

The Agrarian History of England and Wales

Volume I

By ERIC JOHN

THE appearance of a second volume of the *Agrarian History of England and Wales*¹ confirms what the first suggested: this is one of the most exciting general works of our generation. In the chronological sense, somewhat after the fashion of Lavissee, this is the second part of volume I. The pre-Roman Age together with a history of livestock up to 1042—did feudalism strike the cattle too?—is reserved for another volume. In the part before us there are three substantial essays: the first, comprising approximately half the whole volume, is a study of Roman-Britain by Professor S. Applebaum; this is followed by a study of Post-Roman Wales by Dr Glanville Jones; and finally Professor H. P. R. Finberg himself, now contributor as well as general editor, gives us a third study on Anglo-Saxon England from the invasions to 1042. No one of these essays marks a radical break with traditional approaches but it is undeniable that all three, in their different ways, greatly extend tradition. None of these authors mistakes their masters' footsteps for their destination. Perhaps the point is made most clearly by Dr Applebaum's essay. The literature on Roman-Britain is immense and Dr Applebaum's does not have the pioneering task his colleagues are presented with. Yet there is a different flavour, a bracing sense absent from much recent writing on the subject.

In a sense Dr Applebaum gives a summary account of a meticulous kind of the current state of play in Romano-British studies. So far as I can tell little of significance is left out, not even "the single dubious turnip seed" found at Silchester, but the difference is illustrated by a quotation and a comment. Dr Applebaum quotes Rivet to the effect that "You can dig up a villa, but you cannot dig up

its land-tenure," and then proceeds to show that you can do just that. His essay is informed by a sense of the importance of social structure, by a feeling for the power of social classification to illumine the patchy evidence that is all one ever gets when one moves away from the corridors of power. This is bound up with a feeling for the importance of the neighbourhood, the locality, of the sort we now associate with Dr Hoskins and Dr Finberg. In a more general way something of the remarkable studies of existing primitive societies made in the last thirty years by social anthropologists is beginning to engage the attention of historians.

For instance, ten years ago I do not think Dr Applebaum would have noted that "cults are required to impose authority, not upon slaves and helots, but upon potential equals," and this observation makes a difference to the interpretation of the evidence. He is able to give a sense of real life to what he has to say about *romanitas*, even though in many ways he has the usual things to say. He argues, to my mind convincingly, that we should not look to this or that technical innovation for the consequences of romanization. It is massive, centrally-directed, social and economic pressure that made the difference. His own summary deserves extensive quotation. "The factors making for the adoption of larger fields, nevertheless, extended beyond the operation of a larger deep-cutting plough. They arose with the multiplication of man-power not restricted to the family plot (slaves, wage-labourers, and tenants), with the availability of markets which led to the development of commercial farming; and in response to the demands of the armed forces and of taxation. From these factors were born the capitalist

¹ H. P. R. Finberg (ed.), *The Agrarian History of England and Wales*, vol. I, pt ii, C.U.P., 1972. xviii + 566 pp. £12.

estate, with its exploitation of new imported techniques . . . all these methods demanded controllable enclosed fields which needed to be larger in order to be profitable." We have all heard of the intolerable fiscal pressures of the late Empire: Dr Applebaum can illustrate the grim realities of this pressure, especially in 'marginal' areas, just as he can also show how the economic collapse of the Roman capitalist agricultural system could wreak similar kinds of havoc to the industrial depressions of the modern world. In his chapter on agrarian change he illustrates convincingly, the more so for his restraint, the way archaeological evidence can be made to reveal a phase of bloody and violent social discontent which the sources only hint at in general and formal terms. In my opinion this essay will prove, for non-archaeologists, the best thing done on Roman Britain since Collingwood's famous book. Dr Applebaum has many disagreements with Collingwood—after all a very great volume of work has been done on this subject since Collingwood was active in the field—but it seems to me that what marks out his essay is that, more than any of Collingwood's other successors, he has grasped what the master meant about asking the right questions.

Dr Glanville Jones has a different task, but discharges it no less well. He has, of course, some distinguished predecessors in the field of early Welsh history and he makes good use of their work, but the list is exiguous compared with the *corpus* of work on Roman Britain. That work is also more beset by presuppositions about what the primitive Welsh must have been like, some of which Dr Jones has no difficulty in demolishing. It is evident that the Welsh of the period had a much more variegated agricultural economy and a more differentiated society than has been commonly supposed. His comments on the *maenor* are an excellent sample of the nature of his contribution. It seems to me that his comments on *tir gwelyog* (hereditary land), with its collocation of kindred, land tenure, and the feud are of quite fundamental importance. He has also interesting things to say on the dichotomy of Roman-Celtic, and he makes interesting comparisons between Wales and Northumbria in the twelfth century. Dr Jones calls Northum-

bria Durham, but there is a point I think in maintaining the old name in this connection. He makes some pertinent comments on the role of mercenaries, and he has an interesting discussion of *ager* which confirms the obvious but disputed translation as 'domain' rather than 'field'. It must be left to those with some knowledge of Celtic languages to make a fundamental evaluation of his chapters but it is obvious no student of the primitive English can afford to neglect them.

Earlier in this review I referred to the third essay, that of Dr Finberg, as pioneering. This may seem perverse—to those at least for whom the second volume of the *Oxford History of England* is a second Koran. Professor Stenton's book has dominated Anglo-Saxon studies as no other book ever has, save for the *Ecclesiastical History of the Venerable Bede*. In both cases some parts are better than others and in both cases their authors' other works have suffered neglect as a result. *Anglo-Saxon England* is a very soberly written book; it reads like the most sober-sided history book ever but it is, in fact, nothing of the kind. It is the low church, low key, version of Stubbs's primitive Germanic polity. In the centre is the rugged yeoman farmer, the famous *ceorl*, who collectively makes up the folk, supporting 'its' king with its purse and its body, sensitive "like their descendants in every age" to social pretension and the claims of rank—though they were rather more successful than their successors in any age in making their feelings respected. This was because the yeoman farmers arose from the mass-migration of free peasants, familiar with life in communities (has there ever been a people who were not?) and accustomed to discussion in popular assemblies. They were deferential to kingship but not to hereditary rank or aristocratic pretensions, so much so that Sir Frank feels he can say dogmatically it is not the manor "but the community of free peasants, which forms the starting-point of English social history." But these simple peasants who start off English social history were usually slave owners. On any view of demography, but especially the crude one that observes that the lower the social class the more numerous its members, this must mean that a substantial section, prob-

ably a majority, of the population of Anglo-Saxon England were slaves. In the *Oxford History* they get one sentence. But there is more to the book than this. Almost every one of these propositions can be destroyed from other pages of the same book, and when Stenton moved from the general to the particular he was a very formidable man indeed. In addition he gave very great thought to the problem of the fundamental source, the charters, throughout his life, and at the end of it wrote what in my opinion is a definitive essay on the study of the Latin Charters. At last, however, a new edition or set of editions is in progress, but one that on all the evidence available will be edited on very different principles. It seems to me that if the criticism of charters is to be more than a sophisticated kind of crossword puzzle it needs to be married to an attempt to solve the general historical problems for which they are the evidence. Nothing is less suited as a task for aspiring research students: charters are not Pipe Rolls. That is my opinion; but what is not mere opinion is that the whole subject has broken wide open at every level from the study of the basic documents to the high level generalities the general reader demands. This is why it is pioneering to write an essay on Anglo-Saxon social history at the moment—and why it is a task of peculiar difficulty.

Dr Finberg has therefore chosen to write an impressionistic study of the problems with the solutions he favours in a shortish essay, only marginally longer than that of Dr Jones on post-Roman Wales. He writes plainly and to the point. No one will agree with all his solutions, but none of them die the death of a thousand qualifications, a disease which Professor Stenton's works frequently exhibit. In many ways the essay is more conservative than one might expect. On the Vikings and their effects he is very close to Stenton. He is certainly right to reject the modern diagnosis of the Viking troubles in the English body politic: where the Germanists diagnosed cancer some would now diagnose boils. In a country which enjoyed little more than one generation's respite from greater, or more rarely, lesser, Viking wars in a period of more than two centuries; in a country bled white for at least one generation as the vast quantity of silver

pennies in Scandinavian museums suggests, there must have been consequences. The nature of the evidence suggests that the lower end of society must have been affected as well as the upper. Dr Finberg has an important suggestion here. He argues ingeniously, though not conclusively, that the hide changed its connotation due to the wars. He thinks it changed from being a unit of arbitrary assessment imposed from above to a measured acreage of arable land. If he is right it follows that the duties and the limitations of those duties, imposed on men of lower status by men of higher, were defined and stabilized. An important limitation on the arbitrary character of lordship was thus imposed, and if Dr Finberg's thesis stands, then in some ways the lowest classes could have benefited from the wars. I suspect he has started quite an argument here. He still maintains that the Viking invasions were mass migrations and that the sokemen were descended from the rank and file of the Danish armies. He may be right but I do not think he can yet convince many of the critics of these views. There are a number of other important points made in the later part of the essay but it is to the earlier period and the problems of continuity that his readers will turn with especial attention.

He begins to the point: "Revolutions in rural economy are not always consistent with political revolution." He does not see any mass migration, and his picture of the earliest Anglo-Saxon polity is one in which Germanic warriors sought freedom to subjugate others and live off the proceeds. The unfree element in early English society and the various degrees of unfreedom get full weight in his discussion. He takes up a point of Professor Applebaum on the Kentish *læt*. It has been usually supposed, since the days of Vinogradoff, that he was a descendant of the aboriginal population sunk in status. But it is clear that the *læt* had a relatively privileged position, and it is here argued he was rather a descendant of a class of German captives settled in Kent in late Roman times. I should myself have stressed the military aspects of early English social structure more than Dr Finberg does. It seems to me that folkland is the land of the *folc*, the warriors, the men of arms, and I should also suppose the

original meaning of soke and sokeman derived from the Icelandic word for a warrior. The author of the Oswaldslow charter seems to have thought so. It is easy to understand how the meaning might be broadened into a judicial sense when liberties—such as Oswaldslow (though such liberties can be traced far earlier than this)—gave the holder of the privileges the duty to lead the fynd, enforce military service, and punish those guilty of evasion. But these are differences of emphasis. It is simply my feeling that violence, force, fighting on some scale, were never very far from the early English countryside. If Dr Finberg might have stressed the military dimension to early English rural life more, he cannot be faulted for ignoring the unfree. He gives us a most perceptive account of the lower ranks of society, with a valuable discussion of the various stages of unfreedom and their significance in terms of life-style. There is one particular text on which Dr Finberg, like every other author writing on this topic, has to comment: chapter 63 of Ine's law-code which still, it seems to me, presents problems.

Dr Finberg follows Mr Aston's interpretation of the passage in his well-known article on the origins of the manor: I should guess he would carry most scholars with him on this point, nor would I wish to dissent very far. It is simply that something more remains to be said. The text speaks of a *gesithcundman* who leaves twenty hides of land; it is prescribed that he must leave twelve hides of *gesettland* behind him. Dr Finberg believes that the *gesith* departs voluntarily attracted by vacant or forfeited land in the newly conquered south-west. The *gesettland* left, he thinks, is not, as used to be argued, simply sown land but land occupied by husbandmen, i.e. something very like a manor as a going concern. Recently Professor McGovern argued on linguistic grounds a case for rendering *gesettland* as land held by written charter, i.e. bookland. Dr Finberg refers to the article but is not convinced. In a sense the disagreement is far from vital. In both renderings it is implied that the twenty hides are arranged into some kind of manorial form. But the difficulty seems to me to be the alleged motives for the *gesith*'s departure. I cannot see that the departure can

possibly be voluntary. Given the size of Wessex, the new estate could be little more than a shire away; why should such a man give up what everything we know about the hidage of estates tells us is a very comfortable holding, indeed—about ten times the size of the average Anglo-Norman knight's fee, if Miss Harvey's calculations are correct? If the man were the proprietor of the land, surely if he felt he must leave it he would hand it over to a relative? (The text implies he is a family man.) It seems to me it must follow that he is not the proprietor of the land, and that his departure is not altogether voluntary. If he went carpet-bagging in the south-west it is because he could hope for land on less onerous terms, or else because he was expelled. If this law were about estates booked to the Church, and the twenty hides had just become bookland, the *gesith*'s departure could be explained, as could the law's concern that the Church's estates should be in reasonable order. I feel that Dr McGovern is on to something here, though it is difficult to follow him all the way simply because it is not easy to make sense of the passage as it stands on his translation. Granted that this is a text of basic importance to the study of manorialism, it needs still more probing.

The general burthen of the early part of Dr Finberg's essay is naturally the case for continuity. He restates his arguments, familiar from some famous papers, but with a greater roundness. Since he wrote, Mr Charles-Edwards' important paper on the hide has added weight to this approach, and both Dr Applebaum's and Dr Jones's papers, in different ways, suggest the plausibility of a much greater degree of continuity at the grass roots level than even Dr Finberg supposed when he wrote the first edition of his paper on Withington.

All three parts of the book are good but the book is more than the mere sum of its parts. It sets the agrarian history of the primitive British in a new context. It is still a traditional context but one in which tradition has been subtly revalued. Vinogradoff is still there, but much more in the margin. Seeborn and Haverfield are still criticized but seem somehow more in the centre. It is a pity incidentally that none of the contributors know C. M. Andrews's book

on the manor. It came out almost simultaneously with Vinogradoff's more famous book and sank without trace in its wake—its author changed fields to become a well-

known authority on imperial America. Professor Andrews anticipated many of the views to be found in the book under review and deserves a tardy amends.

NOTES AND COMMENTS *continued from page 110*

land between about 1730 and 1750, was avoided in the northeast where the development of coal mining and its associated industries increased the demand for food and enabled farmers to increase production and landlords to raise rents quite substantially. Dr Vanessa Doe of Sheffield University followed with an illustrated talk on the excursion which she later led in the vicinity. This included a visit to the Duke of Devonshire's estate at Chatsworth and to some interesting seventeenth-century farmhouses and farmsteads in nearby villages.

Miss Janet Blackman of Hull University discussed the growth of the 'Sheffield food market and agricultural change in Yorkshire and Derbyshire' and her paper linked up well with Mr Brassley's, showing how the increased demand for food caused farmers to specialize (especially in milk and vegetables) and to intensify production. On the final day Professor Robert Gallman of the University of North Carolina spoke on 'Slavery and Southern plantation agriculture before the Civil War' and stimulated a lively discussion on the extent to which southern plantations grew their own food, as opposed to the earlier

view that they specialized almost entirely on commercial crops. Finally, Dr B. A. Holderness from the University of East Anglia discussed the problem of 'credit in English rural society before 1800'. His preliminary study of a sample of probate inventories suggested that credit was much more widespread than had previously been thought. The subsequent discussion of this interesting and neglected topic underlined the statistical problems involved in using inventories, but much interest was shown in the further research which Dr Holderness proposes to undertake on the subject.

The Editor has received a news release from the firm of K. K. Roy (Private) Ltd of Calcutta, India, of a new commercial venture of possible interest to members of the Society. It is proposed in the near future to publish a quarterly journal entitled *History of Agriculture*. Original contributions are invited from serious scholars. The subscription rate is U.S.\$25.00 in the U.S.A. and Canada, and £10 in Europe and elsewhere. Further information may be obtained from the firm at 55 Gariahat Road, P.O. Box 10210, Calcutta 19, India.