Themes in Comparative History

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This series of books provides concise studies on some of the major themes currently arousing academic controversy in the fields of economic and social history. Each author explores a given theme in a comparative context, drawing on material from western societies as well as those in the wider world. The books are introductory and explanatory and are designed for all those following thematic courses in history, cultural European or social studies.

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General Editor: CLIVE EMSLEY

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To my mother,
and in memory of my father

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General Editor's Preface

SINCE the Second World War there has been a massive expansion in the study of economic and social history generating, and fuelled by, new journals, new academic series and societies. The expansion of research has given rise to new debates and ferocious controversies. This series proposes to take up some of the current issues in historical debate and explore them in a comparative framework.

Historians, of course, are principally concerned with unique events, and they can be inclined to wrap themselves in the isolating greatcoats of their 'country' and their 'period'. It is at least arguable, however, that a comparison of events, or a comparison of the way in which different societies coped with a similar problem – war, industrialisation, population growth and so forth – can reveal new perspectives and new questions. The authors of the volumes in this series have each taken an issue to explore in such a comparative framework. The books are not designed to be path-breaking monographs, though most will contain a degree of new research. The intention is, by exploring problems across national boundaries, to encourage students in tertiary education, in sixth-forms, and hopefully also the more general reader, to think critically about aspects of past developments. No author can maintain strict objectivity; nor can he or she provide definitive answers to all the questions which they explore. If the authors generate discussion and increase perception, then their task is well done.

CLIVE EMSLEY

Preface

My father was a policeman; but I never knew him since he was killed serving in Bomber Command three months before I was born. As a boy I remember my mother telling me the story of how he caught pneumonia as a Detective Constable after several nights in the cold and wet investigating the murder of a child. Not all of her recollections were quite as heroic; apparently he never had to pay for tickets in the local cinema, and he was able to get free seats for most West End shows. At least one of his colleagues, while a bobby on a night-time beat in part of south-east London, seems to have spent some time sleeping on the job by taking illicit advantage of the facilities offered by some sports pavilions. I owe a debt of gratitude to the officers and men of my father's police division who always gave me a Christmas box right up until I completed my career as an undergraduate. But the image which I have of my father and the debt which I owe his division have not, I think, led me to write anything approaching an official history.

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Many friends, colleagues and students have listened, with apparent interest, and have given me help and advice during the preparation of this book. My particular thanks are due to Tony Bennett, John Styles, Jean Tulard and Bernard Waites, to Pierre and Irène Sorlin for the generosity and kindness while I have been in Paris, and to David Englander and Stuart Hall who read and commented on a final draft. Peggy Mackay coped valiantly with typing my manuscript; my wife, Jennifer, coped valiantly with me – and now, I trust, will see the much-needed decorating undertaken.