

An Agrarian History of England

By H. P. R. FINBERG

AT a meeting held in London on the 14th of January 1956 the foundations were laid of a project which will doubtless be of considerable interest to members of the British Agricultural History Society.

The plan is an ambitious one. It is proposed to compile and publish an Agrarian History of England. The word agrarian is used here in its widest connotation: that is to say, if present intentions are fulfilled, the History will deal not only with arable and pastoral husbandry, but also with the marketing of produce, the distribution of landownership, rural housing, and the structure of rural society. It will be, in short, a complete social and economic history of rural England. And since any division of what is usually called the Highland Zone would probably be found unsatisfactory in the long run, it is likely that Wales too will be included. The theme will be pursued from the beginnings of systematic agriculture in the neolithic period down to whatever date in the twentieth century may be deemed a convenient terminal point.

It is obvious that a History conceived in these terms can only be contemplated as a long-term effort of co-operative scholarship. A minimum of seven volumes will be required, and several years must elapse before the first of them can be ready for the press. Nor can any assurance be felt or given that the volumes will come out in chronological sequence. As the work develops, the seven may easily become ten or twelve. There will be work here for many hands. And even if all the available talent could be mobilized, the attempt to cover so wide a field is bound to reveal serious gaps in our knowledge of the subject. Hence it will not be sufficient to compile a synthesis of existing knowledge. A great deal of new research will have to be undertaken with the set purpose of embodying the results in the finished work. On one point all who have discussed the project are unanimous: if the work is not to be carried out on the highest level of contemporary scholarship, it would be better not to attempt it at all.

How the research is to be organized, and how the undertaking is to be financed, are questions which cannot as yet be answered in detail. But it is thought that a beginning can be made by utilizing resources already in being. Our university departments of history, geography, and economics include appreciable numbers of postgraduate students who look to their supervisors and tutors for guidance in the choice of subjects for research. Here is a potential source of manpower, waiting to be activated in the direction of the History. From this point of view the History may be expected to fulfil the

secondary but valuable function of co-ordinating a great deal of research-work that at present lacks unity of aim.

In the meantime, an Advisory Committee has been set up, with the *doyen* of our agrarian historians, Professor R. H. Tawney, as its chairman.¹ The editor of this REVIEW will be general editor of the History. Particular responsibilities have yet to be allotted; but it may be taken for granted that each volume will require an editor of its own.

The initiative in this project comes from the Department of English Local History in the University College of Leicester. Many members of the British Agricultural History Society will be personally engaged in the enterprise, and all will probably wish to be informed of its progress, for the Society brings together in its membership those historians, economists, and working farmers whose interest in agrarian history is most alert. The pages of this REVIEW, therefore, will naturally reflect from time to time our interest in the project. Indeed, the REVIEW provides an eminently suitable channel of communication, of discussion, and even at times of healthy controversy, between those who will be working on the History. Therefore, without pledging the Society to give more than this degree of moral support, the Executive Committee has agreed that the project is one in which it may appropriately take a sympathetic interest.

¹ The members of the Committee, in alphabetical order, are as follows.

M. W. Beresford, M.A., *Reader in Economic History, University of Leeds*; E. G. Bowen, M.A., *Gregynog Professor of Geography and Anthropology, University College of Wales (Aberystwyth)*; J. D. Chambers, B.A., Ph.D., *Reader in Economic and Social History, University of Nottingham*; H. C. Darby, O.B.E., M.A., Ph.D., *Professor of Geography, University College, London*; H. P. R. Finberg, M.A., F.S.A., *Head of the Department of English Local History, University College, Leicester*; *editor of the Agricultural History Review*; Alexander Hay, *General Secretary of the Association of Agriculture*; J. W. Y. Higgs, M.A., *Lecturer in the History of Agriculture and Keeper of the Museum of English Rural Life, University of Reading*; R. H. Hilton, D.Phil., *Lecturer in History, University of Birmingham*; W. G. Hoskins, M.A., Ph.D., *Reader in Economic History, University of Oxford*; H. C. Pawson, M.B.E., M.Sc., *Professor and Assistant Director of the Department of Agriculture, King's College, Newcastle upon Tyne*; Stuart Piggott, B.Litt., F.B.A., F.S.A., *Abercromby Professor of Prehistoric Archaeology, University of Edinburgh*; M. M. Postan, M.Sc., M.A., *Professor of Economic History, University of Cambridge*; *editor of the Economic History Review*; C. E. Stevens, M.A., B.Litt., *Fellow of Magdalen College, and Lecturer in Ancient History, University of Oxford*; R. H. Tawney, Litt.D., F.B.A., *Professor Emeritus of Economic History, University of London*; (Mrs) I. Joan Thirsk, B.A., Ph.D., *Senior Research Fellow in Agrarian History, University College, Leicester*; Edgar Thomas, B.Litt., B.Sc., *Professor of Agricultural Economics, University of Reading*; Sir James A. Scott Watson, C.B.E., LL.D., D.Sc., *President of the British Agricultural History Society*; *formerly Chief Scientific and Agricultural Adviser to the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries*; Edith H. Whetham, M.A., *Gilbey Lecturer in Agricultural Economics and History, University of Cambridge*; David Williams, M.A., *Sir John Williams Professor of Welsh History, University College of Wales (Aberystwyth)*.