

Peasants, Servants and Labourers: The Marginal Workforce in British Agriculture, c 1870–1914

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Abstract

This essay is essentially a 'polemic' concerned to look critically at who literally worked the land of Britain in the nineteenth century. Looking at England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales it argues that small family producers — that is peasants — make up a far larger part of the agricultural workforce than has previously been argued. This is true both of their work on their own holdings and of their work as migrants. Similarly it is argued that farm servants form a much more important part of the total British agricultural labour force than most work would suggest. Taken together throughout Britain these two groups are actually larger than the supposedly 'normal' landless farm labourer.

THIS essay is work-in-progress, or perhaps more accurately, work beginning. Its purpose is to provoke thought and argument rather than to provide a carefully worked out and completed narrative or analysis. It begins from an unease on my part, after some twenty or more years working on the history of the rural poor, with the all too easily used descriptions of the 'farm labourer', especially the description of him or her as a 'rural proletariat'. This essay's premise is simple — that for most of the nineteenth century there were groups of workers in agriculture who stood outside the conventional tri-partite model which divides rural society into landlords (who owned the land), tenant farmers (who 'managed' the land) and landless labourers (who worked the land). Taking my title, these groups of workers were marginal in the sense that

they were at the edges of the three 'classes' of rural society, almost entirely on the line between farmer and labourer. However, they were not marginal in the sense of being unimportant; rather they were a central part of the farm workforce. As Shanin says of them in a different context, 'analytical marginality does not imply numerical insignificance or particular instability'.² This was centrally the case if we recognize the regional diversity of English agriculture and even clearer if we think for once of 'British' agriculture and that Britain, for the whole of the nineteenth century, 'included' Wales Scotland and Ireland, as well as various smaller off shore islands.

In a direct sense much of what follows grows out of a colloquium held in Barcelona in 1991: 'Crisis agrària i canvi social a Europa: 1880–1913'. During the papers given there I was struck by work on the response to what we in Britain call the 'Great Depression', especially work on the Spanish experience, which centred around arguments about the peasant labour contract and its modification under economic pressures. These questions have never

¹ I would like to thank Keith Snell and Jeanette Neeson for comments on an earlier version of this paper and for comments at the British Agricultural History Society meeting in December 1991, where it first saw daylight, at the Conference in Rome organized by the Istituto Alcide Cervi in October 1992, and at the Economic History Seminar in Helsinki in September 1993. Prior to publication it was read by an anonymous reader and by Stephen Caunce. My thanks to both of them for sharp and useful comments. Finally, I would like to thank Mick Reed. A pioneer in this field and one of my graduate students he was lost to this work because of education cuts. Although he does not know it he stands behind it all. In the end though, as always, mine is the final responsibility.

² Teodor Shanin, ed, *Peasants and Peasant Societies. Selected Readings*, Harmondsworth, 2nd ed, 1988, p 5.

really been addressed in a 'national' British context because such arrangements are not supposed to exist. However, by looking at these forms in detail I was struck by their similarity to many found in Britain. This opened new, and suggestive, ways at looking at what is seen in Britain as a straightforward wage relationship. I want to begin by looking briefly at the ways in which that wage relationship is presented historically concentrating on a 'straw man' called the 'nineteenth-century farm labourer'.

He (and it is almost inevitably he) began the nineteenth century as a regionally various creature. In some areas (probably the majority) he relied entirely on cash wages or cash wages supplemented by poor relief. In a few places access to common waste added to these wages. A minority were servants, paid in part in kind, that is in board and lodging, but they were already a residual category restricted to backward areas. There may have been 'peasants', but it is very unlikely, and anyway they weren't really peasants at all compared to the Poles or the French. In the next fifty years these regional patterns gradually vanish, becoming more and more residual so that by the late nineteenth century the British farm worker is male, employed by the week, and for cash wages — what some have called an 'agricultural proletarian'. However, he was an ever docile proletarian (usually) happy in his lot, having more in common with his boss than his fellow workers.³ In this version, the exceptions are either unimportant or increasingly a feature only of 'upland areas' or 'the Celtic fringe'.

I realize this is a parody. There has been a growing sense and awareness since the

1980s of the regional diversity of employment patterns, and of the complexities in terms of social relations that these create. I have relied on several of these studies in what follows. There has also been a loosely radical tradition which saw the labourer as 'oppressed' but far from docile. In this version his sullen, apparent acquiescence in fact hides a radical underground of social crime and even class politics. I think I am part of that tradition in some ways! Yet getting beyond this straw man in any national sense, at least, seems to be difficult. A major reason for this is in the historiography. Despite a lot of excellent 'local' studies the methods and ideas of economic history still dominate much writing about rural England in the last century. This is certainly not always a bad thing, but it does tend to stress the formal production and functional nature of the farm worker — crudely he is a factor of production, along with capital and land, who functions within a set of paradigms defined by ideas like 'yield', 'productivity', 'labour costs' and 'labour markets'. Even Armstrong's study of the farm worker ultimately sees rural social change and the position of the farm worker 'anchored...in agrarian conditions, the impact of industrialisation and associated demographic change'.⁴ If we take this view the actual productive relations of agriculture are only interesting in as far as they relate to these broader economic questions—'is the introduction of machinery really labour cost effective?'; 'what is the role of the worker in increasing grain yields?' and so on. In this it does not necessarily matter if we are talking about a man, a woman, a child, a servant, a peasant or a casual worker.

This is reinforced by economic history's concern with 'growth' and the 'inevitalist' links made between increased grain production and industrialization, which in turn leads to certain sectors being seen as 'typi-

³ The literature is very large on this subject but two important and different studies which take this kind of view are Howard Newby, *The Deferential Worker*, Harmondsworth, 1979 and Alan Armstrong, *Farmworkers: A Social and Economic History, 1770-1950*, 1989. Both it should be said present a more complex picture than this in total.

⁴ Armstrong, *op cit*, pp 251-52

cal' of an 'English model'. Central here, as Robert Allen points out, is the rare unanimity between left and right on an important historical question. Both Marxist and Tory interpretations of agricultural change in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are agreed on the necessity, inevitability and desirability of the English road to 'agricultural modernization'. This involved, as it effects my argument here, the creation of a largely landless labour force initially in the agrarian sector but which (in some versions of the argument at least) then moves into the industrial sector.⁵ Further, as historians like Mutch and Reed have argued, this leads to a disproportionate amount of work being done on the great wheat growing areas of the south and east which are seen as best exemplifying these trends.⁶

Also the Anglo-centrism of much rural history has led to other, or different, productive systems being written out as 'Celtic', or residual, and hence 'untypical' of British growth as a whole. It is therefore possible, as Ian Carter pointed out some years ago, to discuss the progress of 'British' agriculture without mention of Scotland, Ireland or even Wales on many occasions.⁷ This is despite the fact that all the great government reports of the late nineteenth century, which looked at agriculture, included material on these areas. Finally, there is still an all but universal discussion of the workforce as male. This automatically reinforces the 'ideal' type, since women workers were, for a whole variety of reasons, increasingly excluded from

accounts of the full-time workforce from the 1870s onwards.⁸

To look at the question of the farm workforce I want now to return to my title. I have three, albeit crude, categories: 'peasants, servants, and labourers'. I will look at these in turn, in the perspective of 'four nations', and suggest how they fit into an argument which offers a general modification of our notion as to who actually worked the land of these islands in the nineteenth century. At the most basic level I want to question the notion that the main form of farm labour in nineteenth-century Britain was 'agricultural proletarian'. I must stress again that this work is exploratory rather than in any sense definitive and is offered in that spirit.

I

Let us start with the most problematic category — the peasant. The very notion of an English peasantry is a contested one, although this is clearly not the case of Wales, Scotland and Ireland. It has long been suggested by historians that the notion of a peasantry is inappropriate to England after the seventeenth century, while other writers, for instance Alan Macfarlane, have gone further still and argued that England has never had a peasantry in the sense that the group exists on mainland Europe.⁹ However, the work of Reed, Donajkowski, Hall and in a different way Mills suggests that not only does such a group exist but that it should be seen as a

⁵ Robert C Allen, *Enclosure and the Yeoman. The Agricultural Development of the South Midlands 1450-1850*, Oxford, 1992, chapter 1 *passim*.

⁶ Alistair Mutch, *Rural Life in Southwest Lancashire, 1840-1914*, Lancaster, 1988; Mick Reed, 'The peasantry of nineteenth century England: a neglected class?', *History Workshop Journal*, 18, 1984, pp 53-77.

⁷ Ian Carter 'Agricultural workers in the class structure: a critical note', *Sociological Review*, XXII, 1974, pp 271-9 and *idem*, *Farm Life in Northeast Scotland, 1840-1914. A Poor Man's Country*, Edinburgh, 1979.

⁸ See Karen Sayer, '“Girls into Demons”: nineteenth century representations of English working class women employed in agriculture', unpublished PhD thesis, University of Sussex, 1992; Judy Gielgud 'Nineteenth century farm women in Northumberland and Cumberland—the neglected work force', unpublished PhD thesis, University of Sussex, 1992; Edward Higgs, 'Women occupations and work in the nineteenth century censuses', *History Workshop Journal*, 23, 1987, pp 59-80.

⁹ Alan MacFarlane, *The Origins of English Individualism*, Oxford, 1978. See also J V Beckett, 'The peasant in England: a case of terminological confusion?', *Ag Hist Rev*, 32, 1984, pp 113-23. For a recent and excellent discussion of these arguments which presents a very different view and, I think, fits with mine see J M Neeson, *Commoners: Common Right, Enclosure and Social Change in England 1700-1820*, Cambridge, 1993, chapter 10.

separate economic and social formation.¹⁰ This group is located by Reed as those with holdings of less than 100 acres who on the one hand 'do not hire labour, or who do not appropriate surplus value from hired labour', but on the other 'did not rely on selling their labour power, or at least not entirely nor predominantly'. There are problems here straight away. His figure of 100 acres as the defining basis of a unit held by a 'small family producer' seems far too high. In many areas, especially of England, 100 acres could be a substantial holding employing several workers. On the good wheat lands of Norfolk, in the early years of this century for instance, a holding of 102 acres employed three regular workers as well as the farmer, his brother, and two or three casual workers at harvest and hoeing times.¹¹ There were also functional variations depending on, for example, what part of family income was derived solely from the holding, or what stage of the life cycle the family was at.¹² Given these problems 50 acres, although large for Ireland and parts of Wales and Scotland, seems to be a more realistic size of 'peasant' holding for our four nations as a whole. This view was shared by many writers from Arthur Young onwards into the nineteenth century who argued that a holding of that size could support a man and family using family labour. It is also broadly in line with the work of Jeanette Neeson writing on the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.¹³ Robert Allen writing, like Neeson, on the pre-enclosure economy argues for a slightly larger 'upper limit':

¹⁰ Reed, 'The peasantry'; A J Donajrodski, 'Twentieth century rural England: a case for "Peasant Studies"', *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 16, 1989, pp 425-42; Adrian Hall, 'Fenland worker-peasants. The economy of smallholders at Rippingale, Lincolnshire, 1797-1871', *Ag Hist Rev Supplement Series*, 1, 1992; D R Mills, *Lord and Peasant in Nineteenth Century Britain*, 1980.

¹¹ Interview: Alun Howkins/Mr Harold Hicks, Trunch, Norfolk, Oct 1974. Tape in author's possession.

¹² I am grateful to Jeanette Neeson for her emphasis on this point. See also Hall, *art cit*, p 56.

¹³ Neeson, *op cit*, p 306.

While precision is impossible, it can be stated that the labour of women and children allowed larger acreages to be tilled. The upper limit of a farm worked mainly with family labour was probably closer to 60 acres than to 50, while the size at which hired labour surpassed family labour was probably near 75 acres.... [However] allowing for fallow, pasture, and meadow on the English pattern implies that a family farm was about 50 acres.¹⁴

Moving to the early 1900s a similar definition was used by the Smallholdings Act of 1908 where a 'smallholding' was described as an agricultural holding which exceeds 1 acre, and either does not exceed 50 acres, or if exceeding 50 acres, is at the date of sale or letting of an annual value for the purpose of income tax not exceeding £50.¹⁵ It must be stressed however, that this is a guide not a straight jacket — as Shanin puts it we must always remember 'the trivial but often forgotten truth that a sociological generalisation does not imply a claim of homogeneity or an attempt at uniformity'.¹⁶ Even in contiguous areas, for instance the North York Moors and the Vale of York, holdings of similar sizes produced quite different socio-economic structures.¹⁷

Secondly, and here I follow Reed, I am not concerned with ownership of land as a defining category. This again seems to be a specifically 'English' problem arising from arguments about the precise nature of the accumulation of capital in late medieval and early modern England. In contrast in many 'classic' peasant societies, notably Ireland, but also parts of France and Spain, outright ownership of land was (and is) rare. However, it is easy to push this further. Work on contemporary peasant societies often specifically excludes the precise nature of land ownership or tenure from the *general* definitions of a peasantry. Rather it is, in 'the view of a majority of

¹⁴ Allen, *op cit*.

¹⁵ The Right Honourable the Earl Carrington, 'Small holdings' in Prof R Patrick Wright, ed, *The Standard Cyclopedia of Modern Agriculture and Rural Economy*, XII vols, 1911, XI, p 24.

¹⁶ Shanin, *op cit*, p 2.

¹⁷ I am grateful to Stephen Caunce for this point and example.

contemporary analysts who accept peasantry as a valid concept,...the family farm which is the most significant characteristic of the peasantry'.¹⁸

Taking the family farm as briefly described above peasants, in Shanin's sense, are clearly not a group restricted to Scotland, Ireland and Wales but existed in all British counties during the nineteenth century, but the question remains how many and where? We obviously have huge difficulties with national figures, especially before the agricultural returns begin. There are also problems of precise comparability over time, but it still seems likely that we can get some indications from what figures we have even if they are less accurate than we would like. Initially, the 1880 agricultural returns can serve as an indication of the extent of these holdings.¹⁹ In that year 71 per cent of agricultural holdings in England were under 50 acres, which was actually higher than the 'peasant' societies of Wales and Scotland, both of which had 69 per cent of holdings in this category, and remarkably near Ireland, which had 77 per cent of farms under 50 acres. What is equally striking is that there is little real regional variation with small farms 'persisting' even in the most 'advanced' areas of England. In 1880, 66 per cent of all East Anglian holdings (Norfolk, Suffolk, Essex and Cambridgeshire) were under 50 acres, while within that figure Norfolk, the apogee of high farming, had 73 per cent of its holdings under 50 acres. Clearly many of these were not peasant farms in any sense at all. As we noted above 50 acres of good land in north-east Norfolk was a substantial unit. Additionally, some were not strictly agricultural at all but 'small-residential properties which have a few acres attached'. However, equally clearly many of them were small agricultural units worked solely by family labour, and in

1907 the Board of Agriculture estimated that 94 per cent of such holdings were 'farmed for business'.²⁰ The total land area of England held in this way was small, about 14 per cent, as it was in Scotland although it was larger in Wales, 23 per cent, and especially in Ireland, but that is not my concern here since it is as workers in agriculture that these peasant farmers interest me.²¹

Returning to sub-regional mapping, in Wales, unlike England, a clearer geographical division is apparent. Here the small farms were most obvious in the north, with 81 per cent of farms in Caernarvonshire under 50 acres. However, as in England, even the southern and border counties still had well over 50 per cent of farms in this group. A similar pattern emerges in Scotland with the counties north of the Great Glen and the Islands having substantial numbers of farms under 50 acres, and in some cases (Ross and Cromarty, Sutherland and Shetland) having over 90 per cent. Conversely Scotland, unlike England, Wales or Ireland, has a number of counties where significantly more than half of the farms were above 50 acres. Again in Ireland, a regional pattern emerges which to some extent fits in with expectations although the divisions are not as clear as in Scotland. Connacht was, not surprisingly, the area with the largest number of small farms, with 84 per cent, while Munster was the lowest with 78 per cent of farms under 50 acres.²²

In what ways can we talk of these farming units being 'peasant farms'? Firstly, few of these small farms, even in Ireland,

¹⁸ Shanin, *op cit*, p. 5.

¹⁹ *Agricultural Returns of Great Britain 1880, 1880, Cd 2727.*

²⁰ Carrington, *art cit*, p. 24.

²¹ There is a real problem in producing figures here since how this group would be described in the census rather than in the agricultural returns means that it would be virtually impossible, outside close local studies, to work out who they were. One of the many sensible pieces I am putting on one side here is David Grigg, 'Farm size in England and Wales, from early Victorian times to the present', *Ag Hist Rev*, 35, 1987, pp 179-89. Grigg raises many of these problems but, for his own purposes, which are not mine, he ignores holdings of less than 5 acres.

²² *Agricultural Statistics of Ireland for the Year 1879, 1880, Cd 2534.*

produced solely for subsistence, although many contained a high proportion of production for subsistence or barter either with other family producers or with more market oriented groups. At one extreme horticulture and specialized dairy production was capital intensive and frequently highly 'capitalist' in its profit orientation. At the other extreme even the most 'peasant' of producers saw a proportion of their product sold on the market. All but a few household producers, therefore, existed within capitalist market relations to a greater or lesser extent depending on precise local conditions. E J T Collins' study of the woodland village of Tadely in Hampshire shows what he calls a dual economy of small farming and wage labour in the woodland trades, and a similar situation existed in other woodland areas of southern and central England, for example, the Forest of Wychwood in Oxfordshire and the High Weald of Kent and Surrey.²³ This dual economy was also, as Hall argues, a central part of the economy of 'peasant' Lincolnshire with many families following both labouring and artisan trades as well as holding land.²⁴ But it must be stressed that these kinds of practices are widespread in many peasant societies. The 'classic' nineteenth-century peasantry of much of southern Europe was deeply implicated in market production.

However, as Reed argues of England, this does not necessarily mean that they were always overwhelmingly entrepreneurial in their attitudes. A key element here was 'family'. 'Unlike capitalist producers who sought to maximise the return on capital invested, household producers were preoccupied with the interest of family rather than the individual. They concerned themselves more with family

needs and neighbourhood obligations than with profits from trade'.²⁵ A precisely similar point is made by Hall in relation to Lincolnshire: 'The peasant's concern is not accumulation of capital, or business expansion, but preservation of the household economy'.²⁶ This was clearly even more the case of the Gaelic Highlands where historians have argued that attachment to the land and its 'ways' overrode all considerations of the market. As T C Smout has written, 'they had their own ideology, which was that possession of land — the tenure (not the ownership) of a croft — was the highest good a man could desire'.²⁷ It was an identical attitude which puzzled Joseph Cowen MP when he gave evidence to the Richmond Commission about Galway. Here he met a peasant farmer who worked part of the year in an English factory for '25s or 30s per week'. What reason said the confused Englishman was there that he should leave this regular work and a good house 'to go upon a small piece of property only some ten acres in extent and earn an additional income by labouring occasionally for the squire at 1s 2d per day?'²⁸ The point is again generalized by Shanin:

Peasants are involved in daily exchange of goods and in labour markets. Their economic action is, however, closely interwoven with family relations. Family division of labour and the consumption needs of the family give rise to particular strategies of survival and use of resources. The family farm operates as the major unit of peasant property, production, consumption, welfare, social reproduction, identity, prestige, sociability and welfare.²⁹

The relationships between family, neighbourhood and work group are another key aspect of peasant farming

²³ E J T Collins, 'Farming and forestry in central southern England in the nineteenth and early twentieth century', unpublished research paper. For Wychwood and Ashdown, see Alun Howkins, *The Reshaping of Rural England 1850-1925*, 1991.

²⁴ Hall, *art cit*, *passim*, but especially pp 46-56.

²⁵ Mick Reed, "'Gnawing it out": a new look at economic relations in nineteenth-century rural England', *Rural History*, 1, 1990, p 84. This argument is developed in Mick Reed and Roger Wells, eds, *Class, Conflict and Protest in the English Countryside, 1700-1880*, 1990.

²⁶ Hall, *art cit*, p 19.

²⁷ T C Smout, *A Century of the Scottish People, 1830-1950*, Edinburgh, 1986, p 67.

²⁸ Quoted in Anne O'Dowd, *Spalpeens and Tattie Hokers*, Dublin, 1991, p 252.

²⁹ Shanin, *op cit*, pp 3-4.

which is present throughout Britain.³⁰ For example, the non-market relationships between equals, which made up a good deal of work and payment on peasant farms, were enshrined both in 'informal' agreements of the kind Reed calls 'gnawing it out' and in more formal obligations. Many household producers, for example, exchanged the produce of their small farms with one another creating bonds of mutuality. A memoir of farming life in Leicestershire in the 1920s shows how a farmer's wife used eggs to 'settle minor debts with local people'; while other demands on the cash income, for flour from the bakers or even the doctor's bills, were paid for by barter with fodder for their horses. As the author concludes, 'by such "scheming and skimping" we weathered the hard times'.³¹ Exchanges of this kind could become formal especially where work was exchanged or shared. Reed's work on the accounts of the small Sussex farmer and tradesman, Philip Rapson, show his 'books' to be full of detailed and complex listings and 'reckonings' of rent, labour debt and credit extended to social equals and inferiors.³² Similarly, records of a 139-acre farm in Devon show how smaller farmers from the neighbourhood incurred debts of seed, cheese and cider, and 'borrowed' workers and machinery from the larger farm at threshing and harvest. Those of a much larger farm in East Sussex show similar reckoning up to the 1880s. In both these cases in return the smaller farmers worked for the larger farmer at busy times of the year. All these charges are carefully recorded in the farm accounts.³³ George

Bourne saw in this the remnants of what he called the 'peasant system' in Surrey as late as the 1900s:

These old people, fortunate in the possession of their own cottages and a little land, were keepers of pigs and donkeys, and even a few cows. They kept bees too; they made wine; they often paid in kind for any services that neighbours did for them; and with the food they could grow, and the firing they could obtain from the woods and the heath, their living was half provided for.³⁴

In Wales and Ireland these relationships of work and labour debt were at the heart of a complex social system. In Wales the corn harvest was taken by *y feudal wenith* (the wheat reaping party), 'a working group of farmers who arranged beforehand not to cut their wheat on the same day so as to be able to help each other'.³⁵ On the last day of harvest this work group would be joined by the smaller farmers, cottagers and independent labourers, 'who gave so many days help in the harvest in return for the loan of a horse and cart, for a row or two of potatoes in a field, or for a supply of farmyard manure'.³⁶ Similar work groups were central in Arensberg's classic study of the west of Ireland, while mid-twentieth-century anthropological studies of the Scottish Islands have demonstrated the persistence of these forms into the 1960s.³⁷

These kinds of arrangement constantly open up what I called at the beginning of this essay 'European questions': the labour contract between the peasant farmer and the landlord, share cropping, payment in kind, and labour debt, which are not supposed to exist in Britain and which form a key part of a peasant society. But there are closer comparisons still. In Ayrshire in Scotland, the old share-cropping system of steelbrow persisted into the 1850s if not

³⁰ See for interesting use of this material Anthony P Cohen, *Whalsay. Symbol, Segment and Boundary in a Shetland Island Community*, Manchester, 1987, chapter 3 *passim*.

³¹ Henry St George Cramp, *A Yeoman Farmer's Son*, 1985, pp 15, 172-3.

³² Mick Reed, 'Social and economic relations in a Wealden community: Lodsworth, 1780-1860', unpublished MA thesis, University of Sussex, 1985, pp 58 ff.

³³ Devon Record Office, Exeter, Records of Whitwell Farm; East Sussex Record Office, Records of an unknown (400 acre) farm near Bexhill.

³⁴ George Bourne, *Change in the Village*, (1912), Harmondsworth, 1984, p 76.

³⁵ Trefor M Owen, *Welsh Folk Customs*, Cardiff, 1959, p 114.

³⁶ *Ibid*, p 115.

³⁷ C Arensberg, *The Irish Countryman*, 1937, p 62 ff; Cohen, *op cit*.

later.³⁸ Cow keeping, at its most basic a form of share cropping, was a highly regularized system by the 1890s with contracts signed and sealed, and remained an important part of Devon agriculture until the Great War.³⁹ More clearly in Wales and Ireland the laying out of potato ground was a form of share cropping widely practised again until the inter-war period in some areas.⁴⁰

Working their 'own' farms, or those of their neighbours and work-group members, was one key sense in which peasant agriculturists were part of the workforce — part of those who 'worked the land of Britain' and who are the object of this search. Another way in which they took this role was as wage labourers. For example, the High Weald of Sussex and Kent supported a large number of small farms until the 1880s and 1890s. However, it is clear that their survival depended in part, at least, on the ability of those who worked them to go as migrant labourers to the larger farms nearer the coast, and earn cash at harvest to pay the rent and buy seeds, tools and clothing. In Scotland, Sir John McNeill reporting on the failure of the potato crop in the Highlands in 1846 gave an account of a Skye crofter who for twenty successive years had spent six months of the year on one of the great 'horse farms' of the East Lothians. With this he paid his rent on Skye. 'When short of meal or seed corn in the spring' he was given credit by his Lothian employer to buy it.⁴¹ Similarly, the cottar class of west Wales frequently worked in the Glamorgan coalfields, and the small farmers of Allendale worked in the lead mines at Allenheads or in the coal-mines of

Consett.⁴² These examples barely scrape the surface. To preserve the farm by short-term injections of cash, peasant workers from England, Scotland and Wales went to sea fishing, to build Bayswater Road and Notting Hill in London, to construct the new railways and to work in the docks. The small farmers and commoners of Ashdown Forest interviewed in 1878 show many of these short-term migrations as well as the more normal movements within agriculture: James Wheatley, 'worked on the Brighton Railway about 2 years. Then returned home'; William Young, lived in the forest all his life, 'except about 7 years from about 17 to 24 when I was in Woolwich Arsenal coming home every few months'; while Michael Maynard 'went brick making in the summer and Hoop shaving in the winter for 4 years. During this time I was backward and forward'.⁴³

This kind of movement is, of course, most striking in relation to Ireland, where the almost total dependency of the small peasant farmers of the west on migration to England was well known. The reports of the Congested Districts Board in the 1890s and 1900s show that as much as 70 per cent of family income in the worst areas came from migratory labour, while even in the best it still made up 10–15 per cent.⁴⁴ In the late 1880s Patrick Gallagher (Paddy the Cope) made the journey year after year from Donegal to Scotland 'after the turf was cut, first to support his family's farm then to build up his own'.⁴⁵ Again this remained important well into the twentieth century. The superb oral 'autobiography' of John McGuire of County Fermanagh gives an account of his travels into Scotland and England until the Second World War, in the same way and for the

³⁸ Smout, *op cit*, p 17.

³⁹ Devon Record Office has many such contracts. See also *Royal Commission on the Distressed State of the Agricultural Interest*, 1881, Cd 3096, pp 729 ff.

⁴⁰ David Jenkins, *The Agricultural Community in South West Wales at the Turn of the Twentieth Century*, Cardiff, 1971; Michael Beames, *Peasants and Power. The Whiteboy Movements and their Control in Pre-Famine Ireland*, Brighton, 1983, chapter 1.

⁴¹ Quoted in Smout, *op cit*, p 66.

⁴² Howkins, *op cit*, p 41.

⁴³ East Sussex Record Office, 'Raper Transcripts.'

⁴⁴ O'Dowd, *op cit*, pp 31 ff.

⁴⁵ Patrick Gallagher, 'Paddy the Cope'. *My Story*, 1939, pp 55 ff.

same reasons as 'Paddy the Cope' fifty years earlier.⁴⁶

These peasant farmers and peasant workers stood in a symbiotic relationship to agrarian capitalism.⁴⁷ They were separate from it in many of their work and cultural practices, and formally they neither exploited the labour power of others (outside the family) nor were in turn regularly exploited. Yet they were dependent on both the capitalist market and the capitalist employing structure for both money wages and a range of goods and services during part of their life cycle or during different times of the year. They existed both as 'farmers' and as workers, and as both worked the land and as both were clearly very different from the classic 'rural proletarian'. What though of numbers? In terms of farming units, the vast majority of them throughout the British Isles were worked by small family producers — peasants — who employed no labour at all. There are clearly huge problems with how many people this actually means, but given the number of holdings in all four countries we can give the broadest possible indication. Assuming one full-time worker per holding (which is clearly an underestimate) and reducing by about 15 per cent for dual occupation, we find that there were in 1880 about 254,400 peasant 'workers' in England, 46,400 in Wales, and 47,000 in Scotland. We have a figure for 'proprietors' in Ireland which we can work from and which gives 448,000. We thus have very approximately 795,800 peasants who worked the land plus their families. In total this accounted for a maximum of 20 per cent of cultivated land. However, these peasants also existed as part of a wage labour force providing labour for capitalist farms, so their contribution has to be increased far beyond this 20 per cent.

II

My second group of marginal workers are farm servants and these are, at one level, much less of a problem. It has been argued by Ann Kussmaul and others that farm service was in decline in England from the 1830s and had become insignificant by the 1870s:

Service in husbandry did not evolve into a new form of labour. It collapsed. The increase in the size of farms and of the social position of farmers, the decline in the opportunities of the poor to be anything but wage labourers, and population increase all led to the near total substitution of the coeval institution, day-labouring.⁴⁸

If we look a little more carefully things are less clear. First, if we accept Kussmaul's dichotomy between service and day labour it is quickly obvious that in a British context, rather than an English one, 'near total substitution' of the latter for the former is by no means dominant especially if we take female full-time workers into account.

In Scotland, outside the 'peasant areas', Devine notes that 'most permanent farm workers were farm servants (rather than labourers) who were hired over a period of one year, if married, and for six months if single'.⁴⁹ The situation in Wales and Ireland was similar. In Wales in 1871 52 per cent of all hired workers (male and female) were servants,⁵⁰ while in Ireland the figure was 60 per cent.⁵¹ In England, it must be admitted, the figure was much lower. In 1871, the last year for which a distinction is made between servants and labourers, 16 per cent of the hired workforce were servants. Even here though the picture is more complex. Kussmaul's work, like a good deal of the work done as a result of the Cambridge Group for the

⁴⁶ Robin Morton, ed, *John MacGiire: Come Day, Go Day, God Send Sunday*, 1974.

⁴⁷ This point is well made by Hall in relation to Lincolnshire.

⁴⁸ Ann Kussmaul, *Servants in Husbandry in Early Modern England*, Cambridge, 1981, pp 133-4.

⁴⁹ T M Devine, 'Scottish farm service in the agricultural revolution' in T M Devine, ed, *Farm Servants and Labour in Lowland Scotland, 1770-1914*, Edinburgh, 1984, p 1.

⁵⁰ *Census of England and Wales, 1871, Population Abstracts*, III, 1872, Cd 872, p 584.

⁵¹ *Census of Ireland, 1871*, IV, pt 1, 1874, Cd 1106, p 24.

Study of Population data, is biased towards particular areas, and particularly towards the south-east. Of their sample of 404, about 120 parishes come from north and west of the Humber-Exe line. Although this may represent 'real' population spread, it clearly skews the sample against certain cultural patterns of employment.⁵²

If we take Devine's notion of farm service based on hiring we see just how central the notion was throughout these islands for all of the nineteenth century. Indeed the figures quoted above certainly underestimate all but the Scottish situation, since they refer to actual living in rather than simply hiring by the 'term'. However, it is important to distinguish the different forms involved. At the most general level, analysis of farm service, seen as hiring by the year or half-year, which is in some ways also the definition adopted by Wilson Fox in his reports of 1900 and 1905, shows that in all areas of Scotland, Ireland and Wales, where farm labour was hired, the majority of those hired were farm servants for most if not all the nineteenth century. In England, the counties of Cumberland, Westmoreland, north Lancashire, Northumberland, Durham, and Yorkshire were dominated by farm service even in 1905. It was also present in some form in all but thirteen English counties.⁵³

Within the kind of broad definitions offered by Devine and Wilson Fox there were many varieties of farm service. Let us begin with 'classic' farm service in which one or two sons or daughters of social equals lived for a time with a different family and 'learnt a trade', hoping themselves eventually to take a farm. This is the form which most concerns Kussmaul and which is certainly in decline throughout

the nineteenth century. However, it did survive in some areas especially in Lancashire, parts of Durham, Yorkshire, the Welsh borders, parts of Devon and Somerset, and on the High Weald of Kent and Sussex well after 1850 even if as a minority form.⁵⁴ Further, when work has been done on the manuscript returns of the census, as it has been by Reed for Wealden Sussex, the survival of farm service is often much higher than the printed census suggests.⁵⁵ Moving out of England the 'survival' of this group is much more significant. In the north-east of Scotland a substantial proportion of farm labour was provided in this way, and, as in classic farm service, many a farm lad went on to be a cottar with an ever hopeful eye on the big farm towns in the valley bottoms.⁵⁶ Similarly, in Wales 'many' small tenants 'climbed from the position of agricultural labourer' having served their time as servants.⁵⁷

More significant, throughout the British Isles was the practice of hiring young, single men and, to a lesser extent, women into the farmhouse or another house or bothy on the farm but whose status was that of hired labour with little or no hope of ever becoming farmers themselves. The East Riding of Yorkshire, the subject of a recent excellent study by Stephen Caunce,⁵⁸ is the prime example here though other areas of the north and east showed a similar pattern, as in Lincolnshire (18 per cent of male workforce living in, and 49 per cent of female) and parts of Nottinghamshire (22 per cent of males living in, and 65 per cent of females). These were largely upland areas where there were few village settlements to provide a labour force, and so young men

⁵² E A Wrigley and R S Schofield, *The Population History of England, 1541-1871: A Reconstruction*, Cambridge, 1989, appendix 1. I am grateful to Keith Snell for this point.

⁵³ See Alun Howkins, 'The English farm labourers in the nineteenth century: farm family and community' in Brian Short, ed, *The English Rural Community: Image and Analysis*, Cambridge, 1992, pp 85-104.

⁵⁴ B M Short, 'The decline of living-in servants in the transition to capitalist farming: a critique of the Sussex evidence', *Sussex Archaeological Collections*, 122, 1984, pp 147-64.

⁵⁵ Reed, 'Social and economic relations', pp 42 ff.

⁵⁶ Carter, *Farm Life*, introduction.

⁵⁷ D J Perry, *The Rural Revolt that Failed*, Cardiff, 1989, p 10.

⁵⁸ Stephen Caunce, *Amongst Farm Houses*, Gloucester, 1991.

were recruited by the year to live in on the farms, which were high on the Wolds and separated from other farms, villages and market towns. This kind of living in was also widely practised in Lowland Scotland, especially in the Lothians, Berwickshire, and in parts of Ireland.⁵⁹

In Lowland Scotland, as in parts of England, this kind of hiring coexisted, as part of a life cycle movement, with another form of service, family hiring. This was at its most developed in the border counties of England and Scotland, although it was present elsewhere, for example, in parts of Kent and Dorset.⁶⁰ Family hiring involved the head of the household, usually a male 'hind' though sometimes a female 'cottar' (Northumberland), being hired for a year with his or her whole family to live and work on a particular farm. They were provided with a house on the farmsteadings, with wages part in kind and part in cash. An identical system worked in the Forth valley and in south-east Lowland Scotland until at least the Great War.⁶¹

All these groups varied in different degrees from the 'hired day labour', which is usually taken as the norm in British agriculture. Hiring was the main difference but there were many others. A crucial one was payment in kind. Payment in kind and 'perks' in general have been looked upon with a good deal of scepticism by historians who have worked on the arable areas of the south and east, and that scepticism is borne out by Wilson Fox's work on farm wages in 1900 and 1905.⁶² However, in the case of farm servants these were central not only as part of payment but as ways of

modifying the cash relationship. In 1855 George Morton hired to Middleton Farm in Northumberland for 'a cow grassed throughout Summer, and wintered upon Hay from the banks, House rent free, Coals led and £5 10 Cash'. He was allowed to keep a pig and given quantities of oats, barley, peas or beans, wheat and rye. He in return worked for one year and 'agreed to provide' two other workers, members of his family. Shepherds in this area were often paid entirely in kind, as was George Crowmarsh, shepherd on the same farm in 1853. In return for the work of himself and two family members he got a house, oats, barley, rye, peas and beans and 8 ewes at sale time, 8 two-year old sheep at sale time and 8 stone of wool.⁶³ Family hiring in Scotland produced a similar range of payments. In the Lothians

The usual mode of payment for farm servants remained payment in kind. This was known as the 'boll wage'...It generally consisted of oats, barley, peas or beans, as well as keep of a cow, food at harvest time, and a plot of ground for growing potatoes or flax. The boll wage frequently included a cash component, but this was not large.⁶⁴

By the end of the nineteenth century some of these payments were commuted to cash but in East Lothian a quarter of the wage was still in kind in the 1890s, and it was probably much the same in Northumberland and the borders.

More obviously there were those payments in kind made to both the farm servants on the big farms of the east and the classic farm servants of the west and much of Wales and Ireland. Here payment in kind was board and lodging. At its best three good meals a day and its worst, as in much of Ireland where porridge of Indian meal often formed the basis, with what could be taken from the land or the farm to supplement it — potatoes, cabbage and rabbits. A rhyme from County Derry put it nicely:

⁵⁹ Alistair Orr, 'Farm servants and farm labour in the Forth valley and south east Lowlands', and Michael Robson, 'The border farm worker' in Devine, *Farm Servants*, pp 29-54 and 71-96. On Ireland, O'Dowd, *op cit*, chapter 3.

⁶⁰ On Kent see Michael Winstanley, *Life in Kent at the Turn of the Twentieth Century*, Folkestone, 1978, chapter 1; on Dorset see Royal Commission on the Employment of Children, *Young Persons and Women in Agriculture. Second Report*, 1868-9, Cd 4202, p 19.

⁶¹ Orr, 'Farm servants' pp 33-4.

⁶² For example see his remarks, *Earnings of Agricultural Labourers. Report by Mr Wilson Fox on the Wages and Earnings of Agricultural Labourers*, 1900, p 18.

⁶³ See Howkins, *Reshaping*, pp 20ff.

⁶⁴ Orr, 'Farm servants', p 35.

For rabbits hot — for rabbits cold,
 For rabbits young — for rabbits old,
 For rabbits tender — for rabbits tough,
 We thank the lord — we've had enough.⁶⁵

Hiring by the year and payment in kind substantially modified the position of a large number of farm workers in nineteenth-century Britain, and again we come to 'numbers'. Taking the British Isles as whole, a very substantial part was cultivated for the great part of the nineteenth century by farm servants. Taking all four countries about 44 per cent of farm workers were hired into the farmhouse, but this clearly underestimates the number of farm servants since it would not include the family hired groups of Scotland and the north of England, let alone those who hired by the year in the north. As with peasants we can only make a 'guessestimate', but this suggests that added together in all four countries there were about 550,000 farm servants.

III

With all these modifications we are still left with a large group outside our categories, who look much more like the 'classic' proletarians of much writing on British agricultural history. However, as I have argued elsewhere, many of these received some semi-regular payments in kind, both formal and informal, which served to blunt the pure cash nexus of the wage relationship.⁶⁶ At its most extreme 'pure' wage did exist, hired and paid by the day. Here, no relationship existed between the labourer and his employer other than a cash nexus, and this form certainly existed in many counties of East Anglia, the midlands and, in a more limited way, the south. It was also present in relation to casual workers. However, many of these were migrants from Scotland and particularly Ireland, plus

a number of urban-rural migrants, as well as internal migrants from areas of household production to those of 'pure' capitalist production. These were, as we have already said, the peasant farmers in their other guise. In addition, there was a 'residual army' of women's and children's labour based in the rural areas. These groups were brought into the production process at times of peak demand — hoeing, singling and especially the various harvests. How we categorize these groups, which barely appear in the written record, is unclear. What is certain is that they are not classic proletarians by the conventional description, though by other descriptions they might be the ultimately proletarianized workforce. Taking the census definition, in 1871 there were 1,227,565 farm labourers in the British Isles. Against that figure there were, in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, 1,345,800 peasants and servants in British agriculture. By a narrow majority, those who worked the land of Britain, the object of our search, were not proletarianized and landless day labourers but peasants or servants.

IV

I stated at the beginning of this piece that it was an essay in argument. It is the beginning of a much more sustained piece of work and any conclusions to be drawn at this stage are even less firm than the argument of the essay, but I would like to make suggestions in two main areas. The first of these concerns socio-political behaviour. To return to our straw man. He was, we are told, usually 'happy' in his lot. Historians point to the fact that he by and large does not form trade unions. Even in the late 1940s, at its high point, agricultural trade unions accounted for only 18.5 per cent of the labour force nationally in England and Wales.⁶⁷ When we turn to

⁶⁵ Quoted in O'Dowd, *op cit*, p 145.

⁶⁶ Alun Howkins, 'La Gran Depressió a l'agricultura anglesa', *Recerques* 26, Barcelona, 1991.

⁶⁷ Newby, *op cit*, pp 81 and 228.

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politics, despite the work of Roger Wells on the 'politicised labourer' around Tolpuddle or on southern Chartism, we are at best looking at a tiny group who often turn out not to be labourers at all but the inhabitants of small towns or large open villages.⁶⁸ Nor does he riot often, and even in 'Swing' there are a disconcertingly high number of tradesmen arrested for a labourers' movement. In short he does not behave like a 'proletarian' at all. But let us look again at this. Very briefly, the 'classic proletarian' farm labourer is probably in a minority, albeit a slight one, of all those who worked the land of Britain in the nineteenth century. Moreover, he is probably regionally restricted to the eastern, and some southern and some midland counties. It is here that 'proletarian' social relationships might be expected to develop in the form of trade unions and political organizations and, of course, they do although still only among part of the labour force. This is overwhelmingly the case of East Anglia and Norfolk in particular. Here, although there was a high number of small farms, there were also the most 'extreme' forms of day labour, while there was a statistically insignificant number of farm servants in 1871. As a result, perhaps of this, Norfolk was probably the most successfully unionized county of the United Kingdom in the periods between 1872 and 1896, and between 1906 and the present. It was also a Liberal stronghold after 1885 and returned a (rural) Labour MP as late as 1970.

In contrast, a substantial area of England and especially Scotland, Wales and Ireland was worked by farm servants. Most contemporaries and many more recent writers

noted that hiring by the year frequently lead to close and apparently harmonious relationships between employer and employed. There was a 'clannish' feeling about the farms of north Northumberland according to John Coleman reporting for the Richmond Commission.⁶⁹ A recent historian of the Welsh agricultural trade unions has argued that a 'comradely social relationship' existed between the hired workers on the small farms of that country which made workers 'more sympathetic to the...farmer's problems and hardships'.⁷⁰

Yet this is clearly far too simple. The work of Dunbabin on the English north-east, Carter on Aberdeenshire, and most recently Caunce on the East Riding of Yorkshire, among others, all show that work place relationships under farm service were far from harmonious.⁷¹ In all these areas the hiring fair or feeling fair was the site of bargaining and conflict every bit as sustained, and on occasions more bitter, than the more public strikes and lockouts of the English south. In view of this work it seems likely that similar conflicts existed elsewhere in these islands but they have remained hidden to historians (like myself) who tended to look for trade unions and other forms of open and institutional organization.

Finally the peasants of these islands were far from quiescent in the nineteenth century as even a cursory look at the history of Scotland, Ireland and Wales shows. The Crofters Land War and the Welsh Tithe War were both dealt with comparatively and perceptively by Dunbabin many years ago, and there is now excellent work on Scotland. The history of the National Land League in Ireland is extensively studied, although usually as an adjunct to the

⁶⁸ Roger Wells, 'Rural rebels in southern England in the 1830s' in Clive Emsley and James Walvin, eds, *Artisans, Peasants and Proletarians 1760-1860*, 1985; *idem*, 'Southern Chartism', *Rural History*, 2, 1991, pp 37-60. For example, from the latter only half the small number of rural supporters of the Land Plan in the Blandford area of Dorset and the Gillingham area of Kent were labourers despite the fact that both were overwhelmingly agricultural areas.

⁶⁹ BPP, *Royal Commission on the Depressed State Condition of the Agricultural Interest. Final Report*, XIV, 1881, p 392.

⁷⁰ David A Pretty, *The Rural Revolt that Failed. Farm Workers' Trade Unions in Wales 1889-1950*, Cardiff, 1989, p 10.

⁷¹ J P D Dunbabin, *Rural Discontent in Nineteenth Century Britain*, 1974, chapters 6 and 7; Carter, *Farm Life*, chapter 5; Caunce, *op cit*, chapters 5 and 6.

'national question'. Perhaps if some of the questions asked of the 'Celtic fringe' were asked of our English peasantry, we might get some different answers as to its peaceful state. Clearly, there is no forgotten mass peasant movement among small tenant farmers, but the work of Mutch in Lancashire and that done (much more narrowly) on the questions of tenant right and the game laws by Porter do suggest all was not entirely harmonious.⁷²

The second area, which I would wish to suggest grows out of the kind of argument I am putting forward, is more fundamental still. The work of Robert Allen and of Jeanette Neeson has gone a long way towards discrediting many aspects of our previously held model of agrarian development in England and much of Britain. If what I am arguing is right then we can go further still. Increased yields in agriculture for much of the nineteenth century rested at least in part on increased

labour productivity. It has usually been assumed this was the result of a 'proletarianized' labour force working under essentially modern social relations of production. If this is not the case then the whole validity of the 'English road', not only as an historical account of change, but also as a model for development, has to be challenged. As Allen says

For all those who contrast a traditional society with a modern one, for all those who argue that the traditional society must be overturned for development to occur, for all those who see inequality as the necessary price of growth — England is the classic case. For that reason, English history is of enduring importance.⁷³

As I said at the beginning this essay is work in progress, but I believe that further work on the detail of the 'national' data and, more importantly, on local studies will show that nineteenth-century Britain remained a complex and differentiated society rather than one dominated by the three 'great classes' of agriculture, so clearly identified by Caird in 1851, and which have dominated our thinking ever since.

⁷² Mutch, *op cit*, pp 51–56; J H Porter, 'Tenant right: Devonshire and the 1880 Ground Game Act', *Ag Hist Rev*, 34, 1986, pp 188–97.

⁷³ Allen, *op cit*, p 2.

Notes and Comments

(continued from page 48)

by Dr Mark Overton from Monday 11 to Wednesday 13 April. There will be a field trip to the farms at Beamish Museum on the morning of Wednesday 13 April.

THE 1994 AUTUMN CONFERENCE

The 1994 Autumn Conference will be held at the Extra-Mural Department, University of Birmingham, and the subject will be midlands agriculture in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The conference organizer will be Dr Richard Hoyle and further details of speakers and the conference programme will appear with this issue of the *Review*.

REQUESTS FOR HELP

As part of our service to readers NOTES AND COMMENTS now includes a section under this heading. This is designed for all members of the BAHS, but particularly those who are not attached to an academic institution. We hope this will provide assistance for two types of problem. Firstly, those thinking of carrying out research and who have chosen a topic, but are not too sure where to begin, or want to know who else has worked on that particular subject. And secondly, those who are well into a project but need further information to fill in gaps, or require advice on methodology.

(continued on page 73)