

**Titmuss, Richard Morris** (1907–1973), historian and teacher of social administration, was born on 16 October 1907 at Lane Farm, Stopsley, near Luton in Bedfordshire, the second child of an unsuccessful small farmer, Morris Titmuss, whose wife, Maud Louise Farr, of rather less modest farming origins, bore him four children. The family lived an isolated and impecunious life in Bedfordshire and, from the early 1920s, in Hendon where, as a haulage contractor, Morris was no more successful than as a farmer. He died in 1926, leaving Richard to support the family, and particularly to accommodate his mother's emotional and financial needs until her death in 1972.

Titmuss's education was not untypical of the son of a petty proprietor in his day. He began at St Gregory's, a small preparatory school at Luton, and was 'finished' at Clark's Commercial College to which he went at the age of fourteen for a six-month course in bookkeeping. He was then employed as an office boy in Standard Telephones until aged eighteen when he was engaged as a clerk by the county fire insurance office, and there he served for sixteen years.

Titmuss never sat an examination or secured a formal credential. Nor did he regret his uncertified career, preferring instead to applaud the public library as among the most precious of British social services, and to hold the PhD in sceptical suspicion. Yet in 1950 he was elected to the chair of social administration at the London School of Economics (LSE). In the years between, and indeed as a child often absent from school with poor health, he had been an indefatigable and imaginative autodidact. Afterwards, when fellowship of the British Academy (1972) and honorary degrees from the University of Wales (1959), Edinburgh (1962), Toronto (1964), Chicago (1970), and Brunel (1971) were conferred on him, he remained a devotee of the spirit rather than the conventions of academic institutions. He was also appointed CBE in 1966, having refused a peerage offered by Harold Wilson.

The first step out of obscurity was made in 1934 in a Welsh youth hostel where Titmuss met Kathleen Caston (Kay) Miller, who became his wife in 1937, and his supportive companion for the rest of his life. Their daughter, Ann, has written a sensitively penetrating book, *Man and Wife* (1996), which reveals much of the private relationship between Richard and Kay that underlay his public emergence in their years together. His first unpublished writing in 1936 was under his wife's middle name. Her father, Thomas Miller, was a sales representative for a cutlery firm. They set up house at St George's Drive near Victoria Station, London, Titmuss still working for the county fire insurance office, his wife supporting his efforts to write in the evenings and stimulating his social and political interests.

Titmuss's first book, *Poverty and Population* (1938), reflected both his wife's influence in its social concern, and his insurance work in its mastery of vital statistics and statistical technique. It was noticed enthusiastically by Lord Horder, the physician, Eleanor Rathbone, Harold Macmillan, and the liberal intellectuals of the day, including the Laytons, the Rowntrees, and the Cadburys. It established his place in the distinctive English tradition of political arithmetic which runs from Sir Thomas More to R. H. Tawney, and bears a literature down the centuries of responsible social criticism based on private numerical enquiry into public issues. Titmuss became the main inheritor and exponent of this tradition of humanistic social accounting.

The second step towards distinction eventually yielded a book which made Titmuss nationally and internationally well known, the official history *Problems of Social Policy* (1950). Titmuss had been invited by W. Keith Hancock to join the group of historians

commissioned to write the official civil histories of the Second World War and to cover the work of the Ministry of Health. So Titmuss entered Whitehall, became industriously familiar with the social services, and was recognized by Hancock as possessed of ‘really creative insight into human problems’ and ‘the most unusual gift for asking the right questions’.

The answers led Titmuss from his pre-war allegiance to the Liberal Party, through active interest in the short-lived Common Wealth Party, to the Fabian wing of the Labour Party. Not that his passions for social justice and equality ever made him a strident politician, for he was always essentially a private citizen and scholar, a teacher and adviser, rather than a political leader, though he was strenuously dutiful in public service, whether as a member of the fire-watching squad at St Paul's during the war, or as deputy chairman of the Supplementary Benefits Commission from 1968. His socialism was as English as his patriotism—ethical and non-Marxist, insisting that capitalism was not only economically but socially wasteful, in failing to harness individual altruism to the common good. The most startling and impassioned statement of his conviction was in his book *The Gift Relationship: from Human Blood to Social Policy* (1970), in which, on the basis of characteristically meticulous statistical enquiry, he expounded the theory of a Gresham's law of selfishness such that commercialized blood markets undermine social integration.

This book and many others were the product of over twenty years as incumbent of the LSE chair. From that position Titmuss established the academic respectability of social administration both outside and inside the LSE, where it involved him in a protracted conflict with Irene Youngusband, whom Ralph Dahrendorf described as ‘the unusual, flamboyant and yet deeply committed social work teacher’ (Dahrendorf, 383). He taught and inspired a generation of university teachers, social policy researchers, administrators, and social workers from New York and Toronto to Mauritius and Tanganyika, until he died in the Central Middlesex Hospital, London, on 6 April 1973.

Titmuss was indeed a remarkable figure. Indefatigable in his obligation to his colleagues and students, unsparing in his loyalty to his college and his country, a bench-mark of integrity and virtue for the vast majority of those who knew him—whether at work in Houghton Street or at his modest house in Acton with his wife and their daughter, who was born in 1944. In another age he might have been an ascetic divine, painted by El Greco, with his long, thin body and large, round compelling eyes. In fact, he was no saint, but a secular agnostic—in Sir Edmund Leach's phrase, ‘the high priest of the welfare state’.

A. H. Halsey, *rev.*

#### **Sources**

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