

The Peasant in England: A Case of Terminological Confusion?¹

By J V BECKETT

DURING the twentieth century historians of English society have faced a dilemma when describing those people connected with the land but below the gentry in the social hierarchy. Their predicament has arisen from the absence of a suitable collective noun with which to describe rural society. Consequently they have had to try to turn imprecise contemporary terminology into clear-cut categorization widely acceptable to their readers, and in this process the word 'peasant' has increasingly been utilized. The fact that influential contemporary social commentators such as Gregory King and Patrick Colquhoun did not use 'yeoman', despite its widespread currency in the countryside, has always suggested that it was an imprecise term. As a result, historians have tended to employ their own definitions, such as owner-occupier or owner-cultivator. However, as social anthropologists have come to attribute wider scope to the term peasant, writers on England have been able to regard it as a convenient description applicable to rural society.² This should not be taken to imply that there has been any uniformity on the matter; on the contrary, a split has occurred between those who use the word, and those who, for a variety of reasons, refuse to entertain it. The latter group base their objection either on the imprecision of

the term, or their belief that it has connotations appropriate to Medieval England and Continental Europe but not to modern England, rendering it a potentially confusing term. They are anxious, in other words, to avoid the dilemma of one recent scholar who has accepted that English rural dwellers were not peasants in the Continental sense of the word, but has still used it in a British context.³ The purpose of this paper is to add a further caveat to these drawbacks by suggesting that in its current usage the word is being employed unhistorically. Because of the connotations of the word to contemporaries most of them would almost certainly have resented the idea that they lived in a 'peasant society'. It will be suggested that whilst anthropological definitions may allow the word to be used, historical considerations should ensure that it is treated with great care.

I

In English society the terms yeoman and husbandman were widely used without being clearly defined, largely because contemporaries relied upon the community to judge the status of a particular individual. Legally, a yeoman was a freeholder who could meet the qualification for voting in Parliamentary elections, but the term was evidently applied much more widely, probably to most freeholders, copyholders, and even tenant farmers.⁴ In the 1560s Sir

¹An earlier version of this paper was read to the British Agricultural History Society's Annual Conference in 1981. I should like to thank participants for constructive criticisms which have enabled me to refine some of the ideas contained in this paper.

²Alan Macfarlane, *The Origins of English Individualism*, Oxford, 1978, pp 9ff. The difficulty of defining 'peasantry' is pointed out by Barrington Moore: 'it is impossible to define the word peasantry with absolute precision because distinctions are blurred at the edges in social reality itself': *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*, 1967, p 111n.

³Dennis R Mills, *Lord and Peasant in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, 1980, p 16.

⁴Mildred Campbell, *The English Yeoman under Elizabeth and the Early Stuarts*, New Haven, 1942, pp 23-5. Eighteenth-century use of the word yeoman in Cumbria included freeholders, customary tenants and tenant farmers: J V Beckett, 'The Decline of the Small Landowner in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century England: Some Regional Considerations', *Ag Hist Rev*, 30, 1982, pp 97-111.

Thomas Smith defined the ranks of his fellow Englishmen as gentlemen, yeomen and rascals. Forty years later Thomas Wilson included in his list yeomen, 'yeomen of meaner ability which are called freeholders, copyholders and cottagers'. In 1674 another commentator distinguished between yeomen (farmer-owners), farmers (tenant-farmers) and labourers.⁵ Giles Jacob's law dictionary of 1720 defined yeomen as being 'chiefly freeholders, and farmers; but the word comprehends all under the rank of gentlemen, and is a good addition to a name &c'.⁶ Both Adam Smith and Blackstone used the term in this wide-ranging sense, as apparently did the Board of Agriculture reporters in the 1790s, although by the early nineteenth century a slightly narrower definition seems to have been gaining ground. Arthur Young, for example, used yeoman only of freeholders who were not gentry, and this was how the term was employed by expert witnesses before the 1833 Select Committee on Agriculture.⁷ The use of husbandman varied. Fine distinctions were made in the Midland counties between yeoman and husbandman, but in other areas of the country including Cumbria and Kent, it was rarely used. Its greater employment in the Midlands seems to have reflected the importance of copyhold in that region.⁸ Perhaps significantly, it was not among the terms defined by Giles Jacob. Thus, in a society notable for its concern with rank and social order, 'yeoman' was a clearly recognized term applying to a rural, agricultural group below the gentry and, in some regions, above the husbandman.⁹

Yeoman did not apply in any general sense to a particular group of people with a specific

landowning base, and it may have been for this reason that Gregory King eschewed the word in drawing up his famous table of the income and expense of the nation in 1688. He distinguished between freeholders, farmers and labourers, and set a trend which both Joseph Massie in the mid-eighteenth century and Patrick Colquhoun in the early nineteenth were happy to follow. However, quite what they meant by freeholder has itself been a matter of dispute. According to D M Hirst, in his published work King followed Thomas Wilson in regarding a freeholder as a yeoman, but in some of his unpublished estimates he apparently wavered between including only those who qualified on tenurial grounds, and all those who were freeholders by virtue of having a vote in Parliamentary elections. This latter group could include cottagers as well as genuine landed freeholders.¹⁰

The imprecision of yeoman has raised acute difficulties, particularly for twentieth-century writers concerned with the problem of dating the decline of the small owner in English society. For many years 'yeoman' was used more or less without reserve. Mantoux used yeoman rather than peasant in his study of eighteenth-century England, and it was also employed in the years immediately preceding the first world war by several of the writers who debated the decline of the small owner. Later, Sir John Clapham used it, though making clear that he was aware of the 'varying uses of the word yeoman, both by contemporaries and by historians'.¹¹ H L Gray, Mildred Campbell and, most recently, Gordon Batho, have all freely employed the term. It has generally been those historians writing in recent years on the problem of dating small owner decline who have experienced most trouble

⁵The relevant passages from the work of Smith and Wilson are reproduced in L Stone (ed), *Social Change and Revolution in England, 1540-1640*, 1966, pp 116, 120. R H, *The Prevention of Poverty*, 1674, p 1, quoted in E Lipson, *The Economic History of England*, 6th edn, 1956, II, p 380.

⁶Giles Jacob, *A New Law Dictionary*, 7th edn, 1756.

⁷J H Clapham, *An Economic History of Modern Britain*, II, 1930, p 99.

⁸Joan Thirsk (ed), *The Agrarian History of England and Wales IV, 1500-1640*, Cambridge, 1967, pp 734-5.

⁹Campbell, *op cit*, p 30.

¹⁰D M Hirst, 'The Seventeenth-Century Freeholder and the Statistician: A Case of Terminological Confusion', *Econ Hist Rev*, 2nd ser, XXIX, 1976, p 310.

¹¹P. Mantoux, *The Industrial Revolution in the Eighteenth Century*, 1961 edn, pp 136ff. Lord Ernle, *English Farming Past and Present*, 6th edn, 1961, pp 296-7. E C K Gonner, *Common Land and Enclosure*, 1912. Clapham, *op cit*, I, p 98.

with the term. Mingay regarded it as being imprecise and charged with romantic and sentimental overtones, so that he preferred 'small owner occupier', whilst others have plumped for 'farmer-owner' and 'owner-cultivator'.¹² However, a number of historians have used the term peasant. For much of the twentieth century this was avoided, probably because of its politically emotive overtones, but the term has risen in popularity since its adoption by such eminent local and agricultural historians as W G Hoskins and Joan Thirsk. 'Peasant' has now become a useful term, in F M L Thompson's words, of 'analytical simplicity', and in discussing country dwellers, Dennis Mills has recently asked rhetorically, 'what else can we call them but peasants?'¹³

It is not difficult to justify the use of 'peasant' in an English context given the broad base of recent anthropological definitions of the term. In studying peasant societies, Eric Wolf has seen his brief to be with 'those large segments of mankind which stand midway between the primitive tribe and industrial society'.¹⁴ Daniel Thorner's historical definition of peasant societies encompasses five criteria which are sufficiently broad to include almost the whole of rural society.¹⁵ Most recently,

E Le Roy Ladurie, in a general survey of European peasantries, has used the term more or less interchangeably with rural society/civilization: for him the peasantry was 'a distinctive group of men tied to the land, growing crops and raising stock, whether to sell their produce on the market, or, more commonly, to consume it themselves or to barter it'. His only real distinction is between the day labourer and the yeoman farmer.¹⁶ Thus 'peasant' is largely being used in the common sense meaning of a countryman, and as such there can be no obvious objection to its use in an English context: after all, the French word 'paysan', which is often translated peasant, in fact means countryman. On the other hand it is not clear how the large numbers of countryside dual occupationalists in England fit into this scenario.

Clearly it is valid to ask what historians have meant in using 'peasant'. Two pre-first world war writers, Gilbert Slater and W Hasbach, used the term to supplement yeoman in their discussion of English agrarian society. Hasbach, a German, considered the peasantry to be small freeholders, copyholders and farmers, with the yeomen as the natural leaders of the peasantry. This idea is still current among some commentators; it can be found, for example, in Wolf's analysis of peasant societies.¹⁷ In the 1930s the Russian historian Lavrovsky used 'peasant' as a convenient short-hand term for small estates. He divided peasants on the basis of landholdings into big (50-100 acres), medium (25-50 acres) and small (under 25 acres). More recently, Hoskins has defined a peasant village as one without a lord, or manorial

¹² H L Gray, 'Yeoman Farming in Oxfordshire from the Sixteenth Century to the Nineteenth', *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, XXIV, 1910, pp 293-326. Campbell, *op cit*. Thirsk (ed), *Agrarian History*, pp 301-6. G E Mingay, *Enclosure and the Small Farmer in the Age of the Industrial Revolution*, 1968, p 10. H J Habakkuk, 'La disparition du paysan anglais', *Annales*, 20, 1965, p 659. Clapham, *op cit*, pp 102, 103.

¹³ W G Hoskins, *The Midland Peasant*, 1957. Joan Thirsk, *English Peasant Farming*, 1957. F M L Thompson, 'A Terminological Confusion Confounded', *Econ Hist Rev*, 2nd ser, XXIX, 1976, p 311. Mills, *op cit*, p 16.

¹⁴ Eric Wolf, *Peasants*, New Jersey, 1966, pp vii et seq. In a paper such as this it is clearly not possible to examine in any detail modern anthropological definitions of peasant societies. In general, anthropologists emphasize that the peasant is both *chef de famille* and *chef d'entreprise*, that he is integrated into the state/market economy as well as having a subsistence element in his activity, and that he is determined to maintain the family and its holding rather than to optimize his economic return. The best recent discussions are to be found in Wolf's book, and in S H Franklin, *The European Peasantry: the final phase*, 1969. I should like to thank Dr Philip Wheeler for advice on this point.

¹⁵ Daniel Thorner, 'Peasant Economy as a Category in Economic History', in T Shanin (ed), *Peasants and Peasant Societies*, Harmondsworth, 1971, pp 203-8.

¹⁶ E Le Roy Ladurie, 'Peasants', in P Burke (ed), *New Cambridge Modern History*, XIII, Cambridge, 1979, pp 115-63.

¹⁷ Gilbert Slater, *The English Peasantry and the Enclosure of Common Fields*, 1907, pp 4, 265. W Hasbach, *History of the English Agricultural Labourer*, 1908, pp 89, 107. Wolf, *op cit*, p 16. The term was also used by Betsy Sampson, 'The British Peasant 1770-1820 As Reflected in Our Literature', University of London MA thesis, 1921, in the context of the labouring classes and the poor. However, she quotes only one contemporary passage using the term.

organization, but within a self-contained society. The peasant farmers were those with 'five to thirty acres of land or cottage freeholders', with an upper limit of 60 or 100 acres.¹⁸ Thirsk's definition has been somewhat similar; peasants had family-sized farms with an upper limit, at least for the corn-cattle farm, of seventy acres.¹⁹ Thompson has used 'peasantry' for men with properties between one and 100 acres in 1873, and around 50 acres in the later seventeenth century.²⁰ Other historians have produced definitions which range beyond mere size of holding. For G R Quaife, writing of seventeenth-century Somerset, the 'peasant' world was that of the lesser yeomen, husbandmen, labourers, small shopkeepers, tradesmen, artisans, craftsmen, paupers and vagrants. In seventeenth-century Lancashire, according to N N Foster, the peasantry consisted of a mixture of day labourers, poor husbandmen, merchants and retailers, copyholders and artificers such as shoemakers, carpenters, brickmakers, bricklayers and masons. Dennis Mills has included amongst his peasants 'all kinds of small entrepreneurs, tradesmen, craftsmen and perhaps small factory owners'.²¹ Such wide scope for the one word seems to offend even the more liberal of modern anthropological definitions, although in the absence of a precise

definition individual writers are clearly entitled to produce their own.

Nonetheless, such broad usage seems scarcely acceptable to medieval historians, partly on the grounds that the word 'peasant' is inappropriate in an English context, and partly because if such a group existed in England it had disappeared by the later middle ages. They have tended therefore to question the use of 'peasant' in an early modern or modern sense. K B McFarlane referred to the 'so-called peasantry', and M W Beresford has asked 'what was a peasant?' Alan Macfarlane has suggested that peasants, as such, had disappeared from English society by the thirteenth century, and that even up until that time they were not called peasants.²² Other medievalists have not been so dismissive, regarding 'peasants' as people of an inferior status and legal disability (villeins) with a number of identifiable characteristics. According to M M Postan these included attitude to the family landholdings, relative self-sufficiency, and provision from within the family unit of most if not all of the labour required for cultivation. R H Hilton has suggested five 'essential characteristics' relating to the means of agricultural production, the use of family labour, and the community in which peasants live.²³ However, used in this way, Medievalists would generally agree that peasants had disappeared from English society by the later middle ages, and perhaps even earlier. They would also balk at the idea of a peasant landholding extending up to 100 acres.

Recognizing this apparent anomaly whereby the same word is used to describe different social groups at different periods, at least one historian has sought to make a

¹⁸ See Christopher Hill's review of V M Lavrovsky, *Parliamentary Enclosure of the Common Fields in England at the end of the Eighteenth and beginning of the Nineteenth Century*, Moscow-Leningrad, 1940, *Econ Hist Rev*, XII, 1942, p 93. Hoskins, *op cit*, pp 215, 219, 244. Hoskins does not appear to be entirely consistent, referring on p 215 to the upper limit of the peasant farm as 100 acres, and then on p 244 taking 'the limit of the "peasant" holdings at 60 acres'.

¹⁹ Joan Thirsk, 'The Disappearance of the English Peasantry', unpublished paper read to the University of London Centre of International and Area Studies Peasant Seminar, March 1974, and cited with permission. Elsewhere Dr Thirsk has written that the term peasant 'has to be used loosely in English conditions. I mean by "peasant" an occupier of land for agricultural purposes who does not claim the title of gentleman, or rank as a landlord . . . a peasant economy involves all classes of land cultivators, except gentry/landlords': 'The Peasant Economy of England in the Seventeenth Century', *Studia Historiae Economicae*, X, 1975, pp 5, 7.

²⁰ Thompson, *loc cit*, p 312.

²¹ G R Quaife, *Wanton Wenches and Wayward Wives*, 1979, p 13. N N Foster, 'The Peasantry and the Aristocracy', University of Manchester, MA thesis, 1977, p 11. D R Mills, 'The Peasant Tradition', *The Local Historian*, 11, 1974, p 201.

²² K B McFarlane, *The Nobility of Later Medieval England*, Oxford, 1973, p 215. M W Beresford in a review of Hoskins, *Midland Peasant*, *Econ Hist Rev*, 2nd ser, XI, 1958-9, p 157. Macfarlane, *op cit*.

²³ M M Postan, *Essays on Medieval Agriculture and General Problems of the Medieval Economy*, Cambridge, 1973, pp 279-80; 'England', in M M Postan (ed), *Cambridge Economic History of Europe*, I, 2nd edn, Cambridge, 1966, p 620. R H Hilton, *The English Peasantry in the Later Middle Ages*, Oxford, 1975, p 13.

qualitative distinction between the medieval peasant and the later yeomen. Cicely Howell has suggested that 'perhaps the Medieval holding with its culture could be termed "peasant" while the seventeenth-century holding with its qualitatively higher standard of living could be called a "small-holding" or "commercial family farm"'.²⁴ Yet few historians have seriously posed the question of whether or not 'peasant' should be used at all given its historic meaning in an English context. If anything, it has tended to be used because it has no history, but this is a mistake.²⁵ The word has a long pedigree in English which reveals that its normal usage has been rather different from that to which historians have recently been applying it.

II

'Peasant', according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, refers properly only to foreign countries in its earliest use in English, and it is certainly rare to find it before the sixteenth century. Hilton has located a chance reference from 1313, but it does not occur in Chaucer's vocabulary, and even the famous 'Peasants' Revolt' was referred to by the chronicler as a 'rustic' rather than a 'peasant' tragedy.²⁶ The word began to appear regularly in English literary sources during the sixteenth century, generally as a term of abuse denoting low character, simplicity and rusticity. A 1550s source referred to 'France, where the peasantry is of no value', and in the *Discourse of the Common Weal* a discussion as to 'whether men at armes were as necessary here as in Fraunce', concluded that 'the stomakes of Englishmen would never beare that, to suffer such injurie and reproaches, as I know such a use to doe to the subjectes of France, in reproache of whom we call them

peasaintes'.²⁷ From its earliest employment the word was almost exclusively associated with labourers. Bacon, in an oft quoted phrase, mentioned 'the yeomanry or middle people, of a condition between gentlemen and cottagers or peasants'.²⁸ Shakespeare also used the word in a detrimental sense. 'Peasant' occurs twenty-nine times in his plays, usually coupled with words such as servant, dull, vulgar, worthless, base, slave, rogue and low. Edgar, disguised as a madman in *King Lear*, is called a 'bold peasant' when he emerges to defend his helpless father Gloucester against the assailant Oswald. In *Henry VI Part 2* Jack Cade's army is described as 'a ragged multitude / Of hinds and peasants, rude and merciless'. The sense of ignorance is also conveyed in *As You Like It*, when Orlando tells Oliver, 'My father charged you in his will to give me good education: you have trained me like a peasant, obscuring and hiding from me all gentleman-like qualities'.²⁹ A similar attitude is found in Spenser: 'He holdeth himself a gentleman, and scorneth to work, which, he saith, is the life of a peasant or churl'.³⁰

Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century writers also used the word to describe those at the bottom of the social ladder. H Peacham, in *The Compleat Gentleman*, 1627, inveighed against 'every undeserving and base Peasant aiming at Nobility', and in *Anatomy of Melancholy*, 1651, R Burton argued that although 'pesants' might ascend the social scale, their 'innate rusticity can hardly be shaken off'.³¹ Charles Cotton, in

²⁴ Cicely Howell, 'Stability and Change, 1307-1700: the Socio-Economic Context of the Self-perpetuating Family Farm in England', *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 2, 1975, p. 470. See also Macfarlane, *op cit*, p. 34.

²⁵ See Alan Macfarlane, *The Justice and the Mare's Ale*, Oxford, 1981, p. 199.

²⁶ Hilton, *English Peasantry*, p. 3. E B Fryde, *The Great Revolt of 1381*, Historical Association Pamphlet, 1980, p. 9.

²⁷ Quoted in Gilbert Burnet, *History of the Reformation*, 1681, II, p. 70. Elizabeth Lamond (ed), *A Discourse of the Common Weal of this Realm of England*, 1893, p. 94.

²⁸ J Spedding, R L Ellis and D D Heath (eds), *The Works of Francis Bacon*, 1861, VI, p. 95.

²⁹ *King Lear*, Act 4, Scene 6, line 236. *Henry VI Part 2*, Act 4, Scene 4, line 33. *As You Like It*, Act 1, Scene 1, line 68.

³⁰ Quoted in Johnson's *Dictionary*, 1755. 'Churl' according to the OED referred to a man without rank, a serf or bondman, countryman, peasant, rustic, boor. Like peasant it was a term of disparagement or contempt.

³¹ Peacham and Burton are quoted in A Smythe-Palmer, *The Ideal of a Gentleman*, London, 1928, pp. 15-16, 192.

The Wonders of the Peak, 1681, wrote of Poole's Hole, where:

Propt round with Peasants on you trembling go
Whilst, every step you take, your Guides do show
In the uneven Rock the uncouth shapes
Of Men, of Lions, Horses, Dogs and Apes.³²

Nicholas Rowe referred in *Tamartene*, 1702, to 'the peasant-hind, begot and born to slavery', and in *The Tender Husband*, 1705, Richard Steele had Biddy reject her aunt's claim that Humphrey would be a good husband because he was true and hearty, with the response 'what a peasant-like amour do these words import'. In *Trivia*, 1716, John Gay commented about London, 'here oft the peasant, with inquiring face, / Bewilder'd trudges on from place to place'.³³ John Locke wrote of the French peasant being under much greater pressure of want and poverty, than, by comparison, the *day-labourers* of England; Johnson defined a peasant as 'one whose business is rural labour'; Richardson had Anna Howe in *Clarissa* despise all men 'from the gentleman down to the peasant'; Darvell wrote that 'peasantry is a disease (like the plague) easily caught'; and Goldsmith made it clear in the *Vicar of Wakefield* that 'the peasant must be disposed to labour'.³⁴

Similar sentiments also appeared in nineteenth-century literature. Cobbett wrote that 'the labouring classes . . . are called, now-a-days, by these gentlemen, "the peasantry"'. This is a new term as applied to Englishmen.³⁵ Richard Elsam's *Hints for Improving the Condition of the Peasantry*, 1816, consisted of a number of designs for cottages drawn up on the principle that 'peasants cottages are the habitations of rural labourers'. William Marshall was so surprised when he came

across a reference, in the report to the Board of Agriculture on Leicestershire, to 'a numerous and able-bodied peasantry' that he underlined the word and commented that it was a translation from the Russian!³⁶ David Low distinguished farmers from peasants who merely enjoyed the means of subsistence.³⁷ In a passage of *Coningsby*, 1844, Disraeli had Lord Henry Sydney say that 'I describ'd it as a petition of the nobility, clergy, gentry, yeomanry and peasantry of the county of _____: and, could you believe it, they struck out *peasantry* as a word no longer used, and inserted labourers.' Lord Everingham replied, 'what can it signify whether a man be called a labourer or a peasant'.³⁸ Writing in 1846, G W Perry argued that the peasantry had become detached from the land during the French wars:

a very considerable number of the peasantry possessed little fields of freehold or copyhold land, varying from half an acre to seven or eight acres in extent. Some of these practiced dairy husbandry, and some kept horses for the purpose of doing job-work. But this class of persons has long ceased to exist, except in a few solitary instances.³⁹

F G Heath made the analogy between peasant and labourer in two books on the English 'peasantry'. He argued the need to create conditions in which a well-paid peasantry would aspire first to rent small parcels of land, then perhaps to become large farmers, and 'he might, in some cases, ultimately become a landed proprietor'.⁴⁰ For R Heath, writing in 1893, a description of peasant life in Dorset meant in effect the Dorset labourer, while Hasbach, Collings in

³² Charles Cotton, *The Wonders of the Peak*, 1681.

³³ *Tamartene*, Act 4, Scene 2. C Winton (ed), *The Tender Husband*, Act 2, Scene 1, lines 23-30. John Gay, *Trivia*, 1716, lines 77-8.

³⁴ For Locke and Johnson, Johnson's Dictionary. Samuel Richardson, *Clarissa*, Everyman edn, 1962, I, p 269. Darvell is quoted in Roy Porter, *English Society in the Eighteenth Century*, Harmondsworth, 1982, p 44. O Goldsmith, *The Vicar of Wakefield*, Signet edn, 1961, p 170.

³⁵ William Cobbett, *Taking Leave*, 1817, quoted in OED.

³⁶ William Marshall, *Review and Abstract of the County Reports to the Board of Agriculture*, York, 1818, IV, p 215. Marshall criticized the use of the term 'peasantry' to describe country people on the grounds that this 'hateful, because injuriously humiliating, appellation' should be confined to 'the live stock in human shape, — in Russia, and in other nations of demi-slaves': Pamela Horn, *William Marshall (1745-1818) and the Georgian Countryside*, Abingdon, 1982, p 42.

³⁷ David Low, *Observations on the Present State of Landed Property*, Edinburgh, 1823, p 93.

³⁸ B Disraeli, *Coningsby*, 1927 edn, p 143.

³⁹ G W Perry, *The Peasantry of England*, 1846, p 19.

⁴⁰ F G Heath, *The English Peasantry*, 1874, p 271; *Peasant Life in the West of England*, 3rd edn, 1880.

1908 and Robertson Scott as late as 1926, all saw a peasant as an agricultural labourer.⁴¹

Overall, sufficient evidence survives to suggest that whilst 'peasant' may not have been widely used in contemporary England, it had a steady currency from the sixteenth century, often connected with ignorance and stupidity, and firmly associated with the labouring classes, particularly the rural labour force. Of itself, this must raise some doubts about the validity of using the word as some historians have recently been doing.

III

To complicate the matter further it is clear that during the eighteenth century the word also came to be used in a new way, acquiring overtones associated with the romantic movement, general beliefs about depopulation as the result of parliamentary enclosure, and fears that rural values and virtues were being destroyed by the introduction of materialistic city values into the countryside. One of the earliest examples of this development can be seen in Samuel Richardson's novel *Pamela*, 1740. The heroine writes to her humble parents of how at the last judgement 'the honest peasant will stand fairer in our esteem than the guilty peer'.⁴² But it was the Picturesque movement of the second half of the eighteenth century, with its much greater appreciation of the countryside, which can really be held responsible for giving the word new overtones. Writers visualized a past society, in which great stress was laid on the humble members of the community, the peasantry.

This romantic notion is clear in the work of Goldsmith, who despaired about the future. In *The Deserted Village*, 1770, he wrote of his fears that the 'mournful peasant' was sinking: 'But a bold peasantry their

country's pride, / When once destroyed can never be supplied'.⁴³ Further evidence of this romanticized notion of the word can be found in the 1780s. A pamphlet supposedly written by a member of the Society for Constitutional Information and published in 1782 took the form of a dialogue between a peasant and a scholar. The peasant described himself as a humble man with nothing in the world, 'but my cattle, implements of husbandry, and household goods, together with my farm, for which I pay a fixed rent to the squire'. Clearly he was rather more than an agricultural labourer, even if he was depicted as a country rustic, supposedly ignorant on all political matters. The scholar's task was to bring him to recognize the necessity of resisting the arbitrary nature of kingship which is inherently likely when Parliament is not voted for by the majority of the populace. Similarly, a play written in 1784 stressed the virtues of the innocent rural life and values, describing how Sir Eglamore, a valiant knight, when confronted by a wolf chose to hide up a tree, only to be rescued by a 'surly, sturdy, dauntless Swain . . . This Peasant did his [i.e. the wolf's] ribs so roast, That Mr Wolf gave up the ghost.' The knight then plucked up courage and cut off the wolf's head.⁴⁴ Thomas Bewick's *Memoirs of a Northumberland common* in the 1780s, written in the 1820s, recalled the 'cottage, or rather hovel, of some labouring man, built at his own expense, and mostly with his own hands. . . . These various concerns excited the attention and industry of the hardy occupants which enabled them to prosper, and made them despise being ever numbered with the parish poor.' To summarize his view of the community Bewick quoted Goldsmith's nostalgic lines on the lost peasantry.⁴⁵ Finally, a poem

⁴¹ R. Heath, *The English Peasant*, London, 1893, pp v-vi, 121. Hasbach, *English Agricultural Labourer*. Jesse Collings, *Land Reform, Occupying Ownership, Peasant Proprietary and Rural Education*, London, 1908. J. W. Robertson Scott, *The Dying Peasant*, London, 1926, p. viii.

⁴² S. Richardson, *Pamela*, Everyman edn, 1914, II, p. 14. For an even earlier example of the same type of thinking see *The Spectator*, no 174, 19 Sept 1711.

⁴³ Oliver Goldsmith, *The Deserted Village*, 1770, LL 55-6, 300-1.

⁴⁴ *The Principles of Government, in a Dialogue between a Scholar and a Peasant*, by a Member of the Society for Constitutional Information, 1782. *Songs, Duets, Glees, Chonises &c in the Comic Opera of the Noble Peasant*, 1784.

⁴⁵ Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City*, St Albans, 1975, ch 12 and p 125.

published in 1827, supposedly by 'a peasant', illustrated some of the same themes, with its notions of 'daily toil', 'low cottage door', 'my rustic thought', 'rural heart', and 'I am not letter-learned like many men. . . . A peasant like, in peasant dress appear.'⁴⁶ The problem with such 'whining pastoral poets', according to a Scottish farmer writing in 1808, was that by romanticizing the past, they were holding up the forward march of agricultural progress which demanded large farms, equitable leases and high rents.⁴⁷

Arguably the writer who did most to promote this vision of a past society was Wordsworth. Both in his poetry, and in his descriptive writings on the Lake District, he publicized the idea of a hardy Cumbrian 'statesman'. The term, far from being culled from antiquity, as Wordsworth would have had his readers believe, was in fact an eighteenth-century middle-class vulgarization.⁴⁸ It was in his *Guide to the Lakes* that Wordsworth most clearly expounded the idea of a romantic peasant-proprietorial system, still commonly found on the Continent, but lost in England except for the Cumbrian statesmen. Although ostensibly a tourist guidebook, only the first fifty pages

or so of the *Guide* actually described the countryside. Wordsworth then turned to the inhabitants, from the earliest times onwards. He argued that since the Union of England and Scotland in 1603 'this species of feudal population must rapidly have diminished'. The spread of southern customs, the loss of by employment, and the infiltration of tourists and others, together undermined the hardy 'native peasantry'.⁴⁹ For Wordsworth the characteristic mark of this group was its small, self-sufficient family farms, in the occupation of a single family for several hundred years, with no one family superior to any other in the community.

The impact of Wordsworth's argument was considerable, both because it increased the curiosity of travellers, and also because it coincided with calls for a restored 'peasant proprietorship', a movement associated with land reform. In his *Hints to Gentlemen of Landed Property*, 1775, Nathaniel Kent, later to become a highly successful land surveyor, recommended that every cottage should have half an acre of land so that a tenant could grow fruit and vegetables and keep a pig. Better-off cottagers might have three acres of pasture to keep a pig and graze a cow. Such views were developed in the 1780s and 1790s when William Ogilvie, Tom Paine and Thomas Spence, among others, began attacking the landowners' monopoly of the soil. Ogilvie wanted land letting out to small farmers on favourable terms, and Spence advocated public ownership of all land. Spence continued to hammer home his programme until his death in 1814, and the cause was continued in the immediate post-war years by Robert Owen. William Cobbett helped to maintain the legend of lost rights which lay behind this movement.⁵⁰

By no means everyone agreed with this view, and in any case the movement lost

⁴⁶ *Falsehood Exposed; or, the Reprover Reproved*, by a Peasant, Cheltenham, 1827.

⁴⁷ *An Immediate and Effectual Mode, of Raising the Rental of Landed Property in England*, by a Scotch Farmer now Farming in Middlesex, 1808, p. 83. Perry, *op cit*, was of the opinion that the demand for large farms during the Napoleonic wars had been a major reason for the detachment of the peasantry from the land. It is interesting that the poet John Clare, an agricultural labourer, was described in his first volume of poetry as 'a Northamptonshire Peasant'. In this context Roger Sales has commented: 'an agricultural labourer belongs to the brazen new world of agrarian capitalism, whereas a peasant, especially in early nineteenth-century England, tends to inhabit another country constructed by the pastoral imagination': 'The Politics of Pastoral', in K Parkinson and M Priestman (eds), *Peasants and Countrymen in Literature*, 1982, p. 91. The argument that peasant proprietors were detrimental to agricultural progress was sustained throughout the nineteenth century. Thus W Bench Jones, writing in 1882: 'There is no reason to listen to the talk of men whose agricultural knowledge would hardly enable them to distinguish a bull from a cow, who urge peasant proprietors and like plans as a remedy for our troubles. . . . I have never seen a single line written by any one having knowledge of farming who advocates peasant proprietors, and does not treat the plan as impossible': 'Landowning as a Business', *The Nineteenth Century*, XI, 1882, pp. 364-5.

⁴⁸ J D Marshall, 'Statesmen' in Cumbria: the Vicissitudes of an expression', *Transactions of the Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society*, 2nd ser. (CW2) LXXII, 1972, pp. 248-73.

⁴⁹ William Wordsworth, *Guide to the Lakes*, 5th edn, 1835, reprinted Oxford, 1970, p. 90.

⁵⁰ N. Kent, *Hints to Gentlemen of Landed Property*, 1775, pp. 228ff. G E Mingay, *English Landed Society in the Eighteenth Century*, 1963, p. 267. David Martin, 'Land Reform', in Patricia Hollis (ed), *Pressure from Without in early Victorian England*, 1974, pp. 131-58.

steam during the Napoleonic war years and the ensuing agricultural depression. However, just as Wordsworth's *Guide*, which first appeared anonymously in 1810, was reaching the height of its popularity in its best-known form, the fifth edition, 1835, came the Chartist land plan of the 1840s. This scheme, introduced by Feargus O'Connor in 1843 after the failure of the second national petition, was designed to re-create the virtues of a primitive life by placing men in two-, three- or four-acre plots. It was described by the *Economist* as 'a reasonable experiment upon a small scale, of the establishment of a peasant proprietary in England'. Allottees were required to pay the equivalent of an interest of 5 per cent on the cost of their allotment, house and capital loan of £7 10s. The money raised was to be used to buy more land. Sales were permitted despite some objections that land bought with public funds ought not to be disposed of privately.⁵¹ Ultimately it failed, but the Chartist plan gave a considerable boost to the land reform movement. In part, this was a consequence of the widely held belief that in England land was inequitably distributed, and in particular that there was no 'class' of peasant proprietors of the type common on the Continent. Since it was at root a nostalgic movement much was made of surviving English 'peasants' upon whom the model of peasant proprietary could be based. John Stuart Mill admitted in his *Principles of Political Economy*, 1848, that his support for such a system was partly based on his reading of Wordsworth's description of the Cumbrian statesmen, the one place in England 'where peasant proprietors are still common'.⁵²

Mill may have been impressed, but by the standards of twentieth-century Medieval historians the Cumbrian yeomen bore little relationship to the 'peasant proprietors' he

imagined; indeed, they scarcely conformed to the picture drawn by Wordsworth, which had been so influential. In the *Guide* Wordsworth touched upon several of the features which have come to be regarded by historians as amongst the more important characteristics of peasant society. Thus, he pictured an idyllic society in which 'many of these humble sons of the hills' walked over and tilled the land which had 'for more than five hundred years been possessed by men of their name and blood'.⁵³ Ostensibly, therefore, Cumbria fitted the conception of peasant land as family land, 'not merely a factor of production to be acquired and got rid of in obedience to his calculations of profitability, but an end in itself'.⁵⁴ In practice, however, this was not the case. To cite just a few of many examples, in the village of Irton, estates seldom stayed in the same family for more than two or three generations; of the thirty names of Aspatria tenants in 1578 only four occurred among the farmers listed in the 1829 *Directory*; and in Kirkby Lonsdale between 1642 and 1800 'there was hardly a farm owned by the same family throughout the period'.⁵⁵

Wordsworth also characterized Cumbria as having a classical subsistence economy. In his eyes sufficient corn was grown on each estate to satisfy the needs of each family, and no more, and each family spun from its own flock the wool which it needed for clothing.⁵⁶ This again appears to be typical

⁵¹ Wordsworth, *op cit*, p 68. In fairness, Wordsworth's views were hardly original. An earlier author had claimed that Cumbrian yeomen enjoyed 'exactly the same property which [their] lineal ancestors possessed in the reign of Edward the Confessor': R Warner, *A Tour Through the Northern Counties of England*, 1802, II, p 104.

⁵² Postan, *Essays on Medieval Agriculture*, pp 279-80. Cicely Howell, 'Peasant Inheritance Customs in the Midlands, 1280-1700', in J Goody, J Thirsk and E P Thompson (eds), *Family and Inheritance*, 1976, pp 113-14. Macfarlane, *Origins*, pp 18, 23. Compare Wordsworth, *op cit*, p 146, 'The degree and kind of attachment which many of the yeomanry feel to their small inheritances can scarcely be overrated.'

⁵³ C Moor, 'The Old Statesmen Families of Irton, Cumberland', *CW2*, X, 1910, p 195. G P Jones, 'Continuity and Change in surnames in four northern parishes', *CW2*, LXXII, 1973, pp 143-7; 'The Decline of the Yeomanry in the Lake Counties', *CW2*, LXII, 1962, p 209. Macfarlane, *Origins*, p 173.

⁵⁶ Wordsworth, *op cit*, pp 59-60.

⁵¹ A M Hadfield, *The Chartist Land Company*, 1970. W H G Armytage, 'The Chartist Land Colonies, 1846-1848', *Agricultural History*, 32, 1958, pp 87-96. Joy MacAskill, 'The Chartist Land Plan', in A Briggs, *Chartist Studies*, 1959, pp 304-41.

⁵² J S Mill, *Principles of Political Economy*, 1920 edn, pp 256-7.

of peasant societies: 'a typical peasant would consume all or most of his output within his own household'.⁵⁷ The size of holdings suggests that some yeomen can have been no more than subsistence farmers, but most were firmly market orientated, especially when the profits to be made from pasturing Scottish cattle heading south became apparent. Marshall has concluded that 'even the very modestly placed yeoman had a chance of forming a surplus of grain for sale'.⁵⁸ Nor is it easy to substantiate Wordsworth's conception of the local community as a 'pure Commonwealth... a perfect Republic of Shepherds and agriculturalists'.⁵⁹ This may have been a characteristic of peasant societies, but eighteenth-century Cumbria witnessed a deliberate search for status. Thus the more prosperous yeomen began to imitate the habits of the gentry, entailing their estates, giving portions to their daughters, and providing jointures for their wives. Many began to use the style 'Mr' as a sort of half-way house between yeoman and gentleman, until by the early nineteenth century the better-off were freely adopting the latter term and cultivating the leisured life-style of the true gentry.⁶⁰

Despite the efforts of Wordsworth, Cumbria was not a classic peasant society. Further evidence could be marshalled to show that landholdings were generally too large, even if many yeomen did have relatively small acreages. The absence of partible inheritance and the activity of the land market suggest a society which was not limited by the ties characteristic of European

peasants. The economic differentiation within the community was being enforced by the eighteenth century through growing social diffusion as superior members of the group sought to mark themselves off from lesser brethren. By the early nineteenth century Wordsworth's 'pure Commonwealth' was a figment of his vivid imagination.⁶¹ At the same time, it must be acknowledged that other writers also saw a link between the English yeomanry and Continental peasants. Marx referred to 'the yeomanry as an independent peasantry', and John Rae perhaps came closest to expressing a contemporary viewpoint when writing in the 1880s: 'the old yeomanry of England... were in reality when we come to see them at home in the last century, exactly the toiling, thrifty, humble, yet proudly contented beings that we now either pity or admire, or both, in the peasantry of France'.⁶² Modern research would suggest that this was an oversimplification.⁶³

IV

The evidence presented here suggests that the word 'peasant' is incorrectly used when treated as a catch-all for rural society, and that the nineteenth-century 'peasant proprietor' movement was a romantic notion copying ideas imported from the Continent about a group which, if it had previously existed in England, had not done so for a very long period. However, some historians do not accept that England was altogether different from the Continent, except insofar as the movement towards a landlord/tenant situation took place more rapidly. The critical point may hinge less on a distinction between Britain and Europe, and more on one between medieval and modern conditions in England. It can be argued that

⁵⁷ Postan, *Essays on Medieval Agriculture*, p. 279.

⁵⁸ J D Marshall, 'The Domestic Economy of the Lakeland Yeoman, 1660-1749', *CW2*, LXXIII, 1973, pp. 192-206, 212.

⁵⁹ Wordsworth, *Guide*, p. 67. Such views have continued to be repeated even in the twentieth century. S H Scott, for example, wrote of Troutbeck in Westmorland, where 'instead of the land being occupied by two or three squires and subservient tenantry, this single township has contained some fifty statesmen families, which have held the same land from generation to generation with the pride of territorial aristocracy': *A Westmorland Village*, Westminster, 1904, pp. 20-1.

⁶⁰ Carlisle Record Office, D/Lons/W Sir James Lowther to John Spedding, 22 Feb 1729, 27 Mar 1744; Spedding to Lowther, 25 June 1732: D/Ha/11. Marshall, 'Domestic Economy', p. 214.

⁶¹ Literary critics have recognized that Wordsworth's pastoral was political propaganda rather than the 'faithful copies from nature' he would have had his readers believe; Sales, *loc cit*, pp. 94-8.

⁶² K Marx, *Capital*, Vol 2, Everyman edn, 1930, p. 800. John Rae, 'Why Have the Yeomanry Perished', *Contemporary Review*, 44, 1883, p. 565.

⁶³ Macfarlane, *Origins*.

'peasant' is applicable to Medieval England because the basic characteristics were similar in that period to those found for western European peasants, with overtones of socio-legal disabilities, including villein status. Logically, these characteristics would seem to make the term inapplicable to the post-Medieval period when circumstances and conditions had radically altered. After all, in both its Medieval context, and also in its nineteenth-century peasant proprietorship usage, the word related primarily to very small landholdings, often not exceeding two, three or four acres. This calls into question its twentieth-century usage for holdings of up to 100 acres, except when employed as a generalization for rural society. Possibly Professor Everitt's use of 'peasant labourers' in discussing farm labourers is a modern definition most nearly applicable to the word's historical meaning, although few true 'peasants' would have been wealthy enough to leave inventories.⁶⁴ Even if it is accepted that the difference between England and western Europe has been exaggerated, the distinction between

modern and medieval usages ought perhaps to be recognized terminologically.

Overall, the question raised here produces an answer which itself amounts to a fascinating paradox: contemporaries understood and freely used the word yeoman, which historians have begun to reject on the grounds of imprecision; historians are increasingly using 'peasant' as an alternative for 'rural' society, even though contemporaries would have objected to a label which categorized them all with the lowest elements of that society. To contemporaries a yeoman and a peasant were not the same thing; a peasant was an inferior person with at best only a tiny landholding, whereas a yeoman was close to being a gentleman. 'Peasant' only came into common usage when romantic writers glorified the position of the lowest members of society. In a movement of pure nostalgia it became fashionable to praise the merits of a society in which each individual owned and worked a smallholding to support his family. Even whilst this vision was being developed, however, the use of peasant as an alternative term for agricultural labourer remained current. Thus, it can be suggested that when historians use 'peasant' as a descriptive term for rural society in general, they are using it in an unhistorical way. On the other hand, what are the alternatives?

⁶⁴ A. Everitt, 'Farm Labourers', in Thirsk (ed), *Agrarian History*, pp 396-465. An example of how the word is used unhistorically can be seen in Roger Wells's article, 'The Development of the English Rural Proletariat and Social Protest, 1700-1850', *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 6, 1979, pp 115-39. He distinguishes between a peasant as a subsistence or neo-subsistence farmer, and a landless agricultural labourer. Contemporaries would probably have seen the landless agricultural labourer as the peasant.