject on which he had published in the 1960s. The detailed exposition of the steps by which Charles and Hyde avoided any commitment to confirm the purchasers of confiscated crown, bishops’, capitular, and delinquent lands, and manoeuvred the resumption of most lands without compensation, except for purchasers of incomes in possession on church lands, however, did not greatly modify the accepted view of the Restoration land settlement. The three succeeding Presidential Addresses (1978–1980) were devoted to “The Rise and Fall of English Landed Families, 1600–1800”. In the main these were reworkings of some of his earlier contributions, in no clear sequence: (1) dealt with heiresses and the rise of large estates; (2) with private estate acts and sales by indebted landowners; and (3) returned to the sale of monastic lands, and the development of a market in land in the early seventeenth century. However, they did contain the delightful quotation:

Helmsley, once proud Buckingham’s delight
Fell to a scrivener and a City knight.

The scrivener was the banker Charles Duncombe, typical new man of the 1690s, ancestor of the earls of Feversham, and the estate became Duncombe Park (see Habakkuk 1980: 216).

²⁵ *THES*, 30 September 1977: 31.

²⁶ *THES*, 7 June 1974: 7.

In his final three years at Jesus, he was also kept busy as Chairman of the Oxfordshire Health Authority, and then having retired as Principal of Jesus in 1984 Hrothgar, back at All Souls, gave the Ford Lectures the following year. Spurred on and assisted by Mary, these, much expanded and revised, were published in 1994 as *Marriage, Debt, and the Estates System: English Landownership, 1650–1950*. This great work of nearly 700 pages of text and more than 50 pages of endnotes is not so much a distillation of a lifetime's reflections on large questions concerning the social and economic dimensions of the history of England's long dominant landed class, as a cornucopia of a lifetime's accumulation of facts, quarried from an enormous range of archival and printed sources, about the marriages, debts, purchases, and sales of the landed aristocracy. It has to be said that this magnum opus attracted a mixed reception.²⁷ Reviewers were impressed by the extraordinary wealth of the material Hrothgar had collected over the years, by the clarity of his exposition of the inner workings of the English landed family and his mastery of the technicalities of the legal arrangements these involved, and by his readiness to revise some of his own earlier arguments. Thus it no longer seemed that the landed aristocracy was "raising itself by its own bootstraps", but rather that the operation of marriages and inheritances was constantly recirculating lands that were already within the "estates system", with families taking it in turns as it were from generation to generation to be gainers or losers, and from time to time estates passing out of the hands of great landowners and swelling the ranks of landed gentry through purchases by new men. While some welcomed the book as the definitive account of strict settlements, their functioning in preserving the "estates system", and the significance of that system (of gentry and magnate estates) for agriculture and much of industry and urban development, others were disappointed and even sharply critical. The criticisms were directed chiefly at the methodology of piling instance upon instance and largely leaving them to speak for themselves, and at the supposed superior air of being above the fray conveyed by Hrothgar's aversion from direct engagement with the debates and controversies—sometimes vociferous—which had been largely generated by his own work.

The book is densely packed, by no means a straightforward or easy read even for those well-acquainted with the field, and it requires close attention. That reveals that Hrothgar had taken on board all the modifications and alterations to his initial positions that he regarded as reasonable, and as for those arguments with which he disagreed—for example, on the scale and consequences of aristocratic indebtedness, on the openness of the elite, on the rise

²⁷Major reviews were by Beckett (1996), Spring (1995), Bonfield (1996) and English (1996).

of affective marriage or on the treatment of the womenfolk of landed families—he simply allowed them to be flattened by implication through the massive weight of the evidence he presented. He demonstrated, for instance, with the chapter and verse of specific cases in which actual numbers were recorded in the deeds, that in eighteenth-century settlements it was normal for a widow's jointure (income for life) to equal about one-quarter of her husband's total income (as well as being 10% of the portion she brought on her marriage). This, he argued with some plausibility, was a reasonable substitute for a widow's common law right to dower of one-third of a husband's income, since enforcing dower and collecting it in rents had always involved legal and administrative costs, and a degree of uncertainty. He did not present this in the context of an academic debate not because he regarded himself as above the fray, but because he did not subscribe to the fashion for combative and aggressive scholarship. In his own modest words, 'I have not striven to identify the points on which my conclusions differ from those of other scholars' (Habakkuk 1994: vii).

The reservations about the methodology of the book were more serious. He had certainly moved a long way from the days when the "marriage of history and theory" had been the touchstone of his research. There is precious little theory in this book, except for lawyers' theory on the interpretation and impact of legal instruments. Indeed, with its evidence drawn from deeds, settlements, private acts and genealogies, rather than from letters, journals, diaries or estate accounts, it is in a sense more of a lawyer's book than a social or economic historian's book, and the material is often described in the lawyer's language of a particular case illustrating a general point. It is also true that Hrothgar's pronounced distrust of econometrics and quantification meant that he declined to do any counting and produced no tables or graphs so that the evidence is presented in a literary rather than a statistical framework. What had happened was that in the historian's continual tension between being a "lumper" or a "splitter" the accumulation of evidence had pushed Hrothgar more and more into the splitters' camp. What the evidence indicated was the great diversity of the experiences, and the behaviour, of landed families in their marriages, their children, heirs, and heiresses, their debts, their extravagances and economies, their purchases and sales of lands, and their good or bad luck. The 'diversity of experience', he had come to feel, 'makes the identification of representative behaviour and of dominant trends particularly difficult'. Despite the literally thousands of examples he had assembled, Hrothgar modestly concluded:

I do not, however, know enough about a sufficiently large number of families to specify the basis on which a...representative sample should be selected. I have therefore proceeded by example. As I am well aware, examples, even if tiresomely numerous, are not proof. And the method is particularly dangerous when, as in the case of the landed elite, behaviour was so diverse that it is possible to find an instance to illustrate the most implausible generalisation. All I can hope is that this work will make it easier to test hypotheses in a more systematic fashion (*ibid.*: x).

The result was a triumphant demonstration of the strengths of a perhaps somewhat old-fashioned historical empiricism, worthy of his original supervisor, Clapham, and provided future researchers with a vast body of data and, though buried in the fifty pages of endnotes, a quite extraordinary guide to the sources, and the literature, of the history of landownership. Moreover, some trends were established. There was change over time, essentially the result of demographic changes which saw a reduction in the infant mortality of the landed classes from the mid-eighteenth century, and a significant increase in life expectancy from the early nineteenth century, which together produced trends towards fewer failures of male heirs, more surviving daughters and younger sons, and longer delayed succession by eldest sons, all of which in turn had serious implications for the amount of family support, and hence debt, which an estate had to carry. Change as a result of major alterations in strict settlements did not come until the 1882 Settled Land Act—which Hrothgar somewhat cavalierly described as a conservative, technical, measure of land law reform unconnected with the contemporary liberal and radical attacks on the “land monopoly”—an Act which brought ‘to an end the effectiveness of the strict settlement as a device to fuse a particular family into a particular estate, which had been its primary function since the seventeenth century’ (*ibid.*: 646). The unchallengeable powers of sale conferred on tenants-for-life by this Act were used over the following decades to bend before the pressures of agricultural depression, death duties, and war, and the final chapter of the book is devoted to the decline of the landed interest from the 1880s to 1950. Circumspect to the end Hrothgar declined to accept the more extreme versions of the disappearance of landed estates, and concluded that ‘the greater part of English agricultural land is still held in the form of units which are still recognizably estates’. He had explained “*La Disparition du Paysan Anglaise*” in 1965 (Habakkuk 1965); fittingly the final sentence of the great book is simply ‘There is no English peasantry’ (Habakkuk 1994: 704).

This was his last published work, though he continued to relish conversations about the long-term rate of interest and claimed merely to be waiting,

with some impatience, for medievalists to supply him with rather more evidence for ruling rates of interest in the early middle ages than a single observation of the rate at which Simon de Montfort's forfeited lands were valued in 1265, before he could complete a monograph on the subject. He greatly enjoyed his years as a Distinguished Fellow of All Souls in the 1980s and 1990s, carrying on working in libraries well after the big book had been finished, keeping up with seminars where his interventions were as crisp and sharp as ever, and above all relishing conversations and gossip (never malicious) with friends, colleagues, and visitors. His relaxations remained what they had been in his prime a long walk every Sunday, often on Port Meadow, and reading Victorian novels and poetry.²⁸ In the final years his brisk, jaunty, step was stilled, but the quizzical look from under the bushy eyebrows and the wonderful voice of reason never left him. He moved to Somerset to be with his daughter Alison and to be near Mary, who had to go into a nursing home. He was bereft when she died in August, and barely three months later he himself died, on 3 November 2002. He was perhaps the last of the generation of historians who began to make their mark before the Second World War, one who rose to the summit of his profession through the exciting and innovative quality of his scholarship in three separate areas of historical enquiry, and who was a notable guardian of the institutions of the "liberal university" through his unruffled reasonableness. A Memorial Service was held in the University Church of St Mary the Virgin, Oxford, on 8 February 2003.

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²⁸ *THES*, 7 June 1974: 7. He never recorded any hobbies in *Who's Who*.

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