



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

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The Coming of the Clock

This book is something of a curiosity. Glennie and Thrift have set out to write about “clock time” as it slowly became an everyday practice in the early modern era. This might seem to be a fairly straightforward business, but the authors have actually engaged in a polemical project. In writing this history (the first, so they say) of clock time they eschew all diversions into larger philosophical, anthropological, and historiographical speculation: this is a book about clock time as “everyday practices, rather than as technologies or disciplines” (p. 53). In its place, they have aimed to create a dense historical ethnography of clock time out of which new knowledge about a central aspect of modernity can rise up. The shadow of E. P. Thompson’s “Time, work discipline and industrial capitalism” and its assumption of the use of the clock as a central instrument of the capitalist management of time hangs over this study.[1] How, the authors set out to demonstrate, did we become enthralled to a mere device?

There are many fine things about this book, and they deserve to be highlighted first. Above all, there is the rich diversity of data, much of it newly unearthed for this volume. After two chapters discussing debates about clock time, this bounty begins in chapter 4, which considers the use of the clock in a single location, the city of Bristol, which has the advantage of having a rich archival record over the whole time span of the book, and to have been burdened with neither a sudden leap into prominence like other major British industrial cities, nor a decline into modern torpor. Clock time in Bristol was used to regulate the working day, typically 6 am to 6 pm for artisans as well as factory workers from the middle of the eighteenth century. The central place of clock time in the consciousness of Bristol people

is reflected in other sources, trawled by Glennie and Thrift: probate inventories show that clock ownership was widespread across all classes of Bristol society. It is intriguing that more clocks were to be found in kitchens than in parlors, dining rooms, and bedrooms. Bristol was also a place (though not a particularly important one) where clocks were made or assembled, where public clocks were installed in new sites such as post offices as well as traditional ones such as churches. By the late seventeenth century, there would appear to have been an explosion of private clock and watch ownership, and an insistent intrusion of the measured hour on general consciousness. From Bristol, the next chapter expands to examine the provision of clock time throughout premodern England. Churchwardens’ accounts are used to compile maps of parishes where church clocks were installed and maintained. There are more tables showing the number of people who included clocks as part of their probated wealth, and maps showing where the clockmakers lived.

The overall picture of a society in which the clock was becoming an everyday object of private and public knowledge is demonstrated in the fascinating series of vignettes which attempt to chart the use of the clock in everyday life. From the sixteenth century, diarists, astrologers, and housewives increasingly charted their day with the clock. While the need of astrologers to observe times of birth, death, illness, and other significant moments in order to answer client’s queries is clear enough, it is less obvious why John Dee, Simon Forman and Robert Hooke made a habit of noting the clock times of sexual intercourse. Merchants and schools are other venues for the triumph of the clock. Here I felt the need for some longer discussion of what has generally been seen as

the major medieval transformation of the telling of the hour, from the “natural” or unequal hours of the monastic day, to the precision of equal hours. Jacques Le Goff characterized this as the shift from church time to merchant time and, like Thompson, linked the development to the rise of capitalism.[2] It is important to recognize that the clock was just one of a very wide range of instruments and tables which could be used to determine the equal hours, or translate the unequal hours of the church into the equal hours of the merchant and astronomer.

The final section of the book (chapters 8 to 10) is, in some ways, a long tribute to the creator of the first accurate clock that could tell the time at sea, and therefore allow the precise measurement of longitude, namely John Harrison (1693-1776). Harrison’s story has become widely known through the popular biography of Dava Sobel.[3] Glennie and Thrift demonstrate very well that it is essential to see Harrison not as an isolated and cranky genius, but as someone who emerges from a number of what they call “communities of temporal practice.” The first of these is navigation and seafaring, disciplines which had been obsessed with time, measurement, and its instruments for millennia. Naval watches were perhaps the ultimate expression of the dictatorship of the clock in early modern Europe. The creep of temporal precision and the growing accuracy of the measurement of longitude led to the redrawing of maps, including the shrinking of the coastline of France. There is a wonderful discussion of the complex “ecology” of time-keeping and navigation devices used to chart an accurate course at sea in the era prior to the introduction of the mariner’s chronometer. Finally, there is a conclusion which again pays tribute to E. P. Thompson, and which stresses the centrality of the clock in early modern Britain.

This is a longish summary of the book’s substantive findings, and they are impressive. This is a book to which everyone will turn who wants to know how clocks spread across England: who owned them, what churches installed them, how well integrated the use of clock time was in everyday life, how they were used at sea, and why the creation of accurate clocks was such a significant social and cultural development. However, there are things that the book does not do which raise some questions. In the first place, the ascetic disavowal of all theory of time, with the exception of E. P. Thompson, seems to me to be misplaced. This would have been a much more interesting book if some of the data had been summarized more neatly,

and some wider speculation been included about the social and philosophical experience of time. Some tracks of information appear more or less undigested, like notes from the field. For example, how useful is the immensely detailed enumeration of time items imported into London in 1567-68, or the tabulation of times given in English diaries, or a long description of the navigation of tides around the Isles of Scilly, recorded in c.1740 by Abraham Tovey, master gunner? Particularly with the analysis of diary entries for their deployment of clock times, although this demonstrates the wonderful diligence of the researchers (almost on the scale of Harrison’s), could it not all have been said with more economy, wit, and elegance? This is a long book (417 pages of text) and I suspect few will have the capacity to read it from end to end.

I also felt unsure of the wisdom of the time scale claimed for the coverage of this book. Apart from a few examples, the bulk of the research is the same as that covered by Thompson, namely 1750-1900, when the clock indeed rose to central importance in early modern society. Studies of earlier time-keeping, especially by Linne Mooney, quite rightly stress that the clock was only one of a range of time-keeping practices of the Middle Ages.[4] The sun-dial, the quadrant, and the astrolabe were all used to tell the time and to convert from the natural hours, which were usual in daily life, to the clock hours which were favored by astronomers, astrologers, and others who required more accuracy. More accuracy still could be obtained with the assistance of astronomical tables. Medieval people would never assume, as Glennie and Thrift tend to throughout this book, that an instrument such as the clock rather than the heavens was the prime agent for the representation and determination of daily time. As John of Saxony states, in the canons to the Alfonsine Tables (1327): “Time is the measurement of the *primum mobile*.” A clock, like the astrolabe, was just one imperfect device for attempting to measure the perfect time generated by the heavens. A great deal more might have been said about the way in which the clock was transformed from just one among many instruments, to the premier organ of time over the time scale of this book, ultimately displacing the heavens themselves as the main emblem of passing time.

The approach to the history of time-keeping taken in this book, for all its breadth and tabulation of data, is, therefore, desperately narrow. It makes little sense to examine the history of clock time in isolation from

the history of all the other kinds of time-keeping from which clock time came to triumph only slowly and for reasons it would have been interesting to explore. The authors set out to avoid writing a history of time; well, they succeed. Readers can decide whether a history of the telling of clock time is, on its own, a sufficiently weighty subject to merit buying this book.

Notes

[1]. E. P. Thompson, "Time, work discipline and

industrial capitalism," *Past and Present* 38 (1967): 56-97.

[2]. Jacques Le Goff, "Temps de l'Église et temps du marchand," *Annales* 15, no. 3 (1960): 417-433.

[3]. Dava Sobel, *Longitude: The True Story of a Lone Genius Who Solved the Greatest Scientific Problem of His Time* (New York: Walker, 1995).

[4]. L. R. Mooney, "The Cock and the Clock: Telling the Time in Chaucer's Day," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 15 (1993): 91-109.

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