

ERIC STAPLETON RICHARDS FRHistS FASSA FAHA

1940–2018



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Emeritus Professor Eric Richards died suddenly and unexpectedly in London on 21 September 2018. His passing was a great shock for his wife, Professor Ngairé Naffine, and family, but Eric's death also deeply affected his great many friends, colleagues, students, and admirers across the globe who acknowledged him as a leading historian of the age. Beginning as an economic historian, Eric Richards had over the years broadened his research interests to include social history, especially emigration history, and he had also emerged as a distinguished historian of modern Scotland and Australia, particularly South Australia. His most recent book, *The Genesis of International Mass Migration: The British Case, 1750–1900*, had appeared in July 2018, barely two months before his untimely death.

Fortuitously, in 2015, Eric's life's work had been celebrated at an 'EricFest', an international conference at Flinders University of invited guest speakers, whose papers were later published in a festschrift *Emigrants and Historians: Essays in Honour of Eric Richards* (2016). This memorable occasion led to an outpouring of appreciation and affection. Attendees spoke frequently of Eric's generosity of spirit, especially his eagerness to nurture and encourage students and younger colleagues. Many acknowledged his characteristically gracious acceptance of alternative viewpoints, his willingness to examine issues from all angles, his desire to debate, his freedom from prejudice, and his ability to modify his views

having listened to others. His modesty and humility were constant themes.

Eric Richards was born in Holt in Denbighshire, in rural North Wales, in 1940. By that year, as Eric later reflected, only 5% of the British workforce was left in agriculture, a result of the urban drift associated with industrialisation. 'Out of generations of small farmers and agricultural labourers in North Wales', he wrote in his elegant autobiographical essay in the volume *Living Economic and Social History* in 2001, 'my own father and mother had taken the path from the cottage and the village to the local town (Wrexham) as part of this great historical disjunction and transition'. He added, tellingly, that 'I was conscious of being virtually the last to depart the land at the end of one of the critical processes in Economic History'. It was this deeply formative experience, no doubt, that was to give Eric his passion for migration history, especially his sympathetic and sensitive treatment of the Highland Clearances, when much of the Highland population was not only likewise displaced but also dispersed overseas, far beyond the Scottish homeland. The Richards family, already displaced, similarly left Wales, their ancestral homeland, moving shortly from Wrexham across the border to England, although only to neighbouring Shropshire, with its own Welsh associations but where Eric no longer learned the Welsh language.

The shift from countryside to town, from Wales to England, had also shaped Eric's early appreciation of history. 'I was an adolescent economic determinist at school in Shropshire', he admitted in his autobiographical essay, 'already seduced by Marx, Tawney and the *New Statesman*'. Thus, he decided, 'to understand and influence the world, Economic History was clearly the most important field to explore'. Its study would also, he thought, shed light on 'the problems of class discord', and be a means for 're-balancing the scales of society'. In 1959 Eric went up to Nottingham on an undergraduate scholarship (the 'first time anyone of my family had ever been anywhere near a university'), the means 'to indulge my passion' (as he put it) for Economic History. 'Born at the right time', he recalled with gratitude, 'our lucky generation reaped some of the most tangible rewards of British Socialism and Keynesian growth'. Eric was also fortunate to study under a generation of first-rate Economic Historians at Nottingham, including J.D. Chambers, Bob Coats and Robert Ashton. Here

the emphasis was on empiricism, on documents and field work, asking questions about the fate of ordinary folk during the period of industrialisation: 'not an intellectual puzzle but an actual search for the people of that time'. Theory was not eschewed entirely but the answers to historical conundrums were thought to lie in practical research.

Eric moved easily from first degree to PhD, researching and writing his thesis 'James Loch and the House of Sutherland 1812–1855', which investigated the origins of the Sutherland family's fortune in the English Midlands and their landed activities in the north of Scotland, a study which was later published as *The Leviathan of Wealth*, his first book. While thus engaged at Nottingham ('already a sort of labour exchange for recruitment to Commonwealth universities', he recalled), Eric applied for – and got – a Tutorship in Economics at the University of Adelaide in Australia, to which country he travelled in 1962 as a '£10 Pom'. Now firmly on his life's trajectory as both emigrant and historian, at the time it all 'seemed uncomplicated'. At Adelaide, however, Economic History was subsumed within Economics, which in turn was 'severely conceptual', as Eric explained, given over to theorising, model-building and quantitative research. Although stimulating rather than intimidating, Eric regretted that such an approach seemed devoid of human agency. It was hardly surprising, then, when in 1967 an opportunity to work with George Rude – whose research was far more Eric's cup-of-tea – arose at Stirling University in Scotland, at the gateway to the Highlands, Eric was persuaded to become a return migrant.

Eric's spell at Stirling established his lines of research for the next two or three decades, yet by 1971 he was already back in Adelaide, appointed to a position at the new Flinders University in a free-standing Department of Economic History, which went on to nurture a 'dream team' (Eric's phrase) of W.A. Sinclair, Ralph Shlomowitz, G.D. Snooks and Wray Vamplew. 'Second migrations are commonly better informed and more rational', Eric mused, and Flinders became his academic home for life, although by the mid-1980s Economic History had become subsumed within History, a trend observable at other Australian and British universities at the time. To his repertoire of expanding scholarly interests, Eric had by now added South Australian history, exemplified in a poignant account of the fate of monoglot Gaelic speakers from the Scottish Highlands who arrived in the colony in the 1850s. Published in the *Journal of the Historical Society of South Australia* in 1978, this article showed how the devastation and confusion experienced at home by these people during the Clearances was followed by destitution and humiliation in South Australia.

Less than a decade later, in 1986, Eric Richards was editor of the magnificent *The Flinders History of South Australia – Social History*, published to great acclaim

by Wakefield Press in Adelaide as part of the South Australian Jubilee 150 celebrations. His increasing engagement with Australian history also provided Eric with the opportunities and stimulus to contemplate the emergence of entirely new economies, built in what to European eyes had been a virgin wilderness. Studying both old and new economies in tandem, as it were, the Old World and the New, brought into focus the human and environmental costs of 'progress', and Eric explained that he was 'much engaged in the ironies of displaced Scottish Highlanders recruited as the direct agents in the destruction of Aboriginal societies in colonial Australia'.

By this time, Eric Richards had emerged as a prolific author of immense scholarship. *The Leviathan of Wealth* (1973) was followed by a succession of impressive books, among them *A History of the Highland Clearances: Vols. 1 and 2* (1982 and 1985), *Patrick Sellar and the Highland Clearances: Homicide, Evictions and the Price of Progress* (1999), *The Highland Clearances: People, Landlords and Rural Turmoil* (2000), and *Britannia's Children: Emigration from England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland Since 1600* (2004). He also co-authored with the late Monica Clough (one of Eric's great life-long friends) *Cromartie: Highland Life, 1650–1914* (1989). Later, in 2007, Eric published *Debating the Highland Clearances: Eviction and the Price of Progress*, which reviewed and assessed the contrasting interpretations of various historians. To this was added *From Hirta to Port Phillip: The St Kilda Emigration to Australia in 1852*, which appeared in 2010. Several of Eric's books won literary prizes, and in 2009 he was awarded the New South Wales Premier's Prize for his volume (published the year before) entitled *Destination Australia*, which traced emigration to Australia from the early days of Federation through to the demise of the White Australia policy and beyond. Eric's Preface was almost a hymn to the contemporary multicultural Australia created by the historical processes he describes in the book, paying tribute as he did to the neurological team at Austin Hospital in Heidelberg, Melbourne, which had treated his daughter when she was ill.

Some [of the neurological team] were from the Pacific Islands (one of whom might have been a rugby player); others were Greek in origin; one was clearly Japanese, another Chinese from Hong Kong; one was an Indonesian Muslim in traditional dress. There was a homesick nurse from Lusaka in Zambia, another from Nigeria; they were supported by a technician from Sheffield and a legion of doctors from various parts of Asia. The medical teams were orchestrated by a Highland Scot and a person of rather obvious Irish connections.

In this way, as Eric observed:

the Austin Hospital in November 2007 had assembled a full cast of multi-cultural modern Australians, a remarkable interacting convergence of the elements of the new Australia, here vividly working to a better future. It was also a scene which was, in virtually every respect, totally inconceivable in 1900 and a demonstration of the change that had been wrought upon this continent during the intervening century.

To Eric's formidable publishing output (which also included numerous articles and chapters) was added a string of other outstanding academic achievements. He was Fellow of both the Australian Academy of the Social Sciences and the Australian Academy of the Humanities, and had held visiting positions at Glasgow, Warwick, the Australian National University, London (Birkbeck and King's Colleges), Florence, Cardiff, and Cleveland Ohio, culminating in 2014 in his Carnegie Visiting Professorship at the University of the Highlands and Islands. In 2012 he was voted Historian of the Year by the History Council of South Australia. Alongside his *On the Wing: Mobility before and after Emigration to Australia* (edited with Margrette Kleinig in 2013), were Eric's other recent books, including a new 2016 edition of his *The*

Highland Clearances and a monograph *The Highland Estate Factor in the Age of the Clearances*, also published in 2016, together with *The Genesis of International Mass Migration: The British Case, 1750–1900* in 2018.

These volumes were testament to Eric's enduring commitment to his earliest enthusiasms but also to his belief that there were still enormous challenges facing historians – especially economic and social historians – in our attempts to understand the forces that have shaped the modern world. 'Most of our explanations of economic change are inadequate', he insisted in his autobiographical essay in *Living Economic and Social History*: 'Our understanding, for instance, of the role of women in the economy; of the roots of population change; of how and why certain economies after decades of stagnation, suddenly begin to grow rapidly; of the ultimate causes of the great diasporas – to mention a few matters – are still far from resolved'. Here again was Eric Richards the great encourager, the great inquirer, urging us all – himself included – on to yet more ambitious endeavours. As an awe-struck Theresa Mackay at a conference in Canada in 2014 put it so aptly: 'This guy is a Rock Star Historian'. Indeed he was.

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