

LIVING WITH PURPOSE: MEANINGFUL LIVES IN EARLY MODERN ENGLAND EXAMINED

Keith Thomas, *The Ends of Life: Roads to Fulfilment in Early Modern England*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), ISBN 978-0-19-924723-3, pp. i-xvi + 1-393

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“Ne frustra vixisse videar!” According to the philosopher Pierre Gassendi (1592-1655), the Danish astronomer Tycho Brahe (1546-1601) kept muttering this phrase over and over again in a deathbed delirium shortly before his passing away in October 1601. This powerful picture of a man agonizing over self-realization in his last hours rings true about the Dane who had been an extremely driven person in his scientific pursuits, yet paths to living a meaningful life were open not only to him, as exceptional as he was, but also to many other people in his age. In early modern England, for example, there was a variety of ends which men and women across different social strata could pursue in search of fulfillment. How they did this is told by the noted Oxford historian Sir Keith Thomas in the book under review here.

To set the stage, Thomas reminds us that in that England, as elsewhere in the period, human beings had great difficulties in freely choosing their life goals, since rigid social structures and the will of others usually decided their fate. Nonetheless, this lack of autonomy was gradually lessened as the social order was eroded by changing forces (educational and economic), while ambitious people could always try to do their best within the life niches allotted to them without their consent. So, in an age where the word “fulfillment” was not yet coined, English men and women could still strive to achieve felicity by focusing on meaningful ends. Keith Thomas selects six of these “ends of life” as he calls them – military prowess, work, wealth, reputation, personal relationships, and the afterlife – and dedicates a chapter to each of them. His method is to search for evidence across the divides of class and gender and throughout the period and then to piece together his findings in a broad picture of the subject. The outcome thus accommodates a great range of relevant material, juxtaposes and compares numerous contemporary opinions about the meaning of the ends of life, and pinpoints transformations in their cultural significance occurring over time. For instance, the reader is shown how the social importance of the traditional aristocratic valor was diminished as the importance of the professional army increased, how the line between “necessities of life” and “luxuries” was gradually blurred by the advent of the free market, how the traditional “honour” was less needed in business transactions as the amount of money in circulation increased, how the greeting embraces and kisses between male friends earlier in the period were replaced by mere handshakes later on, and how, at the end of the period, the desire

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for short-term celebrity in this world largely ousted the earlier drive toward long-term immortality in the afterlife. However concrete, all these findings are a direct product of Thomas's method of looking at the big picture.

Yet, such a "paratrooper's view" of his subject did not preclude the author from indulging in a wealth of detail. This partly comes from his propensity for citation - the book is a blazonry of quotations - but should rather be attributed to a seasoned historian's understanding of where the scholarly devil really is. For example, it is enough to list a few of the characters which the author parades in front of the reader - a macho aristocrat chewing glass to show his physical courage, insomniacs-workaholics working themselves to death, an executioner-perfectionist taking pride in his skills, a disappointed aristocratic father who would have his hand posthumously chopped off and sent as a memento to his neglectful son - to realize that Keith Thomas, for all of his care for the breadth of his writing, is not averse to doing some scholarly "truffle hunting," when it comes to finding out that all fascinating and illuminating detail.

Linked to this is the author's fine sense of humour. The days of the great historian Edward Gibbon (1737-94), who had a truly epic sense of humour, are now gone, and it is a rare occasion to see nowadays a scholar employing such a noble faculty of human reason in professional writing. Keith Thomas is a refreshing change from this sober trend. His pen is sparingly but regularly dipped in dry wit ink and he can create a comic moment by simply picking up the right quotation. Such points could be illuminating for the narrative, but even when they are offered as a mere refreshment to the reader they are very welcome. I cannot resist giving an example here. Speaking about the abortive attempts to set noble academies in England, the author tells the story of a donation like this:

In 1751 the great-grandchildren of Edward Hyde, Earl of Clarendon, left his papers to Oxford University, so that the proceeds of publishing them could be used to fund a riding academy, which their ancestor had recommended as essential for a gentleman's education. The university chose to accumulate the interest and, to its eternal shame, used it in 1872 to establish the Clarendon Laboratory. (p. 50).

I think Edward Gibbon would have smiled and nodded approvingly.

What Gibbon might not have approved of is that *The Ends of Life* is a rather short book on a vast subject. Keith Thomas himself regrets he had no time and space to write on "...intellectual inquiry, aesthetic delight, public service, private charity, and physical pleasure." (p. 2) The list sounds mouth-watering and it is indeed regrettable he could not enlarge along those lines, since his "broad-brush" historical writing would have only benefited had he treated a larger number of such themes. It would be presumptuous to ask for a sequel from a scholar whose diverse academic interests must already have set him on another agenda. But I would be glad if the author would decide to have another go at the subject. After all, fulfillment, scholarly or otherwise, sometimes is driven by debts as much as by ends...