

Farm Servant vs Agricultural Labourer, 1870–1914: A Commentary on Howkins

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IN A RECENT article in the *Review*, Alun Howkins has made another valuable contribution to the on-going debate on the socio-economic structure of those who worked on the land in Britain.¹ His article follows a continuing theme which Howkins has pursued for some time, that workers involved in agriculture were a varied and complex group, a fact which has been ignored by many historians of late nineteenth-century rural Britain. At the forefront of his writings has been an emphasis on regional diversity, with a call for a full incorporation of the history of all parts of agrarian Britain.²

This article is intended as a commentary on Howkins' views on the position of farm servants. In his article Howkins argues that the definition of 'British farm workers' needs reassessing for the period 1870–1914. His re-definition is based on a number of points raised both by Howkins and others since the mid-1970s:

1. The conventional tripartite model of landlords, tenant farmers, and landless labourers does not fit many sections of agricultural society.

2. Historical literature has been and remains biased towards male workers in the south and east of England.

3. A large number of those who worked on the land were peasants and servants as opposed to 'farm labourers'.

4. Servants and peasants differed from the traditional 'labourer' in their socio-economic position in society.

5. The prime causes of differentiation for servants were patterns of hiring and payments in kind.

6. Historians have tended to ignore individual and covert conflict between landowners, farmers, peasants, servants, and labourers.

Throughout this commentary the focus will be on lowland Scotland, notably the area south of the Forth-Clyde line. Lowland Scotland is a particularly good area to examine because it contained a wide range of different types of agricultural structure, both in terms of farm size and product specialization, and because its hired labour force was dominated by farm servants.³ In 1908 the average size of farm in lowland Scotland was 87 acres, although this varied from over 200 acres in the south-east to approximately 50 acres in the north-east.⁴

Carter's work on the north-east of Scotland remains one of the most important contributions to modern British rural history in recent decades.⁵ Carter charted the history of the 'peasants' and farm servants in this area, and the ensuing rise of capitalist 'muckle' farmers and the demise

¹ Alun Howkins, 'Peasants, servants and labourers: the marginal workforce in British agriculture, c 1870–1914', *Ag Hist Rev*, 42, 1994, pp 49–62.

² Alun Howkins, 'Labour history and the rural poor', *Rural History*, 1, 1990, pp 113–22; *idem*, *Reshaping Rural England: A Social History 1850–1925*, 1991; *idem*, 'The English farm labourer in the nineteenth century: farm, family and community,' in Brian Short, ed, *The English Rural Community: Image and Analysis*, 1992, pp 85–104.

³ R F Anthony, 'The market for farm labour in Scotland, 1900–39', unpublished PhD thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1993, chs 2 and 3. Throughout this paper specific references will be made to my thesis which is due to be published in the near future as *Herds and Hinds: Farm Labour in Lowland Scotland 1900–39*, Edinburgh, forthcoming.

⁴ Anthony, 'The market for farm labour', p 26. Lowland Scotland is defined as all of mainland Scotland, excluding the following counties: Caithness, Sutherland, Ross and Cromarty, Inverness, Nairn, Moray, and Argyll.

⁵ Ian Carter, *Familife in Northeast Scotland, 1840–1914: The Poor Man's Country*, Edinburgh, 1979.

of the peasantry by the end of the nineteenth century. The problem for Howkins and others is that Carter links the position of farm servants in the north-east with that of peasants, with the local dominant culture being a peasant one. In the period which Howkins considered (1870–1914), this was not replicated to any degree elsewhere in lowland Scotland, where farms were larger and production more capitalist in its nature. This is most clearly demonstrated in the failure of certain collective ‘institutions’, such as the ‘clean toon’, to occur in other parts of lowland Scotland. In fact, farm service exhibited a diverse nature. Outside the north-east the classic farm servant, who lived in the farm steading and ate in the farmhouse was not predominant, although he/she did exist in large numbers in the south-west. In the south-east hiring in family units was the norm and there is little evidence of single hiring. Howkins does indeed make the point that hiring patterns varied, but many still associate the word ‘servant’ with a live-in single worker. In southern Scotland the majority of farm servants lived in cottages as part of family groups.⁶

What was the socio-economic position of these farm servants? Lowland Scottish farming was dominated by landowners and tenant farmers: in 1908 88 per cent of land and 90 per cent of holdings were farmed by tenants. Approximately 50 per cent of holdings were over 50 acres, which contained the vast majority of land farmed. Most production was capitalist in its nature, and was based on the inputs of landowner, farmer and worker. In Scotland farm servants formed the third part of the conventional tripartition. The vast majority of them had no expectation of the ownership of land, whether outright or as a tenant. They were, at the turn of the century, landless farm workers, with only limited links to the community of farmers who

employed them.⁷ The critical change in the structure came during the twentieth century with the spread of owner-occupation amongst farmers, the so-called ‘silent revolution’.⁸ The social position of farmers and workers varied across regions and farms and there is evidence of a growing social gap between employers and workers by the end of the nineteenth century:

Undoubtedly the relations of masters and servants are not the same as they used to be ... in many places farmers are indifferent to their servants, while the servants do not take the interest which it is desirable that they should take in their master's affairs. In districts such as the Carse of Gowrie, where the farms are large the relations are rather graphically described by one of the servants as ‘peace and nothing more’. On the other hand, I think it certain that where small farms prevail, e.g., about Dunblane, the relations are more cordial, there being no such gap between the social position of master and man as upon the large farms.⁹

Howkins regards farm servants, as a group, as socially different from landless proletarians. Exactly who is the ‘agricultural proletarian’, the straw man that Howkins admits he is creating, is unclear. Perhaps this is an abstract creation in an effort to sound radical. Scottish farm servants were predominantly landless workers, who worked for capitalist employers, that is, farmers who aimed to make a profit. Yet Howkins claims farm servants were differentiated from labourers through patterns of hiring and payments in kind.

The most extensive contemporary survey of Scottish farm servants, undertaken by the Board of Trade in 1907, found that perquisites accounted for 28 per cent of weekly wages. However, such a statistic hides widespread regional variations. In the north-east perquisites were a third of total wages, while in the south-

⁷ *Ibid.*, ch 8.

⁸ R H Campbell, ‘The silent revolution in the countryside’, *Scottish Local History*, 24, 1991, pp 4–7; R F Callander, *A Pattern of Landownership in Scotland*, Finzean, 1987, ch 6.

⁹ BPP, 1893–4, XXXVI, *Royal Commission on Labour: The Agricultural Labourer*, III, pt 1, p 147: ‘Report on Forfar and East Perth’.

⁶ Anthony, ‘The market for farm labour’, chs 3 and 6.

east they were approximately 15 per cent.¹⁰ Payments in kind were a declining and less important part of wages than cash.¹¹ During contract negotiations, perquisites were often based on local custom, and the real negotiating points were the position in the labour hierarchy an individual would attain and the resulting level of cash payment. For those on nearly full cash wages in the south-east, perquisites were dominated by the provision of tied housing, particularly cottages, which had developed from the requirements of capitalist farmers for a secure labour force during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.¹² For a modern comparison, in East Anglia during the early 1970s, Newby estimated that farm workers received 11 per cent of their wages in kind and as tied housing.¹³ Howkins never clarifies exactly how a payment of a minority of wages in kind, including tied housing, makes farm servants any less 'landless proletarians' than the agricultural labourers of East Anglia. The provision of board and lodging to single workers in the north-east and south-west was actually used by farmers to emphasize their superior economic position: servants were often given poorer food and ate at different times.¹⁴

The system of hiring associated with farm servants had two important facets, long-term contracts and set-term dates. The termination of contract dates focused negotiations for future employment conditions on particular times of the year. This included not only the actual hiring fair

dates, but also the months prior to the fair. Servants in southern Scotland stayed on a farm for an average of three to four years. The result was that most negotiations took place outside the hiring fair, on the farms where servants were presently employed. Following the successful bargaining, servants were then in secure employment for the next six or twelve months.¹⁵ This removed the pattern of structural conflict that Howkins has identified for eastern England.¹⁶ Bargaining was evenly weighted between employer and worker, and both had their 'reputations' in the labour market to consider. However, farm servants were still landless 'proletarians', and they respected the economic position of the farmer as their employer.¹⁷

This is not to say that conflict did not take place; it certainly did. There has emerged a tradition in recent literature, of which Howkins admits he is a part, stressing the underlying positions of conflict between farm labourers and their employers.¹⁸ It is too easy to take limited evidence of conflict and suggest that it was the norm. Research on farmer-worker relations in early twentieth-century southern Scotland indicates that, even in areas of large average farm size, conflict was uncommon, and was usually small-scale, and limited to specific issues. This stems from the fact that the hiring system encouraged servants to remain with their present employers until the end of the term and then move on to another employer; for individual disputes, conflict was not the

¹⁰ BPP, 1910, LXXXIV, *Report on an Enquiry by the Board of Trade into the Earnings and Hours of Labour of the Workpeople of the United Kingdom. V: Agriculture in 1907*, p 31.

¹¹ T M Devine, 'Scottish farm labour in the era of agricultural depression, 1875-1900', in T M Devine, ed, *Farm Servants and Labour in Lowland Scotland, 1770-1914*, Edinburgh, 1984, p 247; Anthony, 'The market for farm labour', pp 107-14.

¹² Malcolm Gray, 'The social impact of agrarian change in the rural Lowlands', in T M Devine and R Mitchison, eds, *People and Society in Scotland, 1760-1830*, Edinburgh, 1988, pp 53-69.

¹³ Howard Newby, *The Deferential Worker: A Study of Farm Workers in East Anglia, 1979*, pp 172-3.

¹⁴ Carter, *Familyfe*, pp 157-8; Anthony, 'The market for farm labour', p 284.

¹⁵ Anthony, 'The market for farm labour', chs 6 and 7.

¹⁶ Alun Howkins, *Poor Labouring Men: Rural Radicalism in Norfolk 1870-1923*, 1985, ch 2.

¹⁷ Anthony, 'The market for farm labour', chs 6 and 8.

¹⁸ Alun Howkins, 'Structural conflict and the farmworker: Norfolk, 1900-1920', *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 4, 1977, pp 217-29; *idem*, *Poor Labouring Men*; K D M Snell, 'Deferential bitterness: the social outlook of the rural proletariat in eighteenth and nineteenth century England and Wales', in M L Bush, ed, *Social Orders and Social Classes in Europe since 1500: Studies in Stratification*, 1992, pp 158-84; D A Pretty, *The Rural Revolt that Failed: Farm Workers' Trade Unions in Wales 1889-1950*, Cardiff, 1989, ch 1.

answer for a farm servant, moving on was.¹⁹

However, farm servants did prove capable of proletarian collective action, a fact demonstrated by the emergence of the Scottish Farm Servants' Union in Aberdeenshire during the early 1910s, an area associated with 'peasant culture'.²⁰ The Scottish Farm Servants' Union proved just as successful as its English counterpart, the National Agricultural Labourers Union, and it organized a major farm servant strike in East Lothian in 1923. Not surprisingly, its major areas of support were ones of large average farm sizes close to unionized urban and mining districts (the Lothians, Fife, and the counties near to Glasgow).

What was the difference between the Scottish 'farm servant' and the English 'agricultural labourer'? Farm service basically meant a particular form of labour contract, but certainly in lowland Scotland it was associated with a primarily cash relationship between employers and workers, and the possibility of overt collective action. The most important consideration for rural historians is not 'what label to give the landless rural workforce', but what was their socio-economic position and how did this affect their relations with each other and their employers? Some farm servants had a relatively 'proletarian' relationship with their employers, with extensive labour hierarchies, cash wages and socially distant employers (as in the south-east of Scotland). For others it meant, living on the farm, having meals with the farmer and his family, often with the possibility of progressing to a tenancy of their own.²¹ The challenge for historians

is to extend the study of farm labour out of the workplace and into the communities that workers lived in; only by a detailed understanding of these communities as well as the values of employers, can we hope to understand what went on in the labour market.²²

Here we have much to learn from the work of sociologists, particularly Newby whose work is often misconstrued by historians.²³ Newby asked three basic questions:

1. What was the situation at the place of employment?
2. How did workers relate to their immediate communities?
3. What were the wider opportunities for workers economically and socially?

In answering these questions the historical literature has undoubtedly been southern and male oriented. It is good that some of the southern historians have now recognized the weaknesses in the national applicability of their work.²⁴ Research is beginning to emerge from other regions stressing a more complete view of rural employment and the communities in which the workers lived.²⁵ The present danger is of getting caught in a sterile labelling debate concentrating on who is a 'landless agricultural proletarian', 'servant' or 'peasant'. Those who worked on the land lived in a myriad of social, economic, cultural and political conditions. Let us expand our understanding of them rather than creating straw men and women.

²² Richard Whipp, 'Labour markets and communities: an historical view', *Sociol Rev*, 33, 1985, pp 768-91.

²³ Howkins, 'Peasant, servants and labourers', p 50; Ian Carter, 'Agricultural workers in the class structure: a critical note', *Sociol Rev*, 22, 1974, pp 271-9; Howard Newby, 'Deference and the agricultural worker', *Sociol Rev*, 23, 1975, pp 51-60.

²⁴ Howkins, 'Labour history and the rural poor'; Andrew Charlesworth, 'An agenda for historical studies of rural protest in Britain, 1750-1850', *Rural History*, 2, 1991, p 238.

²⁵ Stephen Caunce, *Amongst Farm Horses: The Horselads of East Yorkshire*, Stroud, 1991; Lynn Jamieson and Claire Toynbee, *Country Bains: Growing Up 1900-1930*, Edinburgh, 1992.

¹⁹ Anthony, 'The market for farm labour', pp 299-302.

²⁰ *Ibid*, ch 4.

²¹ D W Howell, *Land and People in Nineteenth-Century Wales*, 1977, ch 6; Carter, *Farmlife*.