

The Third Earl Spencer and Agriculture,

1818-1845

By E. A. WASSON

A CENTURY has passed since the publication of Sir Denis Le Marchant's biography of the third Earl Spencer. It has been eighty-five years since the appearance of Ernest Clarke's article in the *Journal* of the Royal Agricultural Society which contains the only other evaluation of Spencer as an agriculturalist.¹ In the interval not only have historians drastically revised their opinions about agricultural history but also a mass of new documentary evidence has become available. Furthermore, in the last few decades pioneering studies have been made of the role of landed magnates in the nineteenth-century economy, and revisionists have altered our views on the contributions made by men such as Coke of Norfolk to agricultural advancement.

In the case of Lord Spencer, there have been neither new studies nor criticisms of old opinions. Sir James Scott Watson in his centenary history of the Royal Agricultural Society neglected Spencer, and provided inaccurate information about him.² Today the usual conception of Lord Althorp, the name by which he is usually remembered, is that of a bucolic squire placed in political positions above his abilities. His farming career is rarely given more than a mention. Such a reputation is difficult to reconcile with the work of a man who was called by contemporaries "the great patron of English Agriculture";³ who was invariably accorded rapturous ovations by

gatherings of farmers; and who was a promoter and sometimes the principal instigator of almost every important scheme for agricultural improvement put forward in the 1830's and 1840's.

It is the purpose of this article to establish the nature of Spencer's involvement in agricultural affairs. There is always the danger in the study of a single individual that the general picture will be distorted and that larger themes will become lost in the thicket of personal details. However, concrete examples of aristocratic participation in agricultural development and organization are necessary building blocks for creating a broader interpretation of the magnates' role in the management of nineteenth-century English society, and they are still a rare commodity. Spencer, because of his extraordinary position of leadership, deserves special attention.

I

John Charles Spencer, Viscount Althorp (1782-1845), was a member of the innermost core of the "grand Whiggery." He gradually assumed a commanding position in the Whig party during the 1820's and became Chancellor of the Exchequer and Leader of the House of Commons in Lord Grey's ministry (1830-4).⁴ The successful passage of the Great Reform Act was due to a considerable extent to his leadership. Many of his plans for advanced financial reforms, blocked by the prejudices of his own party and the press of other business, anticipated the work accomplished by Sir Robert

¹ E. Clarke and Sir Harry Verney, 'The Third Earl Spencer', *J.R.A.S.E.*, 3rd ser., 1, 1890, pp. 138-56. I would like to acknowledge here the gratitude I feel towards Professor David Spring of the Johns Hopkins University and the late Dr George Kitson Clark of Trinity College, Cambridge, for their supervisory advice and wisdom. I also wish to thank Mr James MacGuire of Downing College, Cambridge, for making some valuable corrections to this paper.

² J. A. Scott Watson, *The History of the Royal Agricultural Society of England, 1839-1939*, 1939, pp. 1-17.

³ *British Farmer's Magazine*, VII, Oct. 1843, p. 298.

⁴ See Le Marchant, *Memoir of John Charles Viscount Althorp*, 1876; Ernest Myers, *Lord Althorp*, 1890; the seventh Earl Spencer, 'John Charles, Viscount Althorp, third Earl Spencer', *Quarterly Rev.*, vol. 283, 1945, pp. 468-80; Lord John Russell, 'Earls Grey and Spencer', *The Edinburgh Rev.*, LXXXIII, 1846, pp. 240-73; Michael Brock, *The Great Reform Act*, 1973.

Peel a decade later. Althorp was closely involved with the drafting and passage of the New Poor Law, the first Factory Act, the Municipal Reform Act, and the final abolition of slavery. In spite of the fact that he stood left of centre in the Whig party (he supported the secret ballot and universal household suffrage), he was the popular choice as Grey's successor to the premiership in 1834—an office which his extreme diffidence and overly refined sense of honour made him decline. In the country he was known by the sobriquet "Honest Jack," and established a reputation for integrity and popularity rivalled by few of his contemporaries. He remained a senior statesman of the Liberal party whose advice was sought by Melbourne, Russell, and others long after his departure from office.

Althorp's career as an agriculturalist began almost by accident. In 1818, after giving birth to a still-born boy and suffering prolonged agony, his wife of but four years died. This double blow changed the course of his life. He stayed shut up and alone for several months in a state of severe depression. He wore mourning dress for the rest of his life and, as a penance, gave up his favourite pastime of fox-hunting.⁵

Althorp had become Master of the Pytchley in 1808 at the age of twenty-six, and had raised it, as one famous sporting writer observed, to "the zenith of its glory."⁶ On taking over the management of the kennels, Althorp had devoted much of his time to the task of breeding smaller boned and swifter hounds.⁷ Thus from an early age he was an avid student of new breeding techniques, and this knowledge and experience became useful when the disaster in his personal life propelled him into the breeding of livestock.

⁵ Northants. R.O., Fitzwilliam MSS.: Althorp to Viscount Milton, 10, 15 June 1818, and Lavinia, Cts. Spencer to Milton, 5 Aug. 1818; B.M. Add. MSS. 51584, G. Tierney to Lord Holland, 23 Sept. 1818.

⁶ The Druid (H. H. Dixon), *Silk and Scarlet*, 1895, p. 73.

⁷ Guy Paget, *The History of the Althorp and Pytchley Hunt, 1634-1920*, 1937, pp. 111, 279-83; Mrs Hugh Wyndham, ed., *Letters from Sarah Spencer, Lady Lyttelton, 1787-1870*, 1912, pp. 62 ff.; Earl Bathurst, *The Earl Spencer's and Mr John Warde's Hounds, 1739-1825*, Cirencester, 1932.

Soon after Lady Althorp's death, the now ex-master of foxhounds told his father that the only interest from which he could take pleasure was in "my cattle and looking at my farm, and I hope by such quiet pursuits as these to bear the affliction I am suffering under with tolerable patience."⁸ Althorp had shown some enthusiasm for husbandry before 1818. At Harrow he loved to read about natural history, and raised silkworms. On journeys he took note of the different soils observed in passing.⁹ In 1814 he had taken over the management of his wife's estate at Wiseton, near Bawtry on the Yorkshire-Nottinghamshire border, which encompassed about 2,000 acres. At the same time he also became a tenant farmer of his father in Northamptonshire, where he managed the large Chapel Brampton farm near Althorp Park.¹⁰ He informed Lord Spencer that he was studying Arthur Young "to make myself a theorist in farming."¹¹

Most of his time had been occupied by politics and the chase. The situation changed, however, when three months after Lady Althorp's death he travelled north to Darlington to attend the sale of shorthorn cattle bred by Robert Colling. There Althorp spent the large amount of £900 on three cows and a bull, with the intention of founding his own herd. "In consequence of this," he wrote to his close friend, Viscount Milton, "I am enabled again to build castles in the air, and if the speculation turns out unprofitable in a pecuniary point of view, I am quite sure it will repay me in happiness."¹²

⁸ Althorp MSS.: Althorp to Ld. Spencer, 29 June 1818: kept at Althorp, Northants., and used by kind permission of the Rt Hon. the Earl Spencer: Le Marchant, *op. cit.*, pp. 169-70.

⁹ Althorp MSS.: Althorp to Georgiana, Cts. Spencer, 9 Sept. 1799.

¹⁰ The two farms each produced about £4,000 p.a. in gross receipts during the 1820's: *Ibid.*, Althorp to Lady Althorp, 23 June 1814.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, Althorp to Ld. Spencer, 9 Oct. 1814. The only recorded meeting between Althorp and Young took place in 1798 when the former was sixteen years old: M. Bentham-Edwards, ed., *The Autobiography of Arthur Young*, 1898.

¹² Fitzwilliam MSS. X1606, Althorp to Milton, 3 Oct. 1818; Althorp MSS.: Althorp to Ld. Spencer, 3 Oct. 1818.

The Colling brothers had chosen the short-horn instead of Bakewell's longhorn to improve upon, and they succeeded in refining their breed into lighter-boned, quicker-fattening cattle which matured earlier and had a higher proportion of carcass to live weight than had been achieved previously.¹³ The Collings' herds were dispersed in two sales, the second of which marked the beginning of Althorp's career as a breeder. Three other herds were of great importance in the refinement and spread of the breed: Christopher Mason's Chiltern Herd, auctioned in 1829 when Althorp purchased eighteen animals, and the herds of John Booth and Thomas Bates.¹⁴ In 1822 the first herdbook was published, and shorthorns were launched on the road to supremacy among the bovine populations of Britain, Ireland, and America.

Althorp probably met Bates at Darlington during the 1818 sale.¹⁵ They soon became friends, and with the expert's advice Althorp began to build what became the largest and one of the most famous of the nineteenth-century strains, the Wiseton Herd.¹⁶ It has been rightly pointed out that in the breeding of shorthorns, Althorp was only a "noble minor star" in comparison with Booth and Bates.¹⁷ The business of politics and office kept the aristocrat away from his farm for long periods, while the farmers were with their animals all the time. Nevertheless, because Althorp was a magnate, he could afford to maintain a larger number of bulls than his fellow breeders, and

he ran Wiseton as if it were an experimental research station rather than for profit.¹⁸ His bulls were always in demand, his frequent sales popular, and after his death the 200 animals remaining at Wiseton were sold for £10,000.¹⁹ Visitors flocked to his farm from home and abroad. Not the least of Wiseton's advantages was its proximity to the Doncaster race-course, and during the St Leger week it was clogged with prospective breeders inspecting Althorp's cattle. In general, he helped to make shorthorns fashionable, and, in particular, the Wiseton bloodline was sought out for the establishment of new herds even many years after his death.²⁰

Agriculture was becoming the consuming passion of Althorp's life. In his article on the work of Coke of Norfolk, written in 1842, Althorp revealed more about himself than about the owner of Holkham. "Nothing would have been . . . more improbable," he wrote,

. . . than an extremely young man, fond of and excelling in field-sports, with a princely fortune, should have applied himself to the detailed management of a farm . . . But having taken it, he found, as every man who will apply himself to agriculture will, the high interest of the pursuit; his taste was formed, the habits of his life accommodated themselves to it, and applying the whole energy of his mind to the collection and dissemination of all the knowledge which he could derive from practical and scientific farmers, he . . . effected the great improvements which, while they have been a source of continued happiness to himself, have produced the most incalculable benefits to the country.²¹

¹³ A. Stewart, 'The Development of the Dairy Short-horns in Britain', *J.R.A.S.E.*, III, 1950, pp. 61-5; H. H. Dixon, 'Rise and Progress of Shorthorns', *ibid.*, 2nd ser., I, 1865, pp. 317-29.

¹⁴ *Farmer's Magazine*, III, 1829, p. 489; 'An Historical Sketch of the Shorthorn Breed', *Shorthorn Breeders Rev.*, 1935, pp. 5-28.

¹⁵ T. Bell, *The History of Improved Short-Horn or Durham Cattle and of the Kirklevington Herd*, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 1871, p. 152.

¹⁶ J. Sinclair, *History of Shorthorn Cattle*, 1907, pp. 92-6; Clarke and Verney, *loc. cit.*, pp. 144-5; Althorp had the largest number of entries in the third edition of G. Coates's, *The Herd-Book: Containing the Pedigrees of Improved Short-horned Cattle*, Pontefract, 1836.

¹⁷ R. Trow-Smith, *A History of British Livestock Husbandry, 1700-1900*, 1959, pp. 233-9.

¹⁸ Fitzwilliam MSS. Y, Althorp to Milton, 5 Jan. 1832; Althorp MSS.: Box 18, Memoir of Frederick, fourth Earl Spencer.

¹⁹ Add. MSS. 35155, f. 91.

²⁰ G. T. Burrows, *History of Dairy Shorthorn Cattle*, 1950, p. 42.

²¹ Earl Spencer, 'On the Improvements which Have Taken Place in West Norfolk', *J.R.A.S.E.*, III, 1842, p. 2. For a corrective to Spencer's views on Coke's achievement, see R. A. C. Parker, *Coke of Norfolk*, Oxford, 1975, pp. 79-81.

In the company of farmers such as Bates and John Grey of Dilston Althorp was able to relax.²² He also took up sheep-breeding, and amongst his flocks and herds he was truly happy. Life at 11 Downing Street filled him with disgust for it kept him from his beasts and fields.²³ His friend Henry Brougham, the Lord Chancellor, used to address his letters to Althorp: "Dearest of Graziers" and "Dear Man of Cattle."²⁴ Edwin Chadwick consulted him about manure and drainage.²⁵ Coke took his advice on cattle-breeding.²⁶ He was called an oracle on all subjects agricultural.²⁷

Unlike some breeders, Althorp was not bigoted about the merits of shorthorns over other types of cattle. He considered carefully before deciding to concentrate on them.²⁸ Other breeds were purchased for the Wiseton farm in order to compare the progress of his own with other animals, and he was prepared to admit the advantages of Herefords and Devons.²⁹ Nor was Althorp exclusively interested in live-stock. He had always been fascinated by science and mathematics. In college examinations at Cambridge he had outshone men who later became wranglers.³⁰ He kept up with the new discoveries in biology and geology, and Brougham, in acknowledgement of this interest, dedicated his edition of Paley's *Natural*

Theology to Althorp.³¹ As a youth he had attended lectures in chemistry, and later by private study he attempted to acquire enough familiarity with the subject to apply it to agriculture.³² He erected a laboratory in his rooms in London, and took lessons from a tutor. "I think the good that can be done by the application of chemistry to farming is quite incalculable," he told his father, "and I am pretty sure I am more likely to be of use to my fellow creatures in this way than in politics . . ."³³

Even before his purchases at the Colling sale in 1818,³⁴ Althorp conducted experiments on the increase of weight in young steers. In 1819 he tried out a drainage technique on his boggy acres at Wiseton.³⁵ In the mid-1820's he tested the value as fodder of the mangel-wurzel as compared with Swedish turnips and sugar beets.³⁶ Later, in collaboration with his friend Lyon Playfair, he was to try out various mixtures of nutritive compounds on his cattle.³⁷ He raised rabbits to test new ideas about breeding, doctored his own cattle, and experimented with various kinds of seeds.³⁸

Althorp's work did not rival that of Liebig or Playfair, but his articles published in the *Journal* of the Royal Agricultural Society show that he had a grasp of the scientific method, was conscious of the importance of statistical analysis, and had a humble awareness of his own limitations. They were practical pieces in-

²² The Druid, *Saddle and Sirloin*, 1895, p. 124; J. Butler, *Memoir of John Grey of Dilston*, 1874, pp. 96, 153.

²³ Le Marchant, *op. cit.*, p. 365; Lord Lyttelton, ed., *Letters from Sarah, Lady Lyttelton, 1797-1870*, privately printed, 1873, pp. 239, 246; Althorp MSS.: Brougham to Althorp, spring 1834; Bell, *op. cit.*, p. 155; Druid, *op. cit.*, p. 125; Butler, *op. cit.*, p. 153.

²⁴ Althorp MSS.: Brougham Letters, 1830's.

²⁵ Univ. College, London, Library: Chadwick MSS.: Althorp to Chadwick, 7 Feb. 1842.

²⁶ Holkham MSS.: Althorp to Leicester, 7, 18 Dec. 1837, copy.

²⁷ Staffs. R.O.: Hatherton MSS.: Duke of Rutland to Hatherton, 1 Nov. 1843.

²⁸ N. Riding R.O.: Kirkleatham Hall MSS.: Althorp to H. Vansittart, 29 Jan. 1826; Althorp MSS.: Arbutnot correspondence.

²⁹ Nottingham Univ. Library: Ossington MSS.: Althorp to J. E. Denison, 10 Jan. 1838; Devon R.O.: Fortescue MSS.: Althorp to Ld. Ebrington, 23 Oct. 1838, 7 Feb., 1 March, 6 Sept. 1839; Holkham MSS.: Althorp to Leicester, 18 Dec. 1837, copy.

³⁰ Le Marchant, *op. cit.*, pp. 78-9.

³¹ London, 1838. Althorp MSS.: Althorp to Brougham, 10 Jan., 8 June 1836, and Brougham Recollection No. 4; See Althorp's essays 'Geology' and 'On Instinct', etc. of the 1830's.

³² Althorp MSS.: Althorp to Georgiana, Cts. Spencer, 8 Dec. 1799; Althorp to Spencer, 5, 12 May 1820.

³³ *Ibid.*, same to same, 5 May 1820.

³⁴ Fitzwilliam MSS.: Althorp to Milton, 31 Aug. 1818.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, X1607, same to same, 3 Jan. 1819.

³⁶ He published his results in the *Farmer's Magazine*, 1, 1827, p. 741; See also 1, 1826, p. 121 and IV, p. 475. It was reprinted in the *J.R.A.S.E.*, II, 1841, pp. 296-8; Holkham MSS.: Althorp to Coke, 25 Feb. 1826, 6 Jan. 1828, copies.

³⁷ Imperial College, London, Library: Playfair MSS.: Althorp to Playfair, 16 Jan., 23 July 1843.

³⁸ West Sussex R.O.: Goodwood MSS.: Althorp to the D. of Richmond, 18 Feb. 1840, 28 Dec. 1832—used by the kind permission of the Earl of March. Hatherton MSS.: Althorp to Hatherton, 21 May, 27 June 1837; Bell, *op. cit.*, p. 157.

tended "for the use of farmers."³⁹ He insisted on the need for careful observation and the keeping of accurate pedigrees.⁴⁰ In one article he used his carefully kept records to revise the generally accepted assumption about the length of pregnancy in cattle.⁴¹ In another paper he described his failure to develop a method of ascertaining quickly whether a cow was in calf after it was put to a bull. Neither stethoscopes nor probability tables were of any use, but he was able to establish a means for predicting the number of calves that would be produced by a given number of cows after breeding.⁴² His experiments with turnips and mangel-wurzels were scrupulously conducted, but he used too few animals for his conclusions to be soundly based.⁴³

II

In the article on Coke of Norfolk Althorp eulogized his friend's attempts to diffuse knowledge through the Holkham sheep-shearings, and he wisely concentrated most of his own time and resources on the dissemination, and not the discovery, of scientific improvements. In 1819, a year after Lady Althorp's death, the Northamptonshire Farming and Grazing Society held its first meeting at Althorp's farm at Chapel Brampton.⁴⁴ He refused the presidency of the Society, however, saying that he joined it in the role of a tenant farmer of his father's and not as the heir of Althorp Park.⁴⁴ He wanted local farmers to run it by and for themselves. But he was soon heavily involved in its affairs.

Although Althorp's famous humility was genuine, it often deceives unwary historians into making misjudgements. The habit of

authority was deeply ingrained in his nature. His diffidence was the product of a devout Christian's sense of sin before the Almighty, and of deference to the eloquence and talents of his more able peers. Althorp felt profoundly inadequate in the presence of God and Lord Grey. Otherwise he was a man of strong, even stubborn, opinions, endowed with a compelling talent for leadership made additionally powerful by a rigid adherence to his conception of aristocratic duty. When the Duke of Bedford resigned from the presidency of the Smithfield Club in 1821, therefore, Althorp waited for the place to be filled by some more able nobleman than himself. When no one stepped forward he assumed the post with energetic gusto.

Bedford's letter of resignation confirmed Althorp's suspicions about the fitness of the older generation of magnates to give a lead in agricultural affairs.⁴⁵ Althorp had witnessed the collapse of the old Board of Agriculture (of which he was only briefly a member before it became defunct).⁴⁶ Coke ended his shows at Holkham. Despite his admiration for the old man, Althorp was moved to say on one occasion: "Coke has two or three crack farms . . . where the tenant dare not have a weed; here [at Wiseton] there's uniformity, the land's farmed for farming's sake."⁴⁷ Bedford ended his sheep-shearings at Woburn at the same time as he urged the dissolution of the Smithfield Club, in the belief that the breeding of livestock had reached a level beyond which little more could be expected.⁴⁸

The pioneering days of individual effort were ending. Althorp believed further advancement should be achieved through the work of large

³⁹ Spencer, 'On the Selection of Male Animals in the Breeding of Cattle and Sheep', *J.R.A.S.E.*, I, 1840, p. 24.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁴¹ 'On the Gestation of Cows', *J.R.A.S.E.*, I, 1840, pp. 165-9.

⁴² 'On the Means of Calculating the Number of Calves which Will Probably Be Produced by a Herd of Cows', *J.R.A.S.E.*, II, 1841, pp. 112-16.

⁴³ 'On the Comparative Feeding Properties of Mangel-wurzel and Swedish Turnips', *J.R.A.S.E.*, II, 1841, pp. 296-8.

⁴⁴ *Northampton Mercury*, 25 Sept. 1819.

⁴⁵ *Farmer's Magazine* I, 1826, p. 97; *Northampton Mercury*, 16 Sept. 1826.

⁴⁶ Museum of English Rural Life, Reading: Board of Agriculture MSS.: Minute Book 1820-2, 23 March 1821. I wish to thank Mr Michael Birch of Christ's College, Cambridge, for drawing my attention to this reference.

⁴⁷ *Druid*, *op. cit.*, p. 125. When as trustee he undertook the administering of Holkham during the 2nd Earl of Leicester's minority, Althorp decided that the famous sheep there needed further improving. Goodwood MSS.: Althorp to Richmond, 8 June 1843. See also Parker, *op. cit.*, p. 161.

⁴⁸ *Northampton Mercury*, 29 Dec. 1821.

popular societies which had greater opportunities and resources for the dissemination of information to the mass of farmers.⁴⁹ In those societies already in existence Althorp found much that he thought needed to be changed. At the Smithfield Club he reformed the requirements and categories for entering exhibits to make it easier for farmers to compete with the aristocratic contestants. He broadened the base of the Club's membership, and insisted on a new standard of fairness in the judging procedure for awards.⁵⁰ At the Northamptonshire Society, and later in alliance with Lord Milton at other agricultural gatherings, he tried to dispense with formal speeches in order to encourage discussions in which farmers could exchange ideas with one another.⁵¹ He was pleased to find an increasing number of farmers coming to the show, and he got to know many of them personally. Althorp often struck observers as a "farmer-looking man" wearing "farmer-like style of dress"⁵² and he took pleasure in announcing to a duke he had invited to the Club's meeting, "we dine at the Crown and Anchor like farmers in boots."⁵³

Althorp was intent, too, on broadening the scope of agricultural shows. Not only were sheep and pigs added to the prize list in Northamptonshire but also he persuaded his mother to establish a contest for poultry, and induced some of the county magnates to put up premiums for both animal and vegetable husbandry.⁵⁴ At the Smithfield show he opened the doors to implement manufacturers and seed sellers, and each year these displays grew in size and number. He was encouraged by the long distances which some visitors travelled to attend the Chapel Brampton show—some

from as far away as Scotland—and, in the last years of Althorp's presidency, up to 60,000 people visited the Smithfield show, including Prince Albert and the Queen.⁵⁵

Even while he was Chancellor of the Exchequer, Althorp each year arrived at the show ground before dawn to superintend the stewards, and to help place the animals in their stalls.⁵⁶ A few months before his death in 1845 he appeared at the Royal Agricultural Society show yard at Shrewsbury in his shirt-sleeves to push livestock into the sheds with his own hands.⁵⁷

In the years when he was not officiating, he sat out among the farmers and not at the high table during the annual dinners of the Royal Agricultural Society. These activities would have seemed ridiculous and repugnant to his predecessors in the presidency of the Smithfield Club. Althorp, however, did not fear to appear undignified, and his unaffected simplicity increased the regard in which farmers held him.

Althorp did not confine his activities to Northampton and Smithfield. He travelled around the country speaking about the merits of the mangel-wurzel, and attending agricultural meetings. In 1827 he was president of the Bedfordshire Agricultural Society, and encouraged the local cattle show near Wiseton. In the same year he became a member of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge. This body had been founded by Brougham and others involved in the inception of the University of London and the Mechanics Institutes. Althorp became one of its most active members. By 1840 he was in charge of the Society, and at his death it came to an end.⁵⁸ The Society's aim was the dissemination of technical and educational material for the purpose of self-improvement among working

⁴⁹ Spencer, 'West Norfolk', *J.R.A.S.E.*, III, 1842, p. 9.

⁵⁰ *Northampton Mercury*, 19 Dec. 1829; *Farmer's Magazine*, IV, 1830, p. 78.

⁵¹ *Northampton Mercury*, 25 Sept., 27 Nov. 1824; *Farmer's Magazine*, VII, 1843, pp. 348-57.

⁵² J. A. Froude, ed., *Thomas Carlyle 1795-1835*, 1882, II, p. 173; G. Ticknor, *Life, Letters, and Journals*, 1876, I, p. 442.

⁵³ Goodwood MSS.: Althorp to Richmond, 20 Dec. 1831; *Northampton Mercury*, 22 Dec. 1827.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 20 Dec. 1823; *Farmer's Magazine*, X, 1836, pp. 361-2.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, VIII, 1845, p. 543.

⁵⁶ *Northampton Mercury*, 23 Dec. 1826; *Farmer's Magazine*, I, 1826, p. 97.

⁵⁷ *Druid, op. cit.*, p. 126.

⁵⁸ Monica Grobel, 'The Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge 1826-1846', unpub. M.A. thesis, Univ. of London, 1933, p. 48; R. K. Webb, *The British Working Class Reader, 1790-1848*, 1955, pp. 66-73, 85-90, 114-22.

people. Althorp took particular interest in supervising the Farming Series in the Library of Useful Knowledge: suggesting topics, finding authors, and editing manuscripts.⁵⁹ This series, especially William Youatt's book on the horse, was among the Society's most popular publications.⁶⁰

In October 1837 Althorp, now Earl Spencer, presided over a meeting at York at which the Yorkshire Agricultural Society was founded. He hoped that this association would become the English equivalent of the Highland Society of Scotland, which he greatly admired.⁶¹ It had the usual purpose of sponsoring an annual show of livestock and implements, but there were also ambitious plans for promoting research, publishing a journal, and setting up an agricultural school.⁶² In this enterprise, as in many other activities, Spencer was closely associated with Lord Milton, now Earl Fitzwilliam. It was another friend, however, who was to be his partner in a far greater undertaking.

The fifth Duke of Richmond, although a Tory, had joined Lord Grey's ministry through his revulsion at Peel and Wellington's betrayal in passing Catholic emancipation. He was a strong supporter of the Corn Laws, criticized the New Poor Law, approved of spring guns, and was illiberal over Irish policy.⁶³ These were traits hardly likely to find favour in Spencer's eyes. However, the Duke was a breeder of southdowns, and as long as they talked about sheep the ultra-Whig and ultra-Tory got on well together and, indeed, became fast friends. Spencer had taken Richmond as his guest to the Smithfield Club in 1831, and they exchanged agricultural visits.⁶⁴ In 1832 the Duke

was pressed into service as a vice-president of the Club, and on Spencer's death became its fourth president. Spencer found in Richmond not only a fellow enthusiast for agricultural improvement but also a perfect political counterweight who would help to create a neutral atmosphere—especially important as the flames of the Corn Law controversy grew hotter—in the attempt to found a national agricultural association.

The Smithfield Club did not provide the right vehicle for such a project. Its main concern remained livestock. But it was from his platform as president of the Club that Spencer first broached the idea of a new organization encompassing all forms of agriculture and drawing its support from all over England and Wales. This speech, delivered on 11 December 1837, once again emphasized the importance in Spencer's eyes of the diffusion of practical information in a simple form to those who actually tilled the soil. Although he wanted the Society to initiate and subsidize research, Spencer had no patience for untried theories. He spoke of "the application of science to practice," a phrase later adopted as the motto of the Royal Agricultural Society of England—"Science with Practice."⁶⁵

The response to Spencer's proposal was enthusiastic. Many landowners and farmers were eager for the establishment of such an organization, especially in view of the failure of the Central Association founded in 1835. Additional impetus was engendered by a letter addressed to Spencer by Henry Handley, an M.P., who urged the foundation of a society with a central location in London where a library and museum could be accommodated.⁶⁶ The time was ripe for advancement, but it took men of the rank, integrity, and national prestige of Spencer and Richmond to gather a list of subscribers who could provide the capital to launch a substantial and enduring institution. A public meeting was arranged in London on

⁵⁹ Grobel, thesis, pp. 362-70, 380, 382; Univ. College London Library: Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, MSS.: Althorp to T. Coates, 21 Sept., 13 Nov. 1832, 20 July 1836.

⁶⁰ Grobel, thesis, pp. 374-6; S.D.U.K. MSS.: Althorp to Brougham, 26 Oct. 1829.

⁶¹ Butler, *op. cit.*, pp. 156-7.

⁶² J. Fairfax-Blakeborough, 'Centenary of the Yorkshire Agricultural Society', *Trans. Yorks. Ag. Soc.*, 94, 1936, pp. 1-12; *Farmer's Magazine*, IV, 1840, p. 373; VI, 1842, pp. 368-9.

⁶³ Chester Kirby, *The English Country Gentleman*, 1938, pp. 111-65.

⁶⁴ Goodwood MSS.: Althorp to Richmond, 6 Dec. 1833; Althorp MSS.: Althorp to Spencer, 12 Dec. 1833.

⁶⁵ *Farmer's Magazine*, II, 1838, p. 179; E. Clarke, 'The Foundation of the Royal Agricultural Society', *J.R.A.S.E.*, 3rd ser., I, 1890, pp. 2-3; Scott Watson, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

9 May 1838, where Peel, Stanley, Graham, Wellington, Fitzwilliam, and others announced their support.⁶⁷ Spencer chaired the meeting, and was automatically chosen as the first president. He spoke then in much the same terms as he had written to Richmond a few months before, when he was formulating what he thought should be the main objects of the Society:

... First the improved cultivation of the land and secondly improved management of domestic animals, more especially to their medical treatment. In the first of these, English farmers have a great deal to learn which is known to Scotch farmers, and both a great deal to learn which nobody at present knows. In the second the whole is Terra Incognita. With respect to Cattle Shews we must have them or we can excite no interest and get no subscriptions, but I consider that in this respect the public is at present pretty well supplied and therefore and only on this account consider it a secondary consideration.⁶⁸

He and Richmond kept a tight grasp on the government of the Society. Between them they held the presidency for four out of the first seven years of its existence, and during the other three years they still acted as if in office.

III

Spencer was active in every facet of the Society's affairs. He arranged for correspondence with foreign societies to go through the Foreign Office.⁶⁹ He urged the Society to sponsor experiments, and backed the idea of setting up a research farm.⁷⁰ He was eager for the appointment of Dr Playfair as consulting chemist, and during Spencer's second term as

president the Society sponsored the latter's lectures on agricultural chemistry at the Royal Institution.⁷¹ Josiah Parkes, the drainage expert, was made consulting engineer during the same year. Spencer was also anxious that the Society support the work of the Veterinary College, and he pressed for the establishment of lectures on cattle diseases to be given at the school.⁷²

Earl Fitzwilliam had moved a resolution at the May 1838 meeting in favour of holding annual shows in different parts of England and Wales. The first of these was held at Oxford in 1839, where Spencer presided over a huge, popular gathering. The exhibitions grew in size every year, particularly after sites were chosen with a view to access by rail.⁷³ A library and museum were set up in the Society's permanent headquarters in Hanover Square, and Spencer dealt with the printing of its catalogue.⁷⁴

To encourage research the Society annually announced a series of essay topics for which prizes were awarded. The successful entries were published in the *Journal*, which first appeared in 1840. Besides contributing articles, Spencer helped to edit the *Journal*, and he also urged the association of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge with the Royal Agricultural Society in various publications.⁷⁵ Philip Pusey, the official editor of the *Journal*, worked closely with Spencer in placing a premium on short, practical articles. His role in the management of the Society was second only to that of Richmond and Spencer, and the latter took steps to ensure that Pusey soon followed them in the office of president. Spencer took positive delight in nominating a man to the post who was not a peer, and who was to be

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*; Goodwood MSS.: Althorp to Richmond, 14 Feb. 1838.

⁶⁸ Goodwood MSS.: Althorp to Richmond, 10 Jan. 1838; *Farmer's Magazine*, III, 1839, p. 269; Butler, *op. cit.*, pp. 156-7.

⁶⁹ National Rec. Arch.: Broadlands MSS.: Althorp to Palmerston, 8 Aug. 1838; Goodwood MSS.: Althorp to Richmond, 18 Aug. 1838.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, Althorp to Richmond, 18 Feb. 1840; *Farmer's Magazine*, III, 1840, p. 470.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, IX, 1845, p. 11.

⁷² Goodwood MSS.: Althorp to Richmond, 29 Mar. 1839; Trow-Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 318; Scott Watson, *op. cit.*, p. 104.

⁷³ E. Clarke, *The First Two County Meetings of the Royal Agricultural Society of England, Oxford 1839: Cambridge 1840*, 1894, pp. 1-29.

⁷⁴ Goodwood MSS.: Althorp to Richmond, 18 Feb. 1840.

⁷⁵ S.D.U.K. MSS.: Althorp to T. Coates, 18 May 1838.

elevated for his talents and service to farmers, not for his acreage.⁷⁶ But it was Spencer who suggested to John Grey of Dilston the idea of writing a survey of agriculture in Northumberland, which initiated the county series as a regular feature of the *Journal*.⁷⁷

As Spencer and Richmond had recognized at the outset, the life of the Society was threatened by the fierce political atmosphere of the early 1840's. "If politics interfere at all," the former had written to a friend, "an Agricultural Society must fall to the ground."⁷⁸ The Duke, supported by Peel, announced that he wanted the Society to be "neutral ground."⁷⁹ It was the diverse nature of Spencer and Richmond's ideological stances which enabled the Society to collect such a broad spectrum of support.⁸⁰

It was impossible, however, to maintain peace. Richmond became president of the National Society for the Protection of Agriculture, and Spencer publicly declared his support for complete repeal of the Corn Laws in 1841.⁸¹ The latter also strenuously opposed the nomination of the protectionist Duke of Buckingham as president of the Royal Agricultural Society.⁸² Spencer had become a free trader many years before. In the 1820's he had joined with Ricardo and other classical economists in the Political Economy Club, and his closest ally, Fitzwilliam, had been one of the earliest and most severe critics of protection.⁸³ With regard to free trade in corn, however, Spencer

had only expressed his feelings in private to friends.⁸⁴ While Fitzwilliam denounced the Corn Laws at agricultural meetings and was soundly booed, Spencer, at the same gathering, would avoid controversial topics and only go so far as to express sympathy with the farmers' plight.⁸⁵ Some protectionists had noticed what they called "his hostility to the Agricultural interest," and one revengeful Tory farmer went by stealth into his barn at Chapel Brampton and maliciously fed a prize cow the wrong food.⁸⁶ However, it was not until Spencer's forceful speech at Northampton in November 1843 that the farming community realized their leader was a Judas.⁸⁷ By keeping silent Spencer had hoped that he could use his influence gradually to wean the farmers away from their faith in protection.⁸⁸ And once the words were out of his mouth, he instantly regretted that he had spoken.⁸⁹ He was obliged to resign from the Northamptonshire Farming and Grazing Society in order not to cause its dissolution.⁹⁰ He had also to turn down a request to chair the meeting for the establishment of the Royal Agricultural College at Cirencester, a project dear to his heart, because his association with the project would now damage its chances for success. Motions of censure were passed against him at farmers' meetings, and a movement was started to call for his resignation as president of the Royal Agricultural Society.⁹¹

Other political questions also involved

⁷⁶ Goodwood MSS.: Althorp to Richmond, 3, 18 Feb., 7 March 1840; Scott Watson, *op. cit.*, pp. 39, 160-1; Paolo E. Coletta, 'Philip Pusey, English Country Squire', *Ag. Hist.*, xviii, 1944, pp. 83-91.

⁷⁷ Druid, *op. cit.*, p. 124; St Andrews Univ. Library: Miscellaneous MSS.: Althorp to John Grey, 8 Jan. 1841.

⁷⁸ Lord Cockburn, *Letters Chiefly Connected with the Affairs of Scotland . . . to Thomas Francis Kennedy*, 1818-1852, 1874, p. 529, Althorp to Kennedy, 21 Feb. 1841.

⁷⁹ *Farmer's Magazine*, II, 1838, pp. 182-3, 188-90.

⁸⁰ In 1838 Spencer had written to Richmond when they were searching for subscribers: "I hope Handley will get the names of some outrageous Tories and some of the great Corn Law people, to neutralize the effect of my name and yours": Goodwood MSS.: 14 Feb. 1838.

⁸¹ *Parl. Deb.*, 3rd ser., LIX, c. 18-24.

⁸² Althorp MSS.: Althorp to Brougham, 3 May 1842.

⁸³ See David Spring, 'Earl Fitzwilliam and the Corn Laws', *Amer. Hist. Rev.*, LIX, 1954, pp. 287-304.

⁸⁴ Cockburn, *op. cit.*, p. 442, Althorp to Kennedy, 10 Sept. 1832; Butler, *op. cit.*, p. 158, Althorp to Grey, 26 May 1841; Nat. Library Scotland: Ellice MSS.: Althorp to Edward Ellice, 16 March 1843.

⁸⁵ *Farmer's Magazine*, I, 1826, pp. 93-5; *Leeds Mercury*, 19 Aug. 1826.

⁸⁶ A. M. W. Stirling, ed., *The Letter-Bag of Lady Elizabeth Spencer-Stanhope, 1806-1873*, 1923, II, pp. 155-6; House of Lords R.O.: Shaw Lefevre MSS.: Spencer Trust 1 Althorp to C. Shaw Lefevre, 31 Jan. 1835.

⁸⁷ *Northampton Mercury*, 2 Dec. 1843.

⁸⁸ Fitzwilliam MSS.: 212 Althorp to Fitzwilliam, 1 Feb. 1839; Univ. College London Library: Brougham MSS.: 13537 Althorp to Brougham, 26 Sept. 1841.

⁸⁹ Fitzwilliam MSS.: CQ Althorp to Fitzwilliam, 12 Jan. 1844.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, EX same to same, 29 Jan. 1844.

⁹¹ Althorp MSS.: Althorp to ?, draft, 7 July 1844; Scott Watson, *op. cit.*, p. 136; *Farmer's Magazine*, VIII, 1844, p. 296; B.M.: Add. MSS. 35155, f. 90.

Spencer in difficulties. In 1834 he had proposed his own plan for tithe reform. This tied the tithe to rental, and made provision for redemption. The Bill failed to pass, and in 1836 he lent his support to Lord John Russell's Bill with its prescription of compulsory commutation. But no measure, he thought, could satisfy all the interests concerned.⁹²

Security of tenure for tenants appeared to him to be another nearly insoluble problem. Although he believed Coke's long leases combined with covenants had contributed greatly to the improvement of the Holkham estate, he felt the system was too easily open to abuse.⁹³ Virtually all the tenantry on the Spencer estates—some of whose families had been in occupation from the reign of Henry VII—were on yearly leases. The able management of the Spencers had led the farmers to believe that good landlords were hereditary in the family.⁹⁴ Spencer had offered twenty-one year leases but his tenants declined them. They had no hesitation in laying out money on their farms, and were receptive to advice from Spencer and his agents. Although he gave much thought to the problem of securing protection for tenants with bad landlords, Spencer was unable to produce a workable scheme which would not undermine the sense of trust that was basic to the English landed system, and again he confessed failure.⁹⁵

Tithes and tenures were not the only problems about which Spencer was pessimistic or felt a personal sense of ineffectiveness. His calls for improving the conditions of agricultural labourers did not appear to arouse much interest.⁹⁶ He was disheartened to see that many farmers continued to breed their animals indiscriminately.⁹⁷ The financial burden that weighed heavily on his own estate made it

impossible for him to implement schemes for improvement that required large capital outlays.⁹⁸ His grandiose plans for a scholarly biographical dictionary, entirely inappropriate for mass readership, precipitated the collapse of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge. Even the popular farming series did not accomplish its objective; he reported sadly to the Secretary of the Society: "To say the truth I am afraid our Farmers Series is not very much taken in by the Farmers, at least I do not see it in their houses nor do I hear them talk about it. . ."⁹⁹ Spencer was inclined to over-emphasize the importance of new inventions and massive injections of capital into the land when, in fact, a wider use of relatively simple techniques and discriminating expenditure would have been more efficient and productive.

It would be wrong, however, to concentrate on Spencer's failures. His vision of the future was mature and enlightened, and he had the strength of will and confidence in his own judgement to make others see things as he did. Unlike his friend, Fitzwilliam, whose interests straddled the two worlds of rural life and commercial expansion, Spencer's wealth derived almost solely from the land. Nevertheless, he recognized and accepted the changing balance in the importance of the two worlds in the economy and in society. He criticized his own Reform Act for giving too much influence to the landed interest.¹⁰⁰ The prosperity of industry, upon which Britain's future greatness relied, required efficient agriculture and cheap corn. Spencer and Fitzwilliam rejected Malthus's grim forecasts, and believed population growth increased the power and wealth of the

⁹² P.R.O.: Russell MSS.: 30/22/2A Althorp to Lord John Russell, 26 March 1836.

⁹³ Spencer, 'West Norfolk', p. 8.

⁹⁴ James Caird, *English Agriculture in 1850-51*, 2nd edn, 1968, pp. 431-3.

⁹⁵ Nottingham Univ. Library: Ossington MSS.: C128 Althorp to Denison, 2 Sept. 1844.

⁹⁶ *Farmer's Magazine*, VII, 1843, pp. 317-19.

⁹⁷ Spencer, 'On the Selection of Male Animals', p. 25.

⁹⁸ Spencer inherited a debt from his father that stood at £496,869 in 1836. The gross income of the estate before he began selling property was around £40,000 while interest on the debt and annuities took away nearly three-quarters of this—the payments totalled £31,060—and merely the upkeep of Spencer House, Wiseton, and Althorp Park on skeleton staffs used up most of the rest: Shaw Lefevre MSS.: Spencer Trust papers; Althorp MSS.: box 13 and estate ledgers and papers. See also David Spring, *The English Landed Estate in the Nineteenth Century: Its Administration*, Baltimore, 1963, pp. 36-7.

⁹⁹ S.D.U.K. MSS.: Althorp to Coates, 23 April 1836.

¹⁰⁰ Althorp MSS.: Althorp to Brougham, 30 Aug. 1837; Hatherton MSS.: Althorp to Littleton, 1 Jan. 1831.

country not diminished it.¹⁰¹ It was of crucial importance to the maintenance of aristocratic government and to the unhindered growth of industry not only that the magnates understand economic and social evolution but also that the leaders of agricultural organizations and opinion such as Fitzwilliam and Spencer urge acceptance of change.

They worked to modernize the sacred conception of the superiority of landed society's values over all other forms of life. Land, Fitzwilliam declared harshly in a sentence that must have made some of his fellow peers cringe, "may be described as clumsy and inconvenient pieces of machinery."¹⁰² Spencer was deeply gratified by Sir James Graham's speech at the Oxford meeting of the Royal Agricultural Society in 1839, in which he was praised in semi-mystical terms as an improver of the soil—such a man who in all ages was "regarded as the father of his people..."¹⁰³ No good countryman of Spencer's kind could have remained unmoved by such a compliment. But at the last show of the Society attended by him, at Shrewsbury in 1845, he gave a valedictory speech which dwelt on the interdependence of the economy, and ended in an unusual toast for a farmers' gathering: "to Agriculture, Manufactures, and Commerce."¹⁰⁴

IV

Lord Spencer lived and worked in an era sandwiched between 'the Agricultural Revolution' and the age of 'High Farming.' The widespread adoption of new drainage techniques, the use of new types of fertilizers, and the important advances in veterinary medicine occurred after his death. It was his task to help

consolidate and disseminate what had already been achieved, and to set the stage for what was to come.

Spencer was not the first to organize agricultural associations, and there were many farming leaders who made important contributions to improvement who opposed his political and economic policies. Moreover, it is difficult to discover how deeply the spirit of the Royal Agricultural Society permeated through to the lower echelons of the farming community, and one might fairly have some reservations about calling it, as Lord Ernle did, "the heart and brain of agriculture."¹⁰⁵ Nevertheless, it did play an important role in the development of nineteenth-century farming, and the influence it exerted in its early years was due in large measure to the emphasis laid on widespread propaganda and severely practical advice. Spencer sought to ensure that it did not become a remote, aristocratic coterie. The leaders of the Society kept their boots and gaiters freshly caked with clay and muck, concentrating their efforts on the diffusion of utilitarian information to ordinary farmers.

Spencer's personal reputation was of immeasurable assistance in this work. His plain, unpretentious, honest, and farmer-like character had a great appeal in the countryside. Even his views on the Corn Laws were forgiven him once the initial shock of revelation was over. He remains a foremost example of why the aristocracy continued to retain the leadership of society. Not only was the Whig grandee able to adjust to change, he became too a vigorous advocate of innovation, while remaining an exemplar of all that was most respected in the old tradition. These attributes were combined with good sense and singleness of purpose. Thus Spencer became a powerful instrument for the conversion of farmers to progressive ideas, and for the organization of men and resources to produce future technical advances.

¹⁰¹ Spencer, 'West Norfolk', p. 1; Milton Park, Peterborough: Milton MSS.: Diary, Aug. 1821; Fitzwilliam MSS.: letter book 732, Milton to Thos. Cook, 18 July 1837.

¹⁰² Earl Fitzwilliam, *First, Second, and Third Addresses to the Landowners of England on the Corn Laws*, 2nd edn, 1839, p. 34.

¹⁰³ *Farmer's Magazine*, III, 1839, pp. 270-1.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, IX, 1845, p. 320.

¹⁰⁵ *English Farming, Past and Present*, 6th edn, 1961, pp. 362-3.