

## PJC BOOK REVIEW 13

**Paul Glennie and Nigel Thrift, *Shaping the Day: A History of Timekeeping in England and Wales, 1300-1800* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2009), pp. xiv + 456 ISBN 978-0-19-927820-6 (hdbk). Price: \$70.00**

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This meaty and informative study fruitfully revises the existing history of timekeeping. But the authors are unduly wary of offering their own big picture, which makes their conclusion disappointing. At heart, Thrift and Glennie prefer to remain ‘splitters’, in the terminology of J.H. Hexter, himself a gifted splitter. His wording, though inelegant, highlighted a temperamental division among scholars. While ‘lumpers’ happily fit the fragmentary data into grand narratives, ‘splitters’ respond, often with some justification, that ‘things are really more complicated than that’.

Thrift and Glennie take respectful but careful aim at numerous colleagues but especially at one highly distinguished ‘lumper’. He is the heterodox Marxist historian, E.P. Thompson, whose classic article, ‘Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism’, was first published in 1967 (reprinted in his *Customs in Common* in 1991). It is a measure of the relative paucity of research in the field of horological studies that this 42-

year-old study is still a prime target. Thompson argued, with much social and anthropological commentary, that ‘clock time’ really arrived in people’s daily lived experience, with the spread of industrialism in England and, in particular, with the advent of the factory.

Theoretical arguments and empirical evidence are marshalled against this view by the twin splitters, writing seamlessly together. There is not one ‘clock time’ constituting a generalised *thing* throughout time – a point on which Thompson would have agreed. Instead there are pluralities of ideas, devices and practices. For Thrift and Glennie, history’s unfolding is not linear but multi-levelled and diversified. Five major chapters document variegated clock practices from the fifteenth century onwards. Time-keeping devices, including publicly accessible clocks, bells, and sundials, offered pervasive time-cues, especially for city dwellers, long before the spread of privately-owned clocks and watches. Furthermore, such personal ‘timepieces’ were also diffused more widely and earlier than is often realised.

Thereupon, literate people in the sixteenth as in the eighteenth centuries referred in diaries and letters to an understanding of measured time. Schools also imposed a temporal discipline. ‘Now at five of the clock by the moonlight I must go to my book – and let sleep and sloth alone’ ran the saying (c.1500), attributed to a twelve-year-old boy (p. 231). Whether he actually arrived on time remains doubtful. Nonetheless, there was a timetable and an intended discipline, known to the young. Such indicators confirmed ‘the sheer density of temporal infrastructure in early modern England’ (p. 157).

Turning to the eighteenth-century culture of astronomical research and technological experimentation, Thrift and Glennie then document the quest of navigators to find reliable measurements to establish longitude at sea. Of course, not all improvements were immediately adopted. Cautious seafarers

stuck to what they knew, while the incompetent stuck with their ignorance. Here Thrift and Glennie make the salient point that successful technological upgrading depends not only upon producers' inventions but also upon users' skills and willingness to adopt new ways.

Their final research chapter concludes with a revisionist account of the horological genius, John Harrison. He did not emerge from 'nowhere' to invent the marine chronometer, as is often claimed. Instead, he came from an established community of provincial clock-makers and, furthermore, he could tap into national networks of scientific enquiry.

The research ingenuity and rich detail of Thrift and Glennie's study enable them to refute many old generalisations. Not for them a story of technological triumphalism in the later eighteenth century, *en route* to a glorious 'modernity'. Nor for them a jeremiad tale of the loss of pre-industrial freedom and the imposition of strict timetables, *en route* to an inglorious 'modernity'. There was no general change, whether for better or worse, with the advent of industrialisation. Indeed, 'splitters' among the economic-historians have already disputed the timing and even the existence of 'the' Industrial Revolution in the later eighteenth century.

That said, however, Thrift and Glennie almost make an alternative case for a 'slow burn' of evolutionary changes (pp. 407-14), which could be related to commercialisation and urbanisation from the sixteenth century onwards. An older terminology would have called this the era of not of 'industrial capitalism' but of a prior 'merchant capitalism'. Of course, other 'splitters' challenge that concept too. All the associations of 'capitalism', like 'modernity', have become over-stretched and under-specified.

True, very true. Yet the need remains for a better analysis of change, not for abstention. Thrift and Glennie ultimately prefer 'episodes in the history of clock time' and 'segregated spaces that cannot (and perhaps should not) be allowed to coalesce' (pp. 58, 61). Time, however, is

unidirectional and produces an unfolding history, which links pluralism into a temporal whole. Spatial episodes do not remain segregated. Things do happen together, even if in different places. Space after all is yoked into space-time or (better) time-space. *E pluribus unum*, as the Americans might say. Historians now need a better vocabulary and set of concepts for long-term evolutionary transformations. So, in the history of clocks and time-keeping, many changes evolved and coalesced, as Thrift and Glennie show but don't quite say.