

Annual List and Brief Review of Articles on Agrarian History, 1978*

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NINETEEN-SEVENTY-EIGHT yielded an abundant harvest. A major feature was the increased attention paid by prehistorians to agriculture. Continuing the search for origins Bender (20) notes that past theories have concentrated upon environmental and demographic explanations whereas both were dependent upon social structure. Similarly, in a review of work on early field systems, Bradley (28) maintains that social changes were a prerequisite of a change of agricultural regime where the supply of land was diminishing. There is growing evidence that the linear landscape features in England once thought to have served as mere trackways had more important functions. Thus Fleming (71, 72, 73) contends that Dartmoor reaves were linked to land use as well as a territorial division, while Higham (97) finds that in northern Cumbria dykes separated lowland arable from upland pastoral areas.

The practice of slash and burn is closely identified with primitive farming, and Reynolds (200) reports on recent experiments to establish its impact on yields. These indicate that burning is likely to have given a more than six-fold return to emmer wheat over a period of up to four years, while on unburnt ground germination was poorer, weed infestation greater, and yields fell sooner to an uneconomic level. The extent to which Britain is supposed to have been covered by forest in prehistoric times is questioned by Barker and Webley (13), who make a vigorous reassessment of soil studies and consider likely tool kits in order to evolve a new model of Neolithic agriculture. They claim that much of the vegetation in southern upland areas consisted of light woodland or pasture, and postulate an integrated mixed farming system where edge soils and upper alluvium were sown to corn and manured by stock which also grazed the chalk upland and valley clays on a seasonal basis. The Neolithic is also examined by Whittle (237), who finds evidence on southern chalkland of cessation of cultivation and woodland encroachment in the third millennium, and argues that this points to a failure of Neolithic peoples to achieve a stable adjustment to the environment. Instead increased numbers may have depleted the resource base, leading to population decline and even abandonment. For the

slightly later Iron Age Marshall (156) scrutinizes evidence of settlement, and concludes that the heavier, more fertile clay and gravel-based soils came under increased agricultural exploitation at this time, a fact which he links to pressure of population on limestone uplands. Wood and wooden artefacts have been neglected in studies of prehistory, but Coles *et al* (45) show their pervasive and important roles in the economy of the period. Woodland was coppiced, and the use of the raw material indicates considerable understanding of the functions and suitability of individual species.

One of the most exciting and controversial articles to appear recently is by Cooter (49), who adds a new dimension to the study of medieval agrarian history. He believes that past analyses have failed due to an over-reliance on technological, social, and economic explanations, and instead proposes an 'ecosystematic' approach. His thesis is that the level of available plant nutrients was the vital factor, and argues that these were cumulatively depleted by a pernicious open-field system which kept yields at a critically low level; neither the mouldboard plough nor legumes could apparently offset unavoidable losses due to nutrient leaching and soil exhaustion. Answering this, Loomis (145) questions the poor performance of the medieval farm, maintaining that it existed at a fairly stable ecological level with yields of 1000 to 2000 kg grains/ha. He further argues that new techniques as well as cultural factors have a place in analysis. A 1976 article by Brenner has inspired a number of medievalists to reconsider the view that class structure was the major determinant of change, and that feudal relationships were the fundamental cause of high rents, low manorial investment, and the subsistence crises of medieval Europe. Postan and Hatcher, for example (190), maintain that the more traditional demographic explanation, with population growth, land division, diminishing returns, and lack of new techniques has not been refuted. Bois (25) also argues that demographic determinism and economic explanations must have a place in models of historical development.

There has been further discussion of manorial farming. Postan's theses on twelfth-century developments are refuted by Bridbury (29), who denies that a wholesale disintegration of demesnes and commutation of services occurred in response to economic pressures. A study by Mate (161) of the accounts of Canterbury Cathedral Priory leads her to question the traditional

*Publications are dated 1978 unless otherwise noted. References to articles or off-prints should be sent to the Bibliographical Unit, Institute of Agricultural History, University of Reading.

view that landlords invariably prospered from early fourteenth-century inflation, arguing that costs rose faster than revenues. In a reassessment of E M Halcrow's work on Durham Priory in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Lomas (144) maintains that demesne farming was neither universal nor fully commercialized here before 1325, while after that date it could still be profitable. And although leasing subsequently became more usual, this is related less to economic factors than to more purely domestic considerations, thus emphasizing the distinct and individual development of estates. The lack of uniformity is further underlined by Postles's investigation (192) into the administration of three Oxfordshire glebe-demesnes and the peculiar problems of smaller properties at this time. Without tenant land from which to obtain rent and labour services, they suffered severe cash shortages leading to low investment, understocking and reduced efficiency. On a quite different topic, Munro (170) details and assesses the relative merits of nine separate wool-price schedules dating from the later Middle Ages.

Landownership is a prominent theme in writings on the early modern period. Roebuck (201) examines the impact of the abolition of wardship in 1660, and indicates that it was of major importance in the rise of great estates and the sustaining of those of moderate or small size. Before, wardships were a drain on resources of landed families, but thereafter income could be accumulated during minorities for investment and improvement. The importance of minorities after the abolition is confirmed in a study of the Lowthers of Holker by Beckett (18), who also emphasizes that while inheritance and marriage were crucial for advancing family fortunes, inefficient estate management and personal extravagance contributed to their decline. The development of the active trusteeship of estates through the extended role of scriveners in the middle of the seventeenth century is described by Melton (165), and in another article Gentles (81) looks into the purchase of crown lands in a midland county at about the same period. He finds that upwardly mobile parochial gentry and yeomen pounced on what little land was left after purchase by outsiders, but local nobility and higher gentry showed practically no interest in adding to their estates in this way. The impact of sequestration, composition and confiscation of royalist land in the north is assessed by Phillips (185), who concludes that the penalties and taxes of the victors made no marked lasting impression on the estates of the gentry of Cumberland and Westmorland. Rents were generally downward during the 1660s and 1670s, and Davies (55) tries to establish why gentry owners in the midlands preferred to offer abatements or suffer vacant holdings rather than take farms 'in hand' and work them themselves. She finds no evidence that high labour costs were the cause. More likely factors

were a recognition of the financial hazards involved, lack of farming knowledge, and shortage of competent bailiffs. Debate continues over the open fields, Mazur (163) believes that risk-aversion may have been a significant motive for scattering of holdings (*pace* McCloskey) but not the sole one, and offers a new theoretical model 'in which the plowing of a strip of land was the effective means by which rights in the strip were appropriated, at least temporarily'. It is claimed that in such circumstances all teams would plough the best land first before moving to poorer ground, leading to the pattern of dispersed holdings and the alternation of strips among plough teams. In his study of reclamation in the pastoral uplands of the north-east between 1550 and 1630, Porter (188) finds the enclosure preceding it to have been uncharacteristically systematic and large scale, and in the improved surveying techniques which made this possible detects the origins of procedures widely used two centuries later. Rabbits are not usually regarded as livestock, but Sheail (209) shows how after their introduction in medieval times they were exploited like any other farm animal wherever ecological and economic conditions were appropriate. Ironically, although they were encouraged as an 'improvement' and were part of the intensified use of light marginal land during the formative years of the agricultural revolution, the new winter crops also allowed rabbits to become feral and a liability to farmers.

Treatment of the modern period included at least two contributions on documentary sources. Chapman (37) identifies problems in the interpretation of enclosure awards, and Vamplew (227) offers a word of warning on the Gazette corn returns. In an important article on agricultural efficiency in Britain and France, O'Brien *et al* (176) explore major factors affecting labour productivity. They find that Britain had more good land, but also important were the larger units of ownership and occupation which permitted less arable to be in cereals and more in manure-making animal fodders which boosted yields and generated profits for investment in artificials, drainage and machines. Evidence on enclosure has been subjected to further close analysis. Crafts (50) reassesses the relationship between this process and labour supply, and in particular the work of Chambers on Nottinghamshire which is suggested to be something of a special case. In his investigation of enclosures on five manors in the same county, Purdum (195) notes that the rate of return could vary greatly, from 6 to 31 per cent, largely reflecting the extent of prior reorganization and the number of freeholders. Interestingly, the author finds that rent rises were based on improvements in productivity which were due not to the adoption of new techniques but the more intensive use of existing methods, and economies due to more compact holdings. Linneman (138) has carried out an examina-

tion of enclosure in seventy-nine villages, and established that those with highest literacy levels enclosed earliest, as did those with greater weather variation — which might seem to undermine the McCloskey thesis on the risk-spreading function of dispersed holdings in the open fields.

The role of individuals in agricultural progress is explored in two articles. Farrant (68) examines the work of John Ellman of Glynde, and suggests that his success in introducing the improved South Downs in the late eighteenth century owed much to his business acumen and flair for publicity, though doubtless the strong upward trend in mutton and wool prices at the time was also a factor. Wasson (234) singles out the Third Earl Spencer, and claims that the respect he generated allowed him to become a powerful instrument for the conversion of farmers to progressive ideas. Caplan (35) views the landed élite in a less favourable light, and chronicles the parliamentary struggle for union 'poor law chargeability' 'to show that the main opposition to reform came from a section of the landed interest whose object was to maintain the status quo with regard to settlement law and to keep alive the pernicious distinction between open and close villages'. In a search for explanation of the alleged slow pace of development in lowland Wales in the nineteenth century, Colyer (47) suggests that a strong antipathy of tenants towards their landlords, reflecting deep cultural, religious, and political differences, was largely responsible. Suspicious of new ideas propagated by owners, tenants sought to maintain income after Waterloo by low-cost farming on increased acres rather than by exploiting the new husbandry. Also on innovation, Perkins (183) relates the tardy adoption of the scythe in parts of England in this period to the small stature of Irish migrant workers who were physically suited to the lighter sickle. Only when their living standards improved after 1850 did they accept the heavier tool. Farmers' politics have received little attention in the past but Fisher (69) examines a movement in the 1880s to gain parliamentary representation and radically reform tenant rights. Failure was mainly due to lack of support from farmers themselves, who were less concerned with questions of land tenure than the real problems of depression at the time. In an article by Perry (184) attention is focused on another neglected subject, that of finance, and a preliminary investigation made of the origins and destinations of the large capital sums invested in British agriculture during the high farming period.

Rural protest still figures strongly. Williams's study (239) of midland hunger riots in the 1760s confirms the view that those involved saw themselves as upholding popular convention. This is also apparent in evidence collected by Beames (17) on peasant assassinations in Ireland before the Famine. It has been claimed that nationalism and an oppressive land system was respon-

sible, though Beames argues that outrages were not against the system *per se* but rather against attempts to change it. Scotland was notable for its agrarian harmony, and Devine (59) seeks to explain why this should have been so. Reasons put forward include the long-hire system, payment in kind, and a more even year-round labour requirement compared to southern England. Also important after 1815 were the intensified use of land and industrial growth, while the greater mobility of the rural population allowed an equilibrium between labour supply and demand to be more readily maintained. Turning finally to industry, it is conventional wisdom that British firms were sluggish in meeting foreign competition abroad. However, Munting (171) would deny that this was true of agricultural engineering, and finds that both technical innovation and commercial enterprise were shown by Ransomes in pursuit of sales in the difficult and strongly contended Russian market.

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