

Regional Farming in England

AN ADDRESS DELIVERED AT THE JOINT
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I

IT is gratifying to be asked to address what is, I believe, the first full meeting of the new British Agricultural History Society, and I hope that I may do justice to the occasion. It is also somewhat intimidating to face so many who must know much more about practical farming than I do, not only in the new society but also in the Association of Agriculture, with whom this conference is being jointly held. I speak as a historian and not as a farmer, though—like many in this room—I am descended from a long line of farmers (five hundred years of them) which ended in the great depression of the 1820's and a consequent migration to the town, a movement which constituted a fundamental break with the past for most English families, a revolution in English cultural and social history, and one which has produced little but disastrous consequences for the economy and fortunes of this country. But let us tiptoe quietly away from such immediate controversy and apply ourselves to the more distant past.

The full title of my talk this morning is *Regional Farming in England: Problems and Sources*. It is necessary to make this plain at the outset, for I shall be making a survey, not of the work that has already been done, but of the vast field that lies before us awaiting cultivation. I wish to suggest, so far as I am competent to do so, some of the problems and enquiries that seem to me to be worthy of investigation, and to indicate some of the major sources of material for these enquiries.

The study of agricultural history in this country is nothing new. Economic historians have been engaged upon it, as part of a much larger province of enquiry, for the past two generations or so; but we agricultural historians have now reached the age and stature when we need a separate household—a new society and our own journal—where we can be independent, while at the same time maintaining amicable relations with the parents that begat us. Our parents are not sorry to see us go: it relieves the pressure on their own space and resources, and they wish us well in our new house; and for our part we look forward to spreading ourselves more generously over the things that most appeal to us and to following the devices and desires of our own hearts.

We want, for example, to study the actual farming practice of England more assiduously than has yet been done, and to correct what I believe to have been an over-emphasis on the legal and institutional side of agrarian history. Historians have tended to study the *manor* rather than the *village*, the legal concept rather than the physical fact, and to be more interested in tenures and rents than actual farming: to give elaborate consideration to questions of land-ownership and land-occupation, and to give little consideration to land-use: to be interested, in short, in the details of the machinery and to forget what the machinery exists for. Is this because some of our best historians of the land have been trained as lawyers, and none as a farmer?

All these things—manorial history and organization, land-tenures, and so forth—are important. I am not attacking them as subjects of enquiry. I have done my share at all of them, and I find them all interesting and worth doing. But I cannot help thinking that if our friends in the Association of Agriculture wished to read something in plain English about the actual farming of the past in some region or some period of time, what a dusty answer they would get if they opened nine books out of ten that are concerned apparently with the land. Let us, then, above all be practical in our studies of agricultural history, rather than theoretical and legalistic; let us remember all the time that we are dealing with actual men and women who have struggled to get a living off a real piece of country that we can go and walk over to-day, and keep in mind the facts of soil, climate, and topography rather than the nice distinctions of copyhold tenures, the workings of the manor courts, the heriots, fines, and amercements. Let us, while taking account of the machinery of land-ownership and occupation, devote more thinking to the actual uses to which the land has been put. Let us, in short, get down to Earth.

England is an infinitely diverse country, geologically, topographically, and climatically. It is said that the single county of Somerset contains from west to east a greater variety of geology than the whole of Russia from north to south. But before we consider the multitude of small regions, we must recall the two Zones that are fundamental for farming history as for much else: the Highland Zone of the west, and the Lowland Zone of the east, a division so fundamental that it extends down to the very houses in which people lived for as long as regional building styles lasted. If therefore we wish to compare our chosen region with another region, it is necessary to compare it with another in the same zone, or we may find we are trying to compare the incomparable. And let us spread our studies so that each zone gets adequate attention. So far, except for Professor Alun Roberts, we have concentrated mainly, and for accidental reasons, upon studies of Lowland regions—Lin-

colnshire, Wiltshire, Leicestershire. I shall always regret that when I chose to write a thesis nearly twenty years ago upon agrarian history in the west of England, well within the Highland Zone of Britain, I devoted myself to a study of the ownership and occupation of the land and said almost nothing about land-use, about actual farming in the county of Devon. I saw the error of my ways afterwards, and when I was urged to publish this piece of work I declined to do so on the ground that I must first repair this omission and study the thousands of inventories in the probate registry at Exeter to get a picture of the farming in my chosen period. The war came before I could set to work on this task, every document in the probate registry perished—unnecessarily, I may say—in an air raid, and the regional farming of Devonshire can now never be studied, for nothing can take the place of this class of record. Fortunately, there are other counties within the Highland Zone of which the records have escaped destruction.

Within the two fundamental zones of Britain lie, or lay, a great number of regions. A region may be defined for our purpose as a territory, large or small, in which the conditions of soil, topography, and climate (and perhaps certain natural resources also) combine to produce sufficiently distinctive characteristics of farming practice and of rural economy in the widest sense to mark it off clearly from its neighbouring territories. The region may be smaller than the county (e.g. the Lincolnshire Wolds) or considerably larger (such as the Cotswolds or the Fenland). This is an imprecise definition, no doubt, and as work proceeds on regional farming and a greater number of studies becomes available, the definition of a region may well be clarified and made more precise. Here the French and German geographers and historians can help us, for they understand these things better in countries where the region is still a living reality.

II

Where are the origins of regional farming in this country? We find distinctive regional economies well established in sixteenth-century England, if I understand aright the work of Dr Thirsk and Dr Kerridge. How much farther back must we look, and how does a regional economy establish itself? What are its main characteristics, and how have they evolved?

Farming regions cannot emerge until man has invaded the natural scene and lived in a chosen territory long enough to have learnt by experience what the local soils, terrain, climate, and natural resources allow him best to do, what he can best develop, and what is least worth his while to produce or make. There may have been rudimentary farming regions in Romano-British times (as, for instance, in the Cotswolds), but this is probably not a

profitable line of enquiry, nor ever will be, for it must be observed that one specialist does not make a region. The evidence of specialization from two or three, or more, Roman villas would not be conclusive, for a large estate is naturally best suited for specialization and we need to know what the generality of peasant farmers were doing at the same time before we can begin to talk of a farming region; and that we shall probably never know. Nor, if one found good evidence of farming regions in this period, would it help much, for one could not pursue the enquiry at all continuously.

Domesday Book is our first opportunity of observing the emergence of farming regions. It was compiled after some twenty generations of English settlement, after ten to twenty generations of farming experience over most types of terrain and soil. Here the detailed work of Professor Darby on the Domesday geography of England will be invaluable to historians, above all his distribution maps of plough-teams and population, and of the demesne livestock in the eight counties for which this information survives. It should be observed, however, that Professor Darby's regions, inside each of the six eastern counties of his first volume, are a modern geographer's regions, and they are not the regions—if there are any—that emerge from Domesday itself as distinct and contemporary rural economies. Here and there in the distribution maps one catches a glimpse of what may well be a true farming region even in the eleventh century, as for example in the remarkable concentration of sheep on the Essex coastal marshes. But it is still doubtful how far regional farming can be said to have existed in 1086. The most we can say is that it may have begun to emerge in certain very sharply defined districts in the more anciently settled parts of England, above all in the marshlands between the Humber and Dungeness, and perhaps again in the sheep-farming of the Cotswolds. Even then the records of the following century are so thinly spread that we shall not, I think, advance the subject greatly unless we are unusually fortunate with our estate material. Not until the thirteenth century do manorial accounts—our main source for this kind of enquiry in the medieval period—become sufficiently numerous for us to have an opportunity of detecting specialities developing in certain districts; and it yet remains to be seen whether this is so.

Even when we possess our manorial accounts, there are still two difficulties. The accounts tell us about demesne farming, but not about peasant farming: and how far can demesne farming reveal the *typical* farming of a region? The tithe receipts of monastic houses might reveal better the nature of peasant farming. Where our conclusions from these receipts tally with those of the bailiff's accounts, we can feel that we are on the right track. We may also find a small amount of useful material among taxation records, as, for example,

on the roll for the fifteenth in 1225 relating to the estates of three religious houses in south Wiltshire, which Eileen Power used in her *Medieval English Wool Trade*.

The other difficulty is that the thirteenth century is the period of high farming, with a capitalistic organization of agriculture on the large estates at least, and much evidence of inter-manorial and inter-regional traffic.¹ This is the accepted picture, but one may legitimately ask, I think, how far it is generally true of thirteenth-century England. Is it true, for example, of great tracts of the backward west and north, and of the smaller estates anywhere? For we must remember that it was the best organized estates that kept the best records (e.g. the see of Winchester or a Fenland abbey), and historians naturally tend to study these rather than disjointed scraps from elsewhere.

At any rate, by the mid-fourteenth century much of this large-scale and highly organized farming had broken down, giving way to a period of natural economy—a Peasant Economy—with a greater emphasis on subsistence farming. Demesnes were parcelled out on leases to local peasants, with a consequent diminution in the scale of farming and probably of inter-manorial traffic. The use of money was only a marginal affair in the later medieval rural economy, not the essence of the economy as it is today.

Did this reversion towards a natural or peasant economy strengthen or weaken the trend towards the development of regional farming? I cannot answer this question with certainty, but I suspect that regional farming was in fact greatly strengthened.

For one thing, we have to account for the undoubted strength of regional farming in sixteenth-century England, where it clearly has deep roots in the past. And secondly, a natural economy, with its greater emphasis on self-sufficiency and self-containment, would tend to intensify the natural or innate character of a region by weakening its contacts with outside—just as the railways, in the nineteenth century, by making external contacts easy and quick, finally *destroyed* the ancient regions of England.

A subsistence or peasant economy forced a region into a more intensive exploitation of its own natural resources, down to the smallest detail: down to the stones in the clay, the clay itself, the reeds in the marshy corners; everything provided by Nature is used, nothing is wasted. The old field-names and furlong-names all reveal this intensive and minute exploitation of the natural products of a limited territory; and we must pay due regard

¹ See, for example, R. V. Lennard, *Manorial Traffic and Agricultural Trade in Medieval England*, published by the Agricultural Economics Society, 1938. Mr Lennard's evidence is drawn almost exclusively from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

to this kind of evidence—however trifling it may seem at first sight—or our enquiry will be a distortion of the truth.

III

By the early sixteenth century our records multiply, and for the first time we can study in adequate detail the farming of the great mass of ordinary farmers. We are no longer dependent on purely manorial accounts, with their emphasis on demesne farming. The records still provide only a sample, but it is a comprehensive one, covering squires, yeomen, husbandmen, craftsmen-farmers, and even a sprinkling of cottagers and labourers. A detailed picture of English farming at all levels is now possible.

Among the records we must use to construct our picture in any one region are: (a) probate inventories and wills; (b) tithe disputes among the local ecclesiastical records; (c) manorial accounts (for local markets, etc.); (d) parish registers and rate-books.¹ These are all essentially *local* records.

Among the central records we should turn to: (a) Exchequer and other depositions; (b) lawsuits, for information about local markets, crops, and economic information generally; (c) fines (the precise interpretation of which has yet to be settled: they can be very misleading at first sight, but are nevertheless a valuable source for agrarian history); (d) lay subsidies and other taxation records, for the wealth of the farming class in general, and for comparison between farmers and other social classes, or between farmers of different regions; (e) muster returns and hearth tax returns, for population data (these again are not easy to interpret, but a study of population is essential if we are properly to understand a regional economy).

I need hardly mention that many valuable and relevant local records will have strayed into the British Museum, the Bodleian Library, and other national repositories, and that the above list is not intended to be a complete guide to all the material available for a study of peasant economies in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries.

IV

By the sixteenth century we have strongly defined farming regions, and here we may note that part of our task is to rediscover the ancient distinctive regions of England and their economies. We may well be obliterating or for-

¹ The Churchwardens' accounts for Stathern, in north Leicestershire, for example, contain many 'levies' between 1630 and 1677 showing the amount of land farmed by each occupier and the number of his beasts and sheep. See the *Transactions of the Leicestershire Archaeological Society*, xxiii, 1946-7, pp. 75-221. Stathern, indeed, would make an excellent subject for a study of farming history, for there is much medieval material also.

getting these if we thoughtlessly superimpose upon our chosen field the soil-regions or the topographical regions of the modern geographer. Where are the old *pays* of England, the very names of which are now largely forgotten? They may have lingered longer in the Highland Zone, as in Furness and Hallamshire: I do not know.

This search for the old regions—the historical regions rather than the contemporary regions devised by the geographer—imposes upon us the necessity to take a wide view of our subject. To be interested in regional farming is not simply to make a technical study of farming as an industry. It should be a study of the various economies in different parts of England, of the wider implications of farming history—its sociological implications, if you like, though one hates to use these airy words.

Regional farming, down to the mid-eighteenth century at least, was mainly peasant farming. It is the character of peasant farming that determines the character of a farming region. A score or fifty small farms are more significant than one or two big ones.¹ And the history of Peasant England has yet to be written. When it is written, apparent trifles will weigh considerably—the clay, the stones, the sticks, feed for the geese, and so on—as any one knows who has read about the closing years of this England in George Bourne's *Change in the Village*, a classic work for those who wish to understand how the old economy moved and had its being.

This peasant England can best be studied, perhaps can only be studied, region by region, because of the necessity for a detailed knowledge of trifles, of the multitude of products of the local soil that hardly ever appear in the records but which can be seen in the peasant buildings themselves or heard in the field-names. And this means that we must be prepared to walk the fields like a farmer, and not just sit in muniment rooms like a lawyer.

If one may generalize, and perhaps it is too soon to do this, the history of regional economies and of peasant farming falls into three broad phases: the emergent period in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the period of stability in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and the period of disintegration of the old economies from the eighteenth century onwards. Regional farming does not come to an end, it is true, but it changes its character with the disappearance of the peasant and the coming of railways and large-scale industry.

¹ We probably over-emphasize the importance of monastic sheep-farming in the medieval period, even in the chalk and limestone country. On the Wiltshire downland manors studied by Eileen Power, the villagers' flocks amounted to between four and five times the monastic flocks, though the *average* villager's flock was very small (e.g. only eighteen at South Damerham and Martin).

And if one may be permitted to throw out a few hints about the kind of questions one should be asking, they might be these. How did the open-field system really work in different parts of the country? How did the rural economy as a whole work? And one might pay some special attention to the economy of the craftsman-farmer or the miner-farmer, who seems to me to have perfected a little balanced economy of his own. What a mistake it is to look upon him as a man who is failing to make a living in either world, as some of our economic historians are inclined to do, to speak of him as ekeing out a precarious living first at one thing, then at another! To me he is a man who is getting the best of both worlds, not the worst—a balanced man in a world growing increasingly unbalanced. But let the student of regional farming discover this for himself, as he assuredly will if he reads his records with imaginative insight.

When one turns to the period of disintegration, one will find its roots perhaps well back in the seventeenth century. Beneath the rock-like structure of peasant society in that period, two undermining forces are already burrowing: a population growing too quickly upon a relatively fixed supply of land, and the engrossing of farms into fewer and fewer hands. Even so, the structure stood solidly enough until the age of parliamentary enclosure; and here I think we must look in particular to the loss of common rights as dealing the mortal blow. They were the keystone of the arch that held the economy together. Then the industrial revolution destroyed the local industries in some regions, and the railways in others. But all this is telescoping a long and complicated story, which will vary greatly from region to region.

V

My time draws to an end, but there is one important thing yet to be said. I hope that all those who set out to study regional farming in England will extend their view to the farmsteads themselves. We know next to nothing in England about the evolution of the farmstead plan, or the farmhouse plan. They know far more about it in Wales and Ireland. There is still time to make such a study, though it becomes more urgent every year as prosperous farmers improve their houses and buildings beyond recognition and render them valueless as historical records. We take our long series of farmsteads in England—four centuries of them still standing—for granted, and do not yet perceive that a good deal of farming history is written in these buildings and is nowhere to be found in documents. There are indeed three sources for such a study. There is the archaeological evidence, which takes us back to the thirteenth century in Wales or upon Dartmoor, and may take us back even farther when the sites of deserted villages are fully opened up. Then

there are the probate inventories, which will give us an incomparable picture of farmhouses and their contents (including their implements and tools) from the early sixteenth century to the middle of the eighteenth. And finally there is the evidence of the buildings as they stand today, thousands of them waiting to be examined, measured up, drawn, and photographed. How does the plan and disposition of the farmstead as a whole vary from region to region, and are there distinct regional types, and if so when do they emerge?

VI

The history of farming must be studied on a regional basis. England may be a small country, but no country in the world has such a diversity of soils, climates, natural resources, and topography, in such a small space. We must be prepared to toil over minute details in such a study: there is no room for brilliant generalizations. Let us leave those to the political historian. We must get down to earth: to crops, animals, soils, buildings, implements. And yet with all this we must in the end take a wide view, for we shall really be writing, down to 1800 anyway, the history of a vanished peasant culture, one is almost tempted to say civilization.

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