

A Contrast in Style: An Appreciation of Two Victorian Agricultural Journalists*

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Abstract

Henry Corbet (1820–1878) and John Chalmers Morton (1821–1888) were two of the leading agricultural journalists of early and mid-Victorian England. They held influential positions as, respectively, editors of the *Mark Lane Express* and the *Agricultural Gazette*, and both men participated in a diverse range of additional agricultural activities. While they shared some common objectives and beliefs, their writing and agricultural stances exhibited a marked contrast in style and of values. This article examines the viewpoints that they presented to their readers and reviews some of the issues which dominated their careers and positions within the Victorian agricultural community.

JOHN CHALMERS MORTON'S first piece of agricultural writing was an account of Smith of Deanston's method of deep draining and subsoil ploughing, which he completed in 1836 at the age of sixteen while still a pupil at Merchiston Castle School, Edinburgh. In the course of finishing his education, Morton attended some of Professor David Low's classes for agricultural students at Edinburgh University, and he later recalled these lectures as having had particular significance in shaping his career. When only nineteen years of age, he was requested by his father, John Morton (agent to the earls of Ducie and himself the author of a book on soils) to take charge of the Whitfield example farm which the second earl of Ducie had established on his estate at Tortworth, Gloucestershire. In the year 1843 the young Morton was selected by Sir Charles Wentworth Dilke, who had founded the *Gardener's Chronicle* two years previously, to edit the *Agricultural Gazette* which he planned as an addition to the *Chronicle*. Morton occupied the editorship of the *Gazette* from its inception in

1844 until his death forty-four years later.¹

Whereas Morton has received recognition as a leading nineteenth-century agricultural commentator, Henry Corbet is unjustifiably much less well known. Despite his twenty years' tenure of the editorship of the weekly *Mark Lane Express and Agricultural Journal*, unlike Morton he does not, for example, receive notice in J A Scott Watson's and M E Hobbs's survey of 'The press and the pilgrims'.² Corbet was educated at Bedford School and came to agricultural prominence when he was elected to the secretaryship of the London (or 'Central', as it was often styled) Farmers' Club in 1846. Between the years 1846 and 1849 Corbet edited the *Steeplechase Calendar*, and also at this time collaborated with William Shaw (the editor of the *Mark Lane Express* since its establishment in 1832) and Philip Pusey in an investigation into the tenant right question. This work provided Corbet with material which was awarded a prize by the Wenlock Farmers' Club in 1847. The following year, with

* The author is grateful for the assistance of Helen Humphrys, Stephanie Plackett and Claire Santo in the preparation of this article.

¹ For outlines of Morton's life see *Agricultural Gazette*, 7, 14 and 21 May 1888 ('Mr. Morton's schooldays'). Ernest Clarke, the RASE secretary, contributed a memoir of Morton to the society's journal: 'Some late contributors to the journal', *JRASE*, 2nd ser., XXIV, 1888, pp 691–96. There is a short notice of Morton by G E Fussell in *Agricultural Progress*, 58, 1983, pp 52–4. For a memoir of John Morton see *Agricultural Gazette*, 4 Oct 1873.

² J A Scott Watson and M E Hobbs, *Great Farmers*, 1937, pp 246–62.

Shaw, he produced an extensive *Digest of Evidence on the Agricultural Customs of England and Wales* which together with the prize essay became a standard reference text on the subject.³ Corbet also wrote for the *Mark Lane Express* and he succeeded to its editorship shortly after Shaw fled from England to the Australian goldfields in 1852 in order to escape bankruptcy. He spent the rest of his working life at the *Express*, retiring from its editorship, and the secretaryship of the London Farmers' Club, at the end of 1875 owing to ill-health.⁴

Thus both men had lengthy careers as editors of the two leading farming newspapers of their day,⁵ and they also maintained extensive additional interests. Morton, for example, was a Land Commissioner, a member of the Royal Commission on River Pollution between 1868 and 1874, and lectured at Edinburgh in 1855 immediately after Low's death. In addition to his secretaryship of the London Farmers' Club, Corbet was closely involved with the activities of the Total Repeal Malt-Tax Association and in the early 1860s helped to reform the affairs of the Smithfield Club. He was appointed an auditor for the Royal Agricultural Society of England (RASE) in 1859 after it had been discovered that the secretary, James Hudson, had embezzled some £2000 of the year's show receipts.⁶ His lifelong

regard and respect for the horse led him to campaign, with some success, against the over-exploitation of two-year-olds on the Turf⁷ and in conjunction with his brother, Edward Corbet, in 1871 founded the Alexandra Park Horse Show.

Apart from writing for the papers which they edited, Morton and Corbet also made numerous other contributions to agricultural literature. Morton wrote extensively for the *Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society of England (JRASE)*, the *Journal of the Society of Arts*, and the *Journal of the Bath and West of England Society*, as well as editing the 2200 page *Cyclopaedia of Agriculture* (1855-6) which at the time of his death was 'still the most complete work of its kind extant'.⁸ In 1864 Morton brought out a revised and updated edition of Young's *Farmer's Calendar* and later he edited the nine-volume *Book of the Farm* series of instructional works on various aspects of farm practice. He was largely responsible for the editions which dealt with the *Soil of the Farm* (1882), *Equipment* (1884), *Dairy* (1885), and *Labour* (1887), and these books were indicative of Morton's commitment to the improvement of agricultural education. Corbet gave a number of addresses to the London Farmers' Club which were published in its *journal* and elsewhere, and he contributed to a range of sporting papers and magazines such as the *Field*, *Bell's Life*, *All the Year Round*, and the *New Sporting Magazine*. Some of his writings were gathered together and published in 1864 as *Tales and Traits of Sporting Life*.

I

The differing outlets chosen by Morton and Corbet for their agricultural writing reflected their varied outlooks and interests,

³ For Corbet's reminiscences of this work see 'The Central Farmers' Club. English tenant-right', *Farmer's Magazine*, 3rd ser, XXXVII, 1870, pp 518-19.

⁴ For a memoir of Corbet, see 'Noteworthy agriculturists. Mr Henry Corbet', *Agricultural Gazette*, 15 May 1876 (reprinted in *Farmer's Magazine*, 3rd ser, LIII, 1878, pp 253-4). On Shaw see N Goddard, 'William Shaw "of the Strand" and the foundation of the Royal Agricultural Society of England', *JRASE*, 143, 1982, pp 98-104. On the London Farmers' Club see K Fitzgerald, *Ahead of their Time: A Short History of the London Farmers' Club*, 1967, which affords Corbet only passing mention.

⁵ For assessments of the nineteenth-century farming press see N Goddard, 'The development and influence of agricultural newspapers and periodicals 1780-1880', *AHR*, 31, 1983, pp 176-31 and *idem*, 'Agricultural institutions', in E J T Collins, ed, *Agrarian History of England and Wales*, VII, 1850-1914, forthcoming.

⁶ N Goddard, 'The Royal Agricultural Society of England and agricultural progress 1838-1880', unpublished PhD thesis, University of Kent at Canterbury, 1981, p 112; *Mark Lane Express*, 17 Dec 1859.

⁷ Corbet claimed credit for the instigation of a Jockey Club rule which prohibited the running of 2-y-o horses before May; see *Mark Lane Express*, 7 June 1869.

⁸ Clarke, 'Some late contributors', p 692.

and it is the distinct 'contrast in style' of their work, noted in an earlier contribution to this *Review*,⁹ that forms the focus of the present essay. Morton's writing was typically densely written, carefully researched, and highly authoritative but rather 'dry' in its treatment of topics which usually related to agricultural practice, experience, theory, or education. Corbet's output, in contrast, was characteristically concerned with livestock, rural sport, or a range of 'political' issues and was more provocative and combative in style than Morton's work. Morton regularly gave papers to the rather august meetings of the Society of Arts or RASE council, whereas Corbet was happiest when addressing tenant farmers or reporting livestock exhibitions. Morton, while by no means bland or uncritical in his writing, was nevertheless invariably courteous and restrained in his tone whereas, as we shall see, Corbet's work had a well-developed acerbity and he could be outspoken 'to the extent sometimes of ungraciousness'. This tendency created personal opposition 'for which he was sometimes himself responsible,'¹⁰ whereas Morton enjoyed universal respect.

Although both men evinced a commitment to agricultural progress, Morton had a particularly steadfast belief in what could be accomplished by the application of science to farming and the improved education of the farmer. His first communication to the *JRASE* detailed the large yields of Belgian carrots achieved on the earl of Ducie's farm¹¹ while an early essay, published in 1846 on the maintenance of fertility in new arable land, demonstrated his characteristic earnestness of purpose:

Population increases rapidly — an imperative demand exists for an increased production of food, for an increased supply of well-paid employment — yet more than one-half of the cultivable land in

this country is now yielding grass! The co-existence of these facts is a strange thing. Surely it is possible to grow something better, more nutritive, more remunerating than grass — something involving the profitable employment of more labour in its cultivation.¹²

The need to expand agricultural output, and the means by which this could be brought about, was a constant theme in Morton's work. He contributed a prize essay on 'Increasing our supplies of animal food' to the *JRASE* in 1849 and ten years later reviewed 'Agricultural maxima'; in 1863 he presented a detailed paper on the 'helps and hindrances' to agricultural progress to the Society of Arts where he maintained that 'agricultural progress, if of any interest or value whatever, simply means more food produced per acre'.¹³ Morton was particularly interested in agricultural machinery and as early as 1842 he wrote in the *JRASE* of the improvements to which he thought it was susceptible. Later in his career he compiled detailed expositions on the cost of horse power, the 'forces used in agriculture', and in 1868 published his *Handbook of Farm Labour*.¹⁴ The dairy industry, and the ways in which supplies of milk for the urban consumer could be increased, were also particular concerns of Morton's before this sector of farming became fashionable.¹⁵ He campaigned for an improved system of agricultural education,¹⁶ and his writing characteristically stressed the importance

¹² *Idem*, 'On the maintenance of fertility in new arable land', *JRASE*, VII, 1846, p 283.

¹³ *Idem*, 'On increasing our supplies of animal food', *JRASE*, X, 1849, pp 341-79; 'Agricultural maxima', *JRASE*, XX, 1859, pp 442-53; 'Agricultural progress; its helps and hindrances', *J Society of Arts*, XII, 1863-4, p 54.

¹⁴ *Idem*, 'On the present state of agricultural mechanics and the improvement of which the various implements now in use may be susceptible', *JRASE*, III, 1842, pp 100-25; 'On the cost of horse power', *JRASE*, XIX, 1858, pp 437-67; 'The forces used in agriculture', *J Society of Arts*, VIII, 1859-60, pp 53-61.

¹⁵ *Idem*, 'Town milk', *JRASE*, 2nd ser, IV, 1868, pp 69-98.

¹⁶ *Idem*, 'Agricultural education', *JRASE*, 2nd ser, I, 1865, pp 436-64. For a discussion of the slow progress of formal agricultural education in the nineteenth century see N Goddard, *Harvests of Change. The Royal Agricultural Society of England 1838-1988*, 1989, pp 122-4.

⁹ Goddard, 'The development and influence', pp 127-8.

¹⁰ *Agricultural Gazette*, 18 Feb 1878.

¹¹ J C Morton, 'On the white, or Belgian carrot', *JRASE*, II, 1841, pp 40-1.

of learning from direct agricultural experience.¹⁷

Corbet was similarly interested in the ways in which agricultural progress could be achieved by the application of science but generally adopted a much more sceptical viewpoint than Morton. Under his editorship the *Mark Lane Express* and the associated monthly *Farmers' Magazine* gave extensive coverage to all aspects of agricultural innovation, and Morton himself recognized that throughout his lifelong literary work Corbet was 'among the first to recognise the agricultural bearing and importance of every fresh discovery for the benefit of farm practice'.¹⁸ While Morton was an authority on agricultural mechanics, Corbet specialized in the appraisal of livestock and his report on the animals exhibited at the RASE's Cardiff Show in 1872 is a good example of his expertise in this area, as is his essay on 'Heads' written for the Bath and West Society.¹⁹

II

An important contrast in the outlook of the two men is, however, that whereas Morton typically viewed the 'hindrances' to agricultural progress in terms of a lack of agricultural communication and education, Corbet held that the 'alliance of science and practice' that both wished to see was retarded by a range of 'political' factors. Foremost among these was, Corbet maintained, the lack of a formal system of tenant right for the 'absence of security to the outlay incurred in permanent improvement, or even that necessary for the maintenance of the ordinary fertility of the soil' meant that the tenant farmer 'could not

make the most of the land which the nature of his occupation morally enjoined him to do'.²⁰ The commitment of the *Express* to the perceived interests of the tenant farmer was symbolized by the embellishment above the weekly leader column of a rustic scene which carried the inscriptions 'Tenant Right' and 'Live and Let Live'.²¹ For Corbet, the tenant right issue, after his work with Pusey and Shaw in the 1840s failed to yield legislative reform, was a lifelong crusade. In contrast, Morton, in common with many other adherents of progressive farming, opposed statutory tenant right as an inferior substitute for leases and an infringement of the principles of freedom of contract which, as J R Fisher has pointed out, they viewed as an essential basis of economic progress.²²

Unlike Corbet, Morton did not normally dwell on 'political' issues in his published work. Early in his career he was convinced that the potential of science to raise agricultural productivity was such that protection could be surrendered without damage to the farming and rural interest. Thus the first advertisements for the *Gazette* quoted Peel's 1842 exhortation that 'all must learn how, in the shortest time and at the least expense, to produce the greatest quantity of food, vegetable or animal, without permanent injury to the land'. His relative political indifference is illustrated by the fact that the *Gazette* index for 1846 has only three entries on the Corn Laws. Two of these referred to pieces written by Morton's close associate, Chandos Wren Hoskyns, who contributed regular leaders to the paper during its early years. The viewpoint that he expounded

¹⁷ J C Morton, 'Some recent lessons of agricultural experience', *J Bath and West Society*, 2nd ser, IX, 1861, pp 213-66; *idem*, 'Some of the agricultural lessons of 1868', *JRASE*, 2nd ser, V, 1869, pp 27-73.

¹⁸ 'Noteworthy Agriculturists. Mr Henry Corbet'.

¹⁹ H Corbet, 'Report on the exhibition of live stock at Cardiff', *JRASE*, 2nd ser, VIII, 1872, pp 373-404; *idem*, 'Heads', *J Bath and West Society*, 3rd ser, II, 1871, pp 98-116.

²⁰ *Mark Lane Express* 30 Dec 1867. See also Corbet's address to the London Farmers' Club on 'English tenant-right' for a statement of his views on the issue.

²¹ Also noted by J R McQuiston, 'Tenant right: farmer against landlord in Victorian England 1847-1883', *Ag Hist*, 47, 1973, p 100.

²² J R Fisher, 'Tenural deficiencies in the English land system: the mid-nineteenth century debate', *University of Newcastle NSW Dept of Economics Research Report or Occasional Paper*, 58, 1980, pp 18-19; *idem*, 'Landowners and English tenant right 1845-1852', *AHR*, 31, 1983, p 20.

was that agricultural producers gave too much attention to the *price* which could be achieved for agricultural products rather than the *quantity* that could be obtained from a given unit of land. When it was predictably complained that Hoskyns's view, that 'unfettered trade' would allow England to become the 'corn mart' as she already was 'the money-mart of the world', was diametrically opposed to the 'feelings and opinions' of the great majority of the *Gazette's* readers,²³ Morton published a defence in terms of a remembrance of the time when

... a drunken farmer would propose as a toast 'a bloody war and a wet harvest' by which he really meant nothing more than high prices. But what was the consequence of 'bloody wars and wet harvests' to the farmers of the country except utter ruin? We express no opinion about the Corn-Laws, either one way or the other; that is a question which landlords and tenants, the chief disputants in the present instance, must arrange with each other.²⁴

Morton later recalled Hoskyns as having been instrumental in bringing about the gradual acceptance of free trade views among agriculturists,²⁵ but it is important to note that during the early 1840s many influential leaders of farming opinion evinced no great commitment to agricultural protection. The third earl Spencer, for example, in 1843 publicly followed the earlier example of his neighbour, earl Fitzwilliam, when he declared against continued protection²⁶ while the following year Morton's mentor, the second earl of Ducie, spoke in support of the aims of the Anti-Corn Law League.²⁷ Morton's later

memoirs of 'noteworthy agriculturists', such as Edward Holland, Hewitt Davis, and Sir Thomas Dyke Acland stressed their free-trade leanings,²⁸ and even William Shaw at the *Express* – who in 1850 was hailed as the 'Cobden of Agriculture' – by no means unquestioningly supported protection.²⁹ By the time that Corbet had succeeded Shaw, the Corn Laws were a dead issue and it was not until the late 1870s that protection again surfaced as a subject for debate. In contrast to the *Gazette*, however, Corbet gave much more extensive coverage to other 'political' matters which, apart from the perennial issue of the malt-tax included leases, tenant right, the game laws, and cattle disease policy. Some of Corbet's most notable contributions to agricultural discussions were made on these topics.

It was the arrival and rapid spread of rinderpest – 'cattle plague' – in 1865 which particularly demonstrated to Corbet the need for agriculture to have a more effective political voice. The only means of containing the disease was by compulsory slaughter but this was a highly controversial remedy which required legislation before it could be implemented. The RASE was the leading national agricultural organization which might have been expected to campaign for action but its charter, which had been granted in 1840, contained a provision which prohibited it from addressing 'political' issues – a legacy of the divisiveness of the Corn Law debate. This meant that the RASE was precluded from giving a lead in the formulation of cattle disease policy, a situation which was denounced by Corbet in a paper delivered with characteristic vigour to the London Farmers' Club on the 'Cattle plague and the government measures':

²³ *Agricultural Gazette*, 3 Jan, 7 and 14 Feb 1846.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 14 Feb 1846.

²⁵ For memoirs of Hoskyns see *Agricultural Gazette*, 7 Jan and 9 April 1877. See also J S Arkwright's 'Introduction' to C W Hoskyns, *Talpa; or the Chronicles of a Clay Farm. An Agricultural Fragment*, 1903 edn.

²⁶ N Goddard, "'A sensation almost without parallel': reflections on the third earl Spencer's Northampton speech, November 1843', *Northants Past and Present*, forthcoming; Earl Fitzwilliam, *First, Second, and Third Addresses to the Landowners of England on the Corn Laws*, 1839. See also D Spring, 'Earl Fitzwilliam and the Corn Laws', *Am Hist Rev*, LIX, 1954, pp 287–304.

²⁷ *Mark Lane Express*, 3 June 1844. For Morton's memoirs of Ducie see *Agricultural Gazette*, 4 June and 31 Dec 1853.

²⁸ *Agricultural Gazette*, 10 Dec 1870, 4 Feb 1871, 8 June 1872.

²⁹ Goddard, 'William Shaw', p 98. During the passage of the Repeal Bill through the Lords the question was raised in the *Mark Lane Express* (1 June 1846) as to whether agriculturists had been correct to uphold the principle of protection.

The idea of a number of influential agriculturists gathered together to talk over the cattle plague without, however, venturing to touch upon the means employed to subdue it is so sorry a joke that I do not believe after-years will ever credit its occurrence.³⁰

Because of widespread dissatisfaction with the inability of the RASE to act on political issues in 1866, the Central Chamber of Agriculture was formed to give the political articulation to the agricultural interest that Corbet and others believed was needed. However, Corbet soon criticized the Central Chamber for being too dominated by landlords, and for thus failing to address the concerns of tenant farmers. With typical outspokenness he complained of the chamber's 'second-hand sayings and doings', its 'burlesque airs of importance', and its 'egregious system of puffing'.³¹ Charles Clay, the original proposer of the chamber, later recalled Corbet's antipathy as being inimical to its early progress.³²

Despite Corbet's numerous calls for reform of the English system of landlord-tenant relations, he can hardly be characterized as radical in his social and political outlook. Indeed, there was much in his view of the countryside and rural life which was highly traditional. His commitment to country sport – in which Morton appears to have had no interest whatever – led him to speak out against trends of which he disapproved: 'No man, unless he shut his eyes very close indeed, can ever rank the battue as sport' he wrote in 1868, for example.³³ He praised hunting for promoting a better understanding between landlord and tenant, and his perspective was typified in the 1869 paper on 'Foxes versus rabbits'. Here he claimed that there was 'hardly a black sheep in a red coat' and extolled the virtues of the great landholding and hunting families of England: 'the

Grafhams, the Spencers, the Yarboroughs, the Knightleys, the Lane-Foxes ...'³⁴ In concluding his case that rabbits and hares should be treated as vermin in model landlord-tenant agreements, he stated that:

The Turf is getting more and more to be a matter of business, and a bad business too; there is a growing practice of making bets and books on boat races and cricket matches and noblemen have turned hagglers and dealers in pheasants and hares. But as a man can hardly make wagers or make money by fox-hunting, let us try our best to keep one old English pastime amongst us pure and undefiled. We have scared the wolf from our woods and forests, we have banished the bustard from our plains, and the very grouse fly before the shepherd and his flock; but it will be a bad day for this country when a fox can no longer be routed from his lair to

'Die in the open as good'un should do!'³⁵

III

If Corbet's writing was often controversial, Morton was by no means immune from controversy. While Morton's long editorship of the *Gazette* (in the course of which it was recorded that he brought out 1300 consecutive weekly editions of the paper before taking a short holiday) is seen as an outstanding achievement, his career would have taken a very different course had he been appointed editor of the *JRASE*, a post that he particularly coveted when, in 1859, it became available. The background to this episode needs a little explanation.

Philip Pusey, the first – and unpaid – editor of the *JRASE*, continued in the position until 1854 when indisposition caused him to retire from public life. The *JRASE* was then edited by a triumvirate consisting of H S Thompson (later Sir Harry Meysey Thompson), Chandos Wren Hoskyns and Thomas Dyke Acland. The contrasting personalities of these figures meant that this editorial arrangement did

³⁰ Reported in *Farmer's Magazine*, 3rd ser, XXIX, 1866, p 304.

³¹ *Mark Lane Express*, 11 Oct 1869.

³² Fitzgerald, *Ahead of their Time*, pp 103–4.

³³ *Mark Lane Express*, 6 Jan 1868.

³⁴ H Corbet, 'Foxes versus rabbits', *Farmer's Magazine*, 3rd ser, XXXV, 1869, p 513.

³⁵ *Ibid*, p 516. See also Corbet's earlier paper on 'The overpreservation of game', *Farmer's Magazine*, 3rd ser, XVII, 1860, pp 336–43, for a statement of his views on the question of the game laws.

not function effectively and towards the end of 1858, Hoskyns and Acland resigned. This left Thompson in overall control, but at the time he received a great deal of editorial assistance from Morton himself. While there was considerable opposition within the society's council to the proposal to recruit a salaried editor, when in 1859 Thompson entered Parliament the RASE advertised for a 'literary and scientific editor' for its *journal*. It was confidently expected that Morton, already the *de facto* editor, would be appointed to the position; instead, the society's editorship committee chose the agriculturally unknown P H Frere, bursar of Downing College, Cambridge.³⁶

This decision was greeted with considerable outrage by agriculturists. As John Girdwood, a land agent and a contributor to the Highland Society's *journal* expressed it: 'when the committee made its selection, it had before it in the list of candidates the name of John Morton ... a feeling of the greatest astonishment was created among the agriculturists of England when such a man was passed by'.³⁷ Protests about Frere's appointment reverberated throughout the agricultural community; there was something 'strange and inexplicable' about the affair and Morton's non-selection was an 'unwarrantable blow to the cause of scientific agriculture'.³⁸ It seems likely that the reason why Morton was passed over for the editorship of the *JRASE* included the hostility felt by some council members towards the appointment of a professional journalist to the position – Frere's 'literary and academic' qualifications were stressed in the face of widespread criticism – coupled with Thompson's desire, as chairman of the RASE's *journal* committee, to maintain a high degree of editorial control.

Frere died in May, 1868, at which time the RASE council determined to combine the posts of secretary and editor. This decision was deplored by Morton, among others, who considered that the administrative and editorial abilities required in the new combined post were incompatible and unlikely to be satisfactorily discharged by one person, and this deterred many strong candidates – including Morton – from applying for the position. When it was announced that out of forty-six candidates H M Jenkins – then secretary and editor at the London Geological Society – had been appointed, the announcement was greeted with even more incredulity than that which had attended the news of Frere's editorship eight years previously.³⁹

According to Morton, this selection demonstrated a 'heroic disregard of commonsense' on the part of the RASE council although he was characteristically anxious to stress that his opposition to Jenkins' appointment was not based upon personal animosity. Rather, he held that the very nature of the combined post was misguided, and as Jenkins apparently knew nothing of agriculture it was a 'ludicrously absurd' appointment, even a 'farce' to elect an 'entire outsider' as a 'teacher and leader' within a special department of instruction.⁴⁰ At the December general meeting of the RASE in 1868, Morton led the attack on Jenkins' appointment but having somewhat untypically mislaid his notes, his full intended condemnatory speech to the meeting was curtailed.⁴¹

Morton was supported by numerous other of the RASE's critics but most notably by Samuel Sidney. Sidney (the *nom-de-plume* of Samuel Solomons, 1813–1883) had been a candidate for the editorship of the *JRASE* in 1859 and during the 1860s had made a series of outspoken

³⁶ Goddard, *Harvests of Change*, pp 111–12.

³⁷ *Agricultural Gazette*, 28 Sept 1861; *Farmer's Magazine*, 3rd ser, XVIII, 1860, pp 482–3.

³⁸ *Agricultural Gazette*, 26 May and 9 June 1860; *Farmer's Magazine*, 3rd ser, XVIII, 1860, p 484.

³⁹ Goddard, *Harvests of Change*, pp 114–15.

⁴⁰ *Agricultural Gazette*, 7, 14, 21 Nov and 12 Dec 1868.

⁴¹ From a report of the meeting in *Mark Lane Express, Supplement*, 14 Dec 1868.

attacks on the society's management which certainly did not lack support. However, on this occasion, in the course of a lengthy speech, he turned his attention beyond the affairs of the RASE to a condemnation of the agricultural press as a whole:

The journal which was edited by Mr Morton did not live by agriculture – it was obliged to depend on the *Gardener's Chronicle*; it could not live by agriculture alone. Again, let him take the case of *Bell's Messenger*: that was a political newspaper, affording a large quantity of news and upon this it lived. It backed agriculture, and therefore it went among agriculturists. To be sure, there was one other paper, but even that was not purely agricultural. It depended very much upon the corn markets, and besides that it had a considerable circulation, because it somewhat resembled the little boys who frightened away the crows. The *Mark Lane Express* was a sort of literary scarecrow; what it could not do by means of information it did by pitching into them all round. It made a living partly by that sort of thing.⁴²

This, of course, brought in Corbet, who had not joined in the protests about Jenkins' appointment as he had come to the conclusion that 'a good man had been got in a bad way'.⁴³ Corbet felt a great deal of antipathy towards Sidney because of his dislike of the conduct of the horse events promoted by the Islington Agricultural Hall Company to which Sidney had the position of secretary. Corbet condemned the emphasis on trotting, 'leaping', and the 'circus character' of the entertainment promoted by the 'Islington mountebanks'.⁴⁴ His reply to Sidney in the *Mark Lane Express* is worth quoting at length as it demonstrates Corbet's capacity for invective. After some highly disparaging comments about Sidney's own qualifications as an agricultural author, he wrote that:

And yet the thing is amusing if not altogether original; but then many a famous author suffers from such almost unconscious plagiarism of style. Just thirty years since, Thackeray, with a modesty

that we are sure Mr Sidney will appreciate, not liking to see his name placarded on every wall, wrote a romance for *Frazer* under the signature of Ikey Solomons jun, Esq. Mr Sidney may not, perhaps, have caught quite the refined sarcasm or genial humour of this, but he has succeeded admirably in reproducing that air of importance and dignity which the late lamented Ikey Solomons jun, Esq. so delighted to assume; and it seems a thousand pities, as they say at the Herald Office, that the title should ever have died out. Would Mr Sidney object to taking it up again? We are rather the more induced to suggest this from he himself being apparently rather prone to provide other people with an alias; as at the other morning, so far as we could follow his rather peculiar vernacular, he styled this Journal a 'scarecrow'. And then, as people looked at a remarkable figure before them, tricked out with a halfpennyworth of riband or some such tawdry tinsel they roared! But is this fair or generous of Mr Sidney, for a man so lavishly favoured by Nature, of so noble a presence, and with his ancient lineage so indelibly stamped upon him, to gibe at other people as scarecrows?⁴⁵

Warming to the theme, the piece concluded:

... we cheerfully undertake the duty thus implied or asked of us. When the carrion-hunter, the disgusting scavenger, and the noisy quack for whose wide heavy jaws no filth is too unsavoury – when these come waddling on to the fair fields of agriculture we will scare them away. Eu! all up! When the jabbering magpie, with his caddish almost human assurance and swaggering gait comes prying and picking about the grounds of gentlemen we will scare him off again. Or, should he, in his greedy impudence, venture within range, we will gibbet him forthwith and let the much-wondering farmer look for a moment on the gorged carcass of the foul bird with whose husky ropy note he has been so familiar. We will scare the crows away. Eu! all up!⁴⁶

Jenkins proved to be much more successful at the RASE than the critics of his appointment had anticipated. This was fully acknowledged, with typical magnanimity, by Morton when he came to write Jenkins' obituary in 1887:

I had opposed his original appointment to the offices which he held with such signal advantage and ability ... I know that for years he imagined

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Mark Lane Express*, 9 Dec 1868.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 1 June 1868; 7 June, 13 Sept 1869.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, *Supplement*, 14 Dec 1868.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

that scant justice was dealt out to him in the weekly journal that I edited ... the members of the great society of which our late friend was Secretary may, however, be assured that no one could bring to the duty which has been conferred to me a keener sense of the great loss we have all sustained, a more earnest desire to do justice to the example of career, or a warmer loyalty to his memory.⁴⁷

IV

Morton has been termed a 'perennial optimist',⁴⁸ and nowhere was the optimism that pervaded much of his outlook better demonstrated than in his enthusiasm for the potential of sewage as a valuable fertilizer, and the subject demonstrates well the contrast between his and Corbet's general perspective. The worth of sewage was extensively investigated in the 1850s and the 1860s, for the interests of town and country seemed to be united in its economic exploitation. It was considered by many that the sale of sewage to farmers could relieve urban ratepayers of the financial burden of paying for extensive sewerage systems in towns, while it was believed that the agriculturists would also benefit from the ready availability of valuable fertilizing material which would otherwise go to waste. Further, sewage irrigation, it was thought, would be a mode of disposal which would obviate the rapidly growing nuisance of river pollution. By the early 1860s, after numerous investigations and reports, optimism about the agricultural efficacy of sewage was by no means restricted to enthusiasts such as Morton, J J Mechi, and William Hope.⁴⁹ As Morton expressed the point in 1865:

I suppose that if a sober view of the agricultural value of sewage manure were anywhere to be expected it would have been in the columns of the *Mark Lane Express*. But what does the clever editor

of that agricultural paper say? He declares that recent experiments, discussions, and discoveries have thrown so much light upon it, and made us all so much more sanguine of a profitable issue, that an altogether new leaf in the book of agricultural progress has in fact been turned.⁵⁰

In the early 1860s the Metropolis Sewage Company formulated elaborate plans to utilize the north London sewage, which was to be discharged from the northern outfall (completed in 1865) into the Thames at Barking Creek,⁵¹ in a project to irrigate south Essex and reclaim the Maplin Sands at Foulness.⁵² Morton was invited to take personal charge of the company's sewage trials at its Lodge Farm, situated near to Barking, which he did for a period of two years. On the basis of his 'agricultural experience' of '300,000 tons of London sewage' Morton wrote a number of encouraging reports of successes achieved with sewage irrigation on a range of crops, although Italian rye-grass appeared to be the most responsive subject.⁵³ The merits of town sewage were extolled in the *Gazette*:

And not only is the valuable, the filthy part of town drainage thus extracted and made harmless, it is converted into wholesome food more directly and more quickly than any other fertilizer. While it is being disseminated uniformly through the substance of the soil, the sun is shining on a transformation scene above more beautiful than any known to pantomime. Leaves are spreading upwards, roots are swelling outwards, characteristic juices, essences, aromas, are being secreted. Grain, Wurzel, Cabbages, Strawberries, Potatoes, Wheat, Oats, Rye etc, are hastening onwards towards maturity more rapidly than is known under any other plan of cultivation.⁵⁴

By this time, however, Corbet had lost patience with such exaggerated views of the value of sewage:

⁴⁷ J C Morton, 'The late Mr H M Jenkins FGS, a memoir', *JRASE*, 2nd ser, XXIII, 1887, p 169.

⁴⁸ F M L Thompson, 'The second agricultural revolution 1815-1880', *Econ Hist Rev*, 2nd ser, XXI, 1968, p 68.

⁴⁹ N Goddard, "'A mine of wealth?': The Victorians and the agricultural value of sewage', *J Hist Geog*, 22, 1996, pp 274-90.

⁵⁰ J C Morton, 'London sewage from the agricultural point of view', *J Society of Arts*, XIII, 1864-5, p 185.

⁵¹ L B Wood, *The Restoration of the Tidal Thames*, 1982, pp 34-5.

⁵² W Hope and W Napier, *The Sewage of the Metropolis*, 1865.

⁵³ J C Morton, 'Agricultural experience of town sewage in 1867', *J Bath and West Society*, 2nd ser, XV, 1867, pp 22-46; *idem*, *Experience with 300,000 tons of London Sewage at the Lodge Farm, Barking*, 1868.

⁵⁴ *Agricultural Gazette*, 30 Jan 1869.

Is not this a delightful picture of pastoral life? With the leaves spreading, and the roots swelling, and the 'characteristic' essences and aromas, and the strawberries, the wurzels, with the inconceivable *et caetera*, as the sewage is being disseminated by swains and shepherdesses in very pink silk stockings and very smart hats, who break out gleefully into a chorus of 'How brightly, brightly, breaks the morning!' And in the midst of all this rural felicity in rushes a terribly crusty curmudgeon, one Farmer Smith from the Croydon Club, at the sight of whom the shepherdesses fly off with a prolonged shriek, the leaves cease spreading, the roots are contracting, and the 'characteristic' aromas alone linger about the scene ... There should be another scene in the pantomime where the thunder roars and the clouds travel, as when, at a crack of a harlequin's baton, the pipes burst, the tank overflows, and the 'characteristic' aromas come out stronger than ever. *Tableau* – Mr Mechi puts up his umbrella.⁵⁵

In response, Morton published a rather pained reply where it was claimed that the *Mark Lane Express* had been unable to resist the temptation to make a thousand readers laugh rather than objectively report the issue, and that a leading agricultural paper had an obligation to set an example in seeking to halt the waste of fertilizer that the ejection of sewage into watercourses represented. The 'aromas', it was maintained, were bad enough in the ordinary market gardens around London and that

we would rather be of those who are seeking anxiously for the remedy, which one day must be found – or even bear the laugh which over-sanguine enthusiasm sometimes excites – than copy the example of the writer in the *Mark Lane Express*, who sits giggling while both land and city suffer.⁵⁶

By the end of 1869 it was still held in the *Gazette* that it was 'impossible to doubt that Lodge Farm must ultimately give confidence to those who would speculate on the value of town sewage',⁵⁷ but the truth was that the goal of the general profitable exploitation of town sewage by irrigation on agricultural land was always a chimera, for as leading agricultural chemists such as

J B Lawes⁵⁸ and Augustus Voelcker⁵⁹ concluded, sewage was a very dilute fertilizer of little monetary value which would not generally recoup the cost of its distribution for agricultural purposes. Thus in a review of sewage farming in 1877, Morton was forced to 'notice how ludicrously experience hitherto has almost everywhere upset the anticipations of the sanguine sewage agriculturist'.⁶⁰

V

In contrast to Morton's usual optimism, the sense of frustration that is expressed in this observation is applicable to a range of aspects of both his and Corbet's careers. While the latter, for example, did not live long enough to see the repeal of the malt-tax, its abolition in 1880 was more due to budgetary expediency than a concern for the agricultural interest. The permissive Agricultural Holdings Act of 1875 fell well short of his demands, repeated over a period of nearly thirty years, for a comprehensive system of tenant right. Its compulsory extension in 1883 – partly brought about by a campaign orchestrated by W E Bear, Corbet's successor at the *Express* – is a major landmark in the development of the laws governing landlord-tenant relations but it has also been concluded that 'the concern expressed by a few contemporary agriculturists, and some later historians, on the inadequacy of the land-tenure arrangements in England in the late nineteenth century was hardly of great relevance to the great changes affecting agriculture'.⁶¹ Above all, 'science' contributed less to overall agricultural productivity and pros-

⁵⁸ J B Lawes, 'On the utilisation of town sewage', *JRASE*, XXIV, 1863, pp 65–90; *idem*, 'On town sewage', *JRASE*, 2nd ser, I, 1865, pp 226–38.

⁵⁹ A Voelcker, 'Lecture on town sewage', *JRASE*, XXIII, 1862, pp 462–9; *idem*, 'Influence of chemical discoveries on the progress of English agriculture', *JRASE*, 2nd ser, XIV, 1878, pp 830–4.

⁶⁰ J C Morton, 'Half-a-dozen sewage farms', *JRASE*, XIII, 1877, p 438.

⁶¹ J R Fisher, 'The Farmer's Alliance: an agricultural protest movement of the 1880s', *AHR*, 26, 1978, p 25.

⁵⁵ *Mark Lane Express*, 1 Feb 1869.

⁵⁶ *Agricultural Gazette*, 6 Feb 1869.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 20 Nov 1869.

perity than both men had confidently expected in the 1840s and 1850s.⁶² Thus in a retrospective view of agricultural change since the start of his career written in 1877, Morton did not recall a 'golden age' but, rather, the agriculturist's 'rough education', a history of which, Morton thought, would include chapters on 'anticipations' and 'expectations' which had never come to full fruition.⁶³

If Morton over-estimated the amount of 'agricultural progress' that could be achieved on the basis of contemporary scientific knowledge, he also over-estimated the capacity of his audience. In the year 1845, for example, he listed 150 topics suitable for local farmers' club discussions – model rules for which, he considered, should preclude smoking or drinking at meetings. The subjects advocated were highly ambitious and included 'The benefits of which science has been to agriculture', 'The professional education of the agricultural labourer', 'The influence which railroads may be expected to exert on our agriculture', 'Hybridising as a means of improving plants', and 'The relative value of manures, natural and artificial' (with an instruction to consult Boussingault and others on the 'Theory of agriculture').⁶⁴ As a *Gazette* reader commented in response, 'If a scientific subject is brought forward at one meeting, it is, I fancy, a pretty sure antidote to attendance at the next on the part of many',⁶⁵ but nearly forty years later we find Morton disappointed that an intelligent working-farmer friend preferred the equivalent of an agricultural 'gossip column' to the more weighty matter which was still the mainstay of the *Gazette's* content. Despite the high regard that Morton personally commanded, the *Gazette* appears not to have been a

profitable enterprise for its proprietors yet, in a plea for more readers to ensure its continuation, Morton could not understand why in the early 1880s, papers which concentrated on country sport could build up profitable circulations in contrast to those with purely agricultural concerns.⁶⁶

VI

After his retirement Corbet suffered from continual ill-health and the last years of his life were spent in obscurity. While it was recognized that under his editorship the *Mark Lane Express* achieved 'an individuality and a reputation for thoroughness and independence that none of its competitors achieved' it is clear that, in contrast to Morton, in the course of his career Corbet engendered considerable personal animosity and he 'necessarily made some enemies as well as many friends' as has been demonstrated in this article. A testimonial was launched for him after he lost his retirement investments but this only very slowly reached the sum of £350 a few months before his death in December 1878.⁶⁷

Morton died suddenly ten years later and his obituary notices uniformly recorded his good-will, energy, kindness, and receptiveness: 'fewer had made more friends and fewer enemies'. Yet given the conditions of English agriculture in the 1880s, the final note of Morton's career must be a reflection of unfulfilled optimism and unachieved purpose. As it was put in the *Gazette's* own assessment:

...he was only a farm editor, we admit; and this means being an editor of a section of the Press which has never had much recognition from the public, and still less from the State.⁶⁸

⁶² For a general overview of science and agriculture before 1870 see S Wilmot, *The Business of Improvement: Agriculture and Scientific Culture in Britain, 1700-1870*, Cheltenham, 1990.

⁶³ *Agricultural Gazette*, 9 and 30 July 1877.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 13 Dec 1845.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 27 Dec 1845.

⁶⁶ Goddard, 'The development and influence', p 124.

⁶⁷ *Agricultural Gazette*, 15 May 1876, 18 Feb 1878; *Farmer's Magazine*, 3rd ser, LII, 1877, pp 345, 400; LIII, 1878, p 495; LV, 1879, p 105.

⁶⁸ *Agricultural Gazette*, 7 May 1888.