

Conference Report:

The Society's Winter Conference, 2005

'English landed society in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: a celebration of the work of F. M. L. Thompson'

by John R. Walton

The conference, attended by more than seventy people, celebrated the eightieth birthday of Professor Michael Thompson by exploring a theme he has made his own. John Chartres (University of Leeds) began proceedings with a brief appreciation of Michael and his contributions to agrarian history and history more generally. The conference then assumed the familiar form of four papers, each treating some aspect of landownership and landowning society during and since the nineteenth century.

John Beckett (University of Nottingham) and Michael Turner (University of Hull) spoke on the English land market between 1918 and 1921. Sceptical of the much-repeated claim that one quarter of England changed hands during those years, Beckett and Turner traced the origins of this belief to inadequate *Estates Gazette* data granted undeserved publicity by newspapers like *The Times* which were not slow to recognize the headline-making potential of the demise of the great estates or the loss of substantial portions of them. It was notable that later on, during the 1930s, when the Liberals had faded as a political force and their anti-landlord policies no longer threatened, the issue faded too. If concerned commentators of the period 1918 to 1921 were too ready to fear the worst, then what figures might reasonably characterize what happened during those years? In the absence of a national land registry and its database, it is not easy to say. However, combining reports on land sales contained in the Annual Review of the *Estates Gazette* with those in the Yearbook of the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors, and making appropriate

allowance for double counting, suggests a turnover of about eight per cent of England. Measured in constant prices, sales were not greatly in excess of those in some earlier periods, notably the years immediately prior to the First World War.

Mark Rothery (University of Exeter) then presented his paper 'Probate, financial diversification and the wealth of the English landed gentry, 1870–1935'. Focusing on the counties of Devon, Lincolnshire and Hertfordshire, Dr Rothery estimated that land, which had constituted eighty per cent of gentry wealth in 1870, amounted to no more than 58 per cent by 1935, with the biggest decade-on-decade decline affecting those who died in the years 1910 to 1919. However, declining landed wealth, which was attributable to declining land values as well as divestment, was associated with rising overall wealth as the gentry increasingly committed to other asset categories, favouring investments of a conservative, passive and non-entrepreneurial character. Examples included the wealthiest person in the sample, J. Michael Williams, whose receipts from south Wales coal were placed in a diverse investment portfolio which included land in south-west England, and the old-established south Devon family of Strode of Newnham Park, who sold about half of their landed estate before and after the First World War, mostly to sitting tenants whom they supplied with mortgages. The capital thus realized went initially into local industrial, especially mining, enterprises, then into national railway stock, and eventually into overseas ventures, including Australian government bonds and the Melbourne water undertaking. Despite

their greatly diminished landholdings, the gentry could still legitimately consider themselves part of 'the quality' in the 1930s.

In the first session of the afternoon, David Cannadine (Institute of Historical Research) reflected on 'The country house from the twentieth to the twenty-first century'. During the seventeenth century, country houses were demolished to be replaced by something grander. During the twentieth century, one-sixth of the surviving stock were demolished to be replaced by nothing at all. Some surviving aristocrats, as at Chatsworth, have turned their patrimony into thriving economic enterprises. But a post-aristocratic Britain, no longer much infected even by Brideshead-influenced nostalgia for the country house, has nonetheless set itself firmly against further demolitions of country houses. National Trust properties attract fewer visitors than do their gardens, and many houses, once lived in by the more-or-less obscure, are difficult to present and interpret in an appealing way. 'Now we have saved Tyntesfield,' asked Cannadine, 'what is it for?' The speaker contrasted the situation in Britain with that in Ireland, where the country house has long been regarded more as a symbol of

alien oppression than as the embodiment of national heritage, and attrition continues apace. This is not Britain's chosen path, but it is difficult to see where that it has chosen will lead.

The fourth and final paper by Antony Taylor (Sheffield Hallam University) bore the title "'The British aristocracy, probably the most unnecessary a body that any civilised society exhibits and endures'" (J. E. Thorold Rogers). Land utopianism and anti-aristocratic sentiment in late nineteenth century Britain'. The speaker argued that Thorold Rogers' hostility to aristocracy, as articulated in various publications but most notably *Six centuries of work and wages*, influenced the thinking of others to the extent of giving coherence to an idea which had hitherto existed only on the fringes of subterranean counter-culture. *Six centuries* provided the narrative that the land reform movement had previously lacked. Among those on whom its influence is detectable were Keir Hardie, Robert Tressell, and the advocates of Henry George's single tax on property.

The day's events demonstrated the continuing vitality of one important strand in Michael Thompson's research, happily still matched by that of Michael himself.*

* We hope to publish the papers by Professors Beckett and Turner, Dr Rothery and Professor Cannadine in a future issue of the *Review*, and a paper by Dr Taylor at a later date.