

From the Colonies: a Tempered Tribute¹

By WILLIAM N. PARKER

HISTORY is useful, if at all, to "point a moral and adorn a tale." The tales told by agricultural historians, both British and American, are endless—many of them well told in the pages of the *AGRICULTURAL HISTORY REVIEW* and its American cousin, *Agricultural History*. But what are the morals to which the stories lend point? I suggest that there are two: one is the importance of productivity growth in agriculture for modern industrial civilization, the other is the meaning and significance of that curious concept, "freedom," which has played so prominent a role in agrarian history, and now is in need, I think, of revival in a re-defined form.

The productivity growth which agricultural history describes is largely a result either of economic expansion in a world of increasing returns or of a technological change, itself deriving either from desperate contrivance stimulated by economic expansion or from the growth of scientifically established knowledge at a deeper level than that to which mere contrivance can penetrate. The origins, meaning, and effects of freedom are observed in the history of agrarian organization, i.e. of the economic and legal bonds which have attached men to the soil and to one another. Technology and organization, the two great subjects of economic history, form the underlying concern also of agricultural historians; without understanding of their joint effects in rural life, the history of a region's wealth and of its social development remains sealed.

¹ This article constitutes the response by the author to the editor's invitation to contribute, on the occasion of the Society's twenty-fifth jubilee, a discussion in which "the author would address himself more to the failings of the subject, what requires to be done in the field, and how scholars might go about it." Needless to say, in such an impertinent discussion, justice cannot be truly done either to the work of some scholars, who need no ghost come from the dead to tell them these things, or to all the excellent and enlightening work done in other areas and directions.

In both these compartments of our subject the experiences of Britain and America have differed, and those differences, compounded by differences in source materials, methods, and the intellectual climate in which the histories have been written in the two countries, have produced different bodies of literature. It may be of interest to ask how far the methods and perspectives of one national group of historians may be applied to the materials and problem of the other.

I

Concerning productivity growth, two sorts of questions may occur to an American scholar looking at the British experience: one has to do with quantities, the other with processes.

The quantities we wonder about are aggregates, and for British agriculture we wonder—is there really no way to construct them? One recalls the thesis and early articles of E. F. Gay, the charismatic American figure, a kind of "mute, inglorious Clapham," in whom the curiosity for quantification was strongly developed. His dissertation in Berlin in 1902 asked essentially, how much of the arable land in Britain was enclosed for the sheep farming of the sixteenth century? The answer—of the order of 4 per cent—though based on doubtful evidence still leads one to worry about the representativeness of the pamphlet literature on which Tawney built his concern. Gay's relation to "literary" historians was in this instance much the same as Clapham's relation to the Hammonds on the effects of the later enclosures. But unlike Clapham, Gay buried his figures deep in the *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, and released so few copies of his dissertation that they were overlooked, even (according to Heaton) by Tawney.² Might not one get

² Edwin F. Gay, 'Inclosures in England in the Sixteenth Century', *Quart. Jnl. Econ.*, xvii, 1903, pp. 576-97; Herbert Heaton, *Edwin F. Gay: a Scholar in Action*, Cambridge, Mass., 1952, pp. 55-6.

now a national inventory of the British land not perhaps for 1550 but, say, for 1760, and again for the early and mid-nineteenth century? Is it almost time to bring together the splendid county and local studies into a national synthesis, carrying forward the synthesizing efforts of Chambers and Mingay?³

Along with the amounts of different kinds of land enclosed and the amounts of fallow brought into cultivation, might we ask, not on a comprehensive basis, but from a representative sample of agricultural districts between 1760 and 1850, by how much—very roughly—was the food supply increased? All this could lead to the overwhelming question—by what means was Britain's growing population fed in these critical decades before the massive imports of overseas meat and grain? Could not some balance sheet be constructed to show the relative importance of dietary changes—whether restrictions or improvements (*pace* Hartwell, Hobsbawm)—increased grain yields and meat supplies at home, Irish and other imports, and finally the new crops and abandonment of fallow? The value of quantitative work of this sort is not, of course, its deadly accuracy. The demands it places on one's credulity in making and accepting estimates in order to fill empty boxes is its weakness. Its value, when it is done, is to give a sense of proportion among the elements in the history. Did turnips or clover, or both together, feed—by way of meat animals or richer and better tilled soil for the grain crop—30 per cent of the population increase, or 80 per cent of it in the industrial revolution? Again, the very fragmentary answer of a young American scholar, C. Peter Timmer, a few years ago, gives some clues.⁴

Nor is one impelled to questions like these in quest merely of a balanced and comprehensive description, à la Clapham, of an age or a movement. Without a preliminary set of quantities establishing relative magnitudes, deeper analysis of the historical process by means of a macro-

economic model is not possible. Consider, for example, T. S. Ashton's famous speculation at the end of *The Industrial Revolution*. He writes of the population growth in the industrial revolution:

There are today on the plains of India and China, men and women, plague-ridden and hungry, living lives little better, to outward appearance, than those of the cattle that toil with them by day and share their places of sleep by night. Such Asiatic standards, and such unmechanized horrors, are the lot of those who increase their numbers without passing through an industrial revolution.⁵

Now this is a statement about two relationships: that of industrialization to food supplies, and that of food supplies to population growth. We cannot surely say that in the absence of the industrial changes, population would have grown as it did, or that, if it did, there would have been no effect on agricultural change or the trade balance in agricultural products. Still, one thinks, with careful research into what did happen and a study of comparable situations, we can say *something*, even *something* about where the probabilities lie. Ashton is guilty here of an exercise in the notorious "hypothetical history," the history of what did not happen. Without such mental exercises, many of us think, it is not possible to make *any* meaningful statement about what is important for historical change. Yet such exercises are mere barren expressions of prejudice unless derived from a wide base of actual historical experience and a deep foundation of social and economic theory.

Another point must be made to emphasize the importance of theory. Mere quantities can tell us nothing except what is large and what is small, set against some standard. But some quantities, which measured unweighted in a static context, may seem small yet produce large social and economic results. This phenomenon—the "yeast" or the "dyestuff" phenomenon—is responsible for the persistent and irritating emphasis on the growth of trade, at

³ J. D. Chambers and G. E. Mingay, *The Agricultural Revolution 1750-1880*, 1966.

⁴ C. Peter Timmer, 'The Turnip, The New Husbandry, and The English Agricultural Revolution', *Quart. Jnl. Econ.*, LXXXIII, 1969, pp. 375-95.

⁵ T. S. Ashton, *The Industrial Revolution 1760-1830*, 1960, p. 161.

the expense of attention to agrarian history, appearing in those late nineteenth-century writers concerned with mercantilism: Ashley and Cunningham or, in the twentieth century, Lipson, and most recently in Sir John Hicks's *Theory of Economic History*. A little trade leavens (or contaminates) the whole agrarian lump, producing in an agrarian society a commercial infection which spreads not only through prices, credit, and money but also through the nerves of political behaviour and structure, reaching at last the heart: the values men have and the esteem in which they hold one another. Mere quantification cannot tell us this; "mere" economic theory can tell us part of it, but the rest must be supplied by a theory—or at least a well-articulated hunch—about political and social relationships. One must measure the proportion of trade to total production, not against standards of absolute size or "static" welfare but against a critical threshold beyond which a body of social effects is produced. It may be that 5 or 10 per cent of traded goods in the social product is a critical mass such that irreversible processes of social change are set in motion. To say this is simply to say what everyone else knows, but what agrarian historians, especially when their quantities show the vast size, the heavy weight of agriculture in past economic life, can easily forget: namely, the moral of the fable of the lion and the mouse.

Productivity growth in agriculture, then, cries out for measurement and analysis. But discussion of causes, even in advance of measurement, is far from a barren exercise. First, there is the sheer expansion of the agrarian world with a growth of population and demand. Its effects have run in two channels—a channel labelled "new information" and one labelled "economies of scale." For Britain in modern times the first of these is of lesser importance. If England and Wales had a fairly full agrarian settlement at Domesday-Book time, peasants and lords may have known well what they were doing as they retreated or advanced the margin of cultivation or altered the balance of pasture and arable over succeeding centuries. Yet memories are short, and penetration into

woodlands, highlands, or drained marshes need not have been always on a Ricardian curve of declining productivity. An American, with a history full of unexpected bonanzas during settlement, wonders whether any such were experienced by Britain as resettlement or conversions between pasture and arable occurred. In any case, because of her involvement in trade, Britain's food and fibre supplies benefited more than those of any other country from the new areas of the world about which information was yielded as settlement proceeded. Here new knowledge is almost inseparable from the action of economies of scale and the stimulus of commercialization in these new areas. Those effects have been present in Britain as well: indeed, interregional competition around concentrated market areas, induced by urbanization, transport changes, and the growth of commercial services and business and market communications and practices, is a perfectly universal feature of Western agricultural history.

All these sources of agricultural change—frontiers, markets, and the specialization of farming districts—are not systematically treated, so far as I know, in the literature on Britain. There is, for example, one absolutely remarkable feature of the "classic" agricultural revolution—not only in England but also on the Continent in the nineteenth century, as the three-field system with fallow rotation was displaced. Agrarian improvement here was drawn out of the production system by commercial profit opportunities, by the possibility of trading a surplus; it was not pushed out by weight of numbers and the discontent of empty stomachs. In this appears the whole advantage of the capitalistic "West" over the other areas of the world. This route of advantage kept England—and later Europe—more than one jump ahead of the grim Malthusian reaper. Wherever agricultural history has examined it, the conversion to continuous cropping, with the accompanying organizational changes, was made to earn a quick buck, or guilder, or pound. Given this fact, it is again puzzling that not more is known about the costs and returns, either in physical or money terms, of enclosure. The recent specu-

lative articles of Donald McCloskey at Chicago have raised interesting questions about enclosure as a response to altered conditions of risk.⁶ Peter Timmer, in the article already referred to, makes a guess at rates of return. Chambers and Mingay tell us just enough about labour requirements to arouse our appetite for more. To be sure, one can never hope to construct the profit and loss accounts; the controlling price network as it was at the time can never be known. But some sampling in specific districts and cases might tell a large part of the story in detail.

Apart from its sheer economic effects, technological change is important—at least in the world American economists inhabit—as a process. It is an example, a very tangible example, of the other dynamic processes—intellectual, artistic, organizational—in history. But we feel it is also important in and for itself, since on its pace and direction, on its social controllability, seems to hang the future of the world's physical environment. Eric Jones's recent concern with the history of the environment appears to lead the way for historical studies of ecology.⁷ Agricultural history has much to tell us also about the path of technical change and what has affected it. The history, it seems to me, falls into two phases: the folk and the scientific, with the decisive dividing line coming somewhere in the twentieth century. Turnips and clover, to be sure, were not primitive magic, but neither could they be called scientific discoveries. Until recent decades, and even now in many places and points, agricultural technology made its way in the world through a multiplicity of variation, natural selection, and diffusion, aided by some conscious imitation and uncritical experimentation. The world's plant and animal strains have existed, we know, *in posse* if not *in esse*, for a very long time. Until the dubious revelation of modern genetic knowledge, most technical change occurred through their natural

adaptation in the many environments to which they spread. The growth of trade, human migrations, and the "pull" of markets on ambitious agriculturists gave artificial impetus to the process, and bits of knowledge encrusted with myth helped it along. Concerning the cluster of techniques known as the agricultural revolution, one wonders, then, how did it spread? One clue of how it spread would be a mapping of *where* it spread, not merely a county-by-county mapping, but a close mapping to show what kinds of soils, men, and tenure arrangements were most compatible with the innovations. In the marvellous compilation of regional studies in volume iv of the *Agrarian History of England and Wales*, and in her own work in that volume, Joan Thirsk shows what may be done for the seventeenth century.⁸ One awaits the later volumes with mounting impatience.

In the history of technological change in agriculture, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are a transitional period between idiosyncratic folk-lore and the deadly accuracies of modern science. It was a time when the striving after science was present and growing, but not the means of its accomplishment. Some of the most amusing bits of American agricultural history are the stories of frauds, intentional or unwitting—the theory that large, woolly cotton seeds would produce large, woolly plants, or that a cow's milk yield could be predicted by the shape of her "escutcheon."⁹ These are not folk wisdom; they are examples of a folk foolishness possible only in a folk on the scent of science, and led astray by quackery. Has Britain similar stories, or is gullibility the peculiar weakness of American yokels? More seriously, there is also from the nineteenth century the history of mechanization, about which Americans have had so much to do, and even more to say. Paul David's article, 'The Landscape and the Machine', is a tangible and sensitive statement of the diffusion problem, the adjustment of an American artifact, the reaper, to

⁶ Donald McCloskey, 'The Persistence of English Common Fields', 'The Economics of Enclosure: a Market Analysis', in William N. Parker and Eric L. Jones (eds.), *European Peasants and Their Markets*, Princeton, N.J., 1975, pp. 73–160.

⁷ Eric L. Jones, 'Afterword', *ibid.*, pp. 327–60.

⁸ Joan Thirsk (ed.), *The Agrarian History of England and Wales*, iv, Cambridge, 1967.

⁹ Arthur H. Cole, 'Agricultural Crazes', *Amer. Econ. Rev.*, xvi, 1926, pp. 622–39, details other manias for specific novel crops.

English terrain and farm structure.¹⁰ Speaking strictly—usually not a desirable thing to do in economic history—the story of farm machinery belongs to industrial rather than agrarian history; it is the first point at which truly modern institutions of technical change impinge on our terrain. But the adjustment of the machine techniques of the industrial revolution to the infinite variability of the land, the variety of crops and operations, the range of farm sizes and organizational forms, and the uneven levels of skill and aptitude in rural populations, is an important part of agrarian history, past and present. The picture is one of a machine technology unfolding, from one operation to another, and one crop to the next, in a sequence guided largely by the ease or difficulty of the task, and conditioned greatly by the awkwardness of applying mechanical power on the farm prior to the invention of the internal-combustion engine. Of interest, too, is the exact mode of adaptation of the machine techniques to local conditions, the native technical skills required, and the specific efforts of machinery firms to advertise, finance, distribute, and service their products. Not only in technique but also in business organization, the farm machinery industry lies along the interface between agriculture and industrial capitalism.

Finally, among the sources of productivity growth, the nineteenth century contains the prehistory of what was ultimately of the greatest phenomenon of all: modern agricultural research. In America, we are much concerned with how this came about, and in particular the three components in the movement—the intellectual, the political, and the organizational. It was a development of peculiar complexity. In Europe, science—even early agricultural improvement—was in part, as I understand it (perhaps because of an overdose of Lord Ernle in graduate school), an aristocratic pastime, and partly a result of royal sponsorship in universities and institutes. In either case, even if responsive to market demands and opportunities, it was well insulated from popular pressures, from

the philistine demand for immediate, useful results. In America the problem was to obtain for this work the sponsorship of a democratic state, without cutting off its intellectual roots. Indeed, between 1870 and 1930, agricultural science had to develop not simply new fertilizers, milk separators, or modes of traction, but an intellectual capital of theories and research techniques, in soil science, genetics, and environmental management, from which the modern productivity boom was to derive. The science of statistics—an approach highly consonant with Baconian empiricism—was developed, I am told, largely in Britain to serve agricultural research. Are these parts of British agrarian history? Perhaps so, just as farm machinery has its links both to industrial supply and to agrarian demand. Agriculture has in neither case been simply the passive recipient of what science and industry has had to offer. Its tasks and demands, the pressures of world food and fibre markets on world supply, have induced and stimulated research, affecting its direction, and giving it its sponsorship. The socio-economic organization, control, and direction of modern technological change is a topic of high priority for economists and economic historians today, and in it agricultural history has an important contribution to make.

II

To speak of the history of freedom—so favourite a pastime of the Victorians—is almost an embarrassment today. One knows what it means when mouthed by “libertarian” business men or young radicals—freedom from taxes, freedom from social services and social responsibility, freedom from any external control in the market-place, or in the bedroom, the ultimate unravelling of the individualistic, anarchic, anti-corporatism that is our inheritance, Tawney told us, from the Reformation. When little business men in America speak of freedom this is what they mean, and in America, before the era of subsidization and modern equipment, farmers were little business men—Republican (in the North), cantankerous, contrary (a word which when accented on the second syllable

¹⁰ Paul A. David, *Technical Choice Innovation and Economic Growth*, Cambridge, 1975.

had a particular meaning). But when big business men today speak of freedom, they are suspected of a sneaking weakness for corporate organization, with freedom for that organization from other forms of social control. Agrarian historians are similarly suspect when they use the word. Particularly on the Continent they may be suspected of sentimentalizing the corporate life in a hankering after village and manor. In modern society, after all, the individual scholar is himself a bit of an anachronism, particularly the historian with his antiquated and laborious technology of archival research—card files and note-taking, his impressionistic artistry, and his reactionary adherence to eighteenth-century rhetorical standards in English composition. But if the general historian is a craft-shop artisan, perhaps the agrarian historian is a peasant born too late, bound to the soil, with career and interests forming the intellectual counterpart to a rural commune of city-dwellers returned to the organic society of an agrarian past, as a refuge from, and an example to, the modern self-destroying world. So at least may be a suspicion about our activity and our association with one another. Nor is it refuted by the record of German agrarian historiography in the Nazi period. The compatibility of the corporatism of the peasant and the industrialist have been dominant facts in continental political history, and agrarian history, if it idealizes the past, helps to provide the hazy glow that shrouds the naked realities of a corporate state.

From such deceptions English agrarian history, at least since the days of Seebohm Rowntree, has, it seems to me, been quite free. The intensely factual, empirical, and unromantic streak which foreigners see in the English mind and character has no doubt been largely responsible for this. No one can really much idealize a medieval village, or even a nineteenth-century Cranford, who faces the facts of its narrow and uncertain life. What looks changeless and organic on the surface is—for the individuals in it—anxious, risky, and seething. But there are other reasons for the relatively unsentimental attitudes of modern English

agrarian historians. English agrarian history has been largely a success story by the standards of modern economic development. Of course, now that the long-run is upon us all—and despite Keynes's wisecrack, we are not all dead—it may not quite appear so. Did free trade, the Empire, and agricultural improvement at home let things in England shift too far from the ideal balance of an *Agrar- oder Industriestaat*? But that is hardly the fault of the agricultural sector, whose behaviour after 1846, within its complicated social and tenurial structure, in fitting to changed markets, increasing efficiency, conserving the land and the landscape, and releasing "factors," appears by the crude standards of the world's development to have been impeccable. Among large countries, the American is next best in some of these respects, but American agriculture, carried along on the turbulence of frontier settlement, slave emancipation, and world markets in the nineteenth century, had a far stormier career. There are miseries in American agricultural history—long-standing regional running sores, and times of widespread distress and panic—that might induce even the least sentimental to look back on an earlier, happier, yeoman past. British agriculture never, so far as I can learn, had its populists, or even its Poujadists. By the time it was attached to world markets its sturdy yeomen were gone beyond recall.

Yet an earlier generation of English agrarian and political historians wrote much on the growth of "freedom"; its record was taken to be one of the glories of English civilization. This was not the anarchic freedom of the free competitor in agriculture or in commerce. Nor was it the simple freedom of a corporate entity, be it village, guild, manor, trade union, or corporation at joint stock, to regulate its life and that of its members without interference. Rather the concept analysed by nineteenth-century English historians meant freedom of the peasant from the legal forms of serfdom and manorialism, as well as the freedom of lords and commons from the king. In England, as in all early modern states, the four-way struggle of king—nobility—bourgeoisie—peasantry decided

whose and which freedom was supreme. But Americans, at least, still believe that from English agrarian and political history came the modern freedom of the citizen under law, representative institutions, and guaranteed rights, including the right of all to own land and the right of none to own labour.

Is the matter then to be left there? Are the great constitutional lawyers and the historians of the legal and political forms of English agrarian and commercial society to have the last word? From the neglect of questions of organizational forms and their evolution on the part of English agrarian historians today, one would think so. It is a neglect that extends today not only to the objects of the older concern: peasants' or tenants' status, but also to the forms of social organization and political action in the last two centuries. Has English agriculture lived in a sociological and political vacuum since the enclosures? It is the silence in this forest and in these fields that an American agricultural historian, his head spinning with farmers' revolts, New Deal legislation, co-operatives, corporate forms, finds most deafening. The pioneer books of Mingay and Thompson are notable exceptions.¹¹ One feels sometimes, though it is not a guest's place to say it, that in the furrows of British agricultural history the engineer and the geographer hold the plough, and sit, in an American phrase, in the catbird's seat. One knows that English agrarian historians do not lack "heart" but what they write does seem on balance to do so. Where increasingly quantities, models, and scientific explanations obsess American historians, chaining up their nerves and constricting their blood vessels, it is the soil, field patterns, and archaeological remains to which English historians seem to look for their certainties and their salvation. The problem in both cases, as I see it, is not to avoid the use of such hard evidence as statistics or artifacts, but to incorporate them, together with all the well-

worn documentary evidence, into a synthesis of rural social and economic history. In such a study the examination, even of a speculative sort, of lost social forms—the life of the family, the pub, the market-place, the state—must take a larger part than it has in either British or American historiography. Never, surely, has the study of the mediating agencies that have formed between the rural dweller, his physical environment, and the society and state at large been so timely, and so potentially fruitful. It is in the record of the human groupings "in whose service is perfect freedom," in the whole modes of human social behaviour and adaptation, that modern Britain and America may find some perspective on the structural problems that bedevil them.

* * *

On reflection, it occurs to me that the Agricultural History Society is itself one such grouping—one to which I have been attached for half its life and nearly one-quarter of my own. On behalf of its American counterpart I send it greetings and best wishes for continued life and continued vigorous health. The strictures on its past work made here are strictly my own, and come, I like to fancy, from my faith that historical scholarship is, and of right ought to be, useful, or if not clearly useful, then at least complex in confronting human social complexity. The work published in the AGRICULTURAL HISTORY REVIEW over the past twenty-five years has added many dimensions and much detail to that complexity. Perhaps I should close murmuring off-stage a parody of Holmes's lines about the chambered nautilus that American schoolboys used to learn:

Build thou more stately models, O my soul,
As on the swift seasons roll
Leave thy archival past
Let each new construct, fancier than the last
Shut thee in from heaven with a dome
more vast
Till thou at length art free . . .

¹¹ G. E. Mingay, *English Landed Society in the Eighteenth Century*, Paul, 1963; F. M. L. Thompson, *English Landed Society in the Nineteenth Century*, 1963.

APPENDIX

Some Not Very Hard Data on Articles in the *AHR* and their
Distribution by Field and Period.

No tribute from an American scholar would be complete without a nosegay of statistics. I have accordingly conducted a survey of the articles appearing in the *AGRICULTURAL HISTORY REVIEW* since its founding, classifying them according to period, subject matter, and time of publication, in the hope that it would bear out some of the generalizations appearing in the foregoing pages. As is often the case, the statistics speak with forked tongue. They equivocate with my generalizations, like drink with lechery. Of 196 articles in twenty-five years, the distribution, as my research assistant¹² and I would compute it, is as follows:

Agricultural practices and techniques 51

¹² Ms. Laurie Nussdorfer, A.B. (Yale), M.Sc. (L.S.E.).

Social and tenurial structure 17
Economic conditions and phenomena 30
Political and social conditions 33
Materials and methods of research 38
Studies combining several of the above,
studies of foreign agricultures, biographies 27

This tabulation indicates that only 17 out of the 196 articles deal with the sorts of problems I am urging in the second section of my remarks above; if categories 2 and 4 are combined the number rises to 50, still less than the number dealing with practice and technology. Of course, if this tabulation may to some minds modify the strictures I have laid on the bias of the *REVIEW*, that fact is itself an indication of the value of quantification of this sort.

ARTICLES IN A.H.R., 1952-76,
BY SEXENNIAL, SUBJECT CLASSIFICATION, AND PERIOD TREATED

Year of publica- tion	Total 196	Subject category*				Period treated				
		1	2, 4	5	3, 6	Pre- Conquest	Medi- eval	1500- 1800	1800- present	General or none
1952-7	29	9	5	7	8	2	1	7	4	15
1958-63	40	10	11	14	5	4	5	13	8	10
1964-9	52	13	15	8	16	3	9	9	16	15
1970-5	65	16	16	8	25	4	7	20	23	11
1976-	10	3	3	1	3	—	—	3	5	2

- *1. Agricultural practices and techniques
2. Social and tenurial structure
3. Economic conditions and phenomena
4. Political and social conditions

5. Materials and methods of research
6. Several categories and agricultures outside Britain,
and biographies