Ann Waswo's research

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Although Roger Goodman has asked me to say a few words about Ann's research, I think it's significant that the first time I ever heard of Ann was in connection with her teaching. In the spring of 1997, a pregnant time in British political life, I was a second-year history undergraduate at Trinity College in Oxford, and we had to choose what was then called a Further Subject. Effectively, this was our first serious research-based elective in our three-year course. I chose the fifteenth-century art history of Italy and the Low Countries, which tells you about my intellectual horizons at the time. My good friend Stuart—or Stu, as he was known—chose Japanese history, which we all thought was incredibly daring. But then, Stu was quite a daring guy: he was a brilliant jazz trumpeter, and would often improvise late into the night at an underground club on Magdalen Street. A few weeks into the spring term, Stu duly reported back to us: "Dr Waswo *rocks*," he said. Coming from a musician, that verb was high praise indeed.

By the first time I met Ann, in Tokyo in the early autumn of 2004, I knew more about her work. On Stu's recommendation, I had taken to Japan and read her 1996 textbook, *Modern Japanese Society, 1868-1994*, which was a model of succinctness. But I was particularly drawn to her expertise in the history of rural Japan. Her first monograph, published in 1977 and based on her PhD dissertation, was entitled *Japanese Landlords: The Decline of a Rural Elite*. It was a bold and convincing call to rehabilitate prewar Japanese landlords from their popular postwar image as disinterested dinosaurs who had held tenant Japan back from achieving its full social and economic potential after the 1868 Meiji Restoration. Countering this image of parasite landlords (and, as I form this sentence, I hear Ann tutting and suggesting that my metaphoric mix of dinosaurs and parasites is inelegant), Ann offered a view of landlords as innovators and experimenters, seeking to adapt their agricultural methods to the modern world and, thereby, reducing their tenants' centuries-long economic dependence upon them. By the time of the Occupation-led land reforms in the late-1940s, Ann argued, landlords "had played an active, albeit unwitting, role in undermining their own position" (p. 136).

Rereading *Japanese Landlords* today, I'm struck by a number of things. First, it was quite characteristic of Ann in its clear rejection of a Marxist structural framework—or, indeed, any theory-led explanation—for making sense of the prewar past. Ann sought empirical nuance in her work, rather than crowd-pleasing narratives. That's one of the reasons, I suspect, that she later chose to translate Nagatsuka Takashi's 1910 novel, *Tsuchi* (The Soil), because of its unflinching depiction of peasant life in Meiji Japan. The novel's greatest strength, she wrote in her 1989 introduction, was "its portrayal of covert and overt tensions within the community: the persistent and sometimes vicious gossip, the petty and not so petty rivalries, and the ways in which conflict was contained" (p. x). There were no heroes or indeed heroines in Ann's historical view: just humans with their flaws, their rivalries, their unsentimental lives, their unwitting roles in societal transformations.

Nor was this an obvious historiographical position to stake in the mid-1970s, when modernization theory still held many scholars in its thrall, with its assumption that American agency was the key explanatory factor in the genesis of Japan's transformative land reforms. Indeed, though it may have been obvious to her colleagues at the time, I'm struck by how much Ann was engaged in what is today called "contemporary history": the land reforms had only been introduced a quarter-century before Ann did her PhD research—which would make them equivalent to my researching the 1990s today. In identifying a story of "decline" in rural elites, Ann was making a call about contemporary Japan which was, in my view, highly prescient. She noted, in the introduction to *Japanese Landlords*, that many local bureaucrats had destroyed records after the war, and that individual landlords' diaries were few and far between, thus rendering close case studies very difficult. It would be the fortune of future generations of scholars in fact to find such sources, and on this basis to revise some of Ann's conclusions—but in emphasizing nuance, decline, innovation, and experimentation, Ann's scholarship paved the way for such future research.

And yet—and this is my final point—I never once heard her make such a claim for her own work. True, she could be a harsh critic of others. One of my favourite stories comes from a senior US scholar who visited Oxford shortly after the very well-received publication of his latest monograph. As he tells the story, someone stood up during a Question & Answer session and gushed about how they couldn't put his book down. When it came to her

question, however, Ann began by saying, “Well I, for one, *could* put it down.” She once told me that in her later career, she had preferred the work of peer review in private rather than criticism in public, convinced that she could help new scholarship more productively this way. That was how she taught, too, especially as a PhD supervisor. She was rigorous and succinct and deeply loyal—but she never blew her own research trumpet. I somewhat regret that today, wishing that there might have been more opportunities to ask about how she had come to her interest in landlords, and also to her later interests in the history of housing. But as a strategy for encouraging the intellectual independence of her supervisees, and for making me feel that I was taken seriously not just as a student but also as a fellow scholar-in-arms, I have to say that it was smart and that it worked. In that sense, my friend Stu struck a chord in his assessment of my supervisor Ann.

Ann Waswo was DPhil supervisor to Martin Dusinberre from 2005 to 2008