

The Political Economy of Agrarian Education: England in the Late Nineteenth Century*

By JOHN STEWART

Abstract

Debates over the provision of education to the children of the agricultural labouring class in the late nineteenth century display concerns not only about education itself, but also about such matters as labour supply, and cultural and political change. Farmers in the eastern countries in particular were, for example, determined to resist any educational or labour measures which might interrupt the supply of child labour at times of peak demand, such as harvest. Education was also seen by such farmers as an example of 'outside' interference in agricultural affairs. A measure such as the 1873 Agricultural Children Act therefore provides a useful focus for debates and concerns over agrarian change.

THIS article examines the debates over the education of agricultural labourers' children in England in the late nineteenth century. The focus will be mainly, although not exclusively, on the Agricultural Children Act of 1873, and the discussion will centre on the following three issues.

First, it will be suggested that educational change was both symptom and cause of broader rural change. This was recognized at the time. Aspects of the educational debate can clearly be seen as challenging the traditional rural leadership. This was most obvious in respect of school boards which it was thought would, if introduced, provide a platform for emergent labour unions. Education itself was seen as a mechanism whereby the younger and more able of the labouring class might leave the countryside altogether. Both of these were socially disruptive in themselves, the latter also posing questions about existing and future labour supply. So a uniquely serious problem confronted the leaders of rural society as the 'established' way of life came under threat.

Secondly, since educational change was about more than simply education, the act of 1873 should be seen as an attempt to shore up and defend the existing order through limited compromise by the more politically sensitive leaders of agrarian society. To such individuals this order was, ideally, hierarchical, deferential and Anglican. Additionally, the act would ensure the ongoing provision of labour at crucial times in the farming year. Of course, some realized that increased educational provision and restrictions on child labour might lead to a more stable workforce. This would come about through an increase in adult male wages and by equipping future generations to deal with modern farming techniques. But such 'enlightened' views were not typical, at least in eastern England, of the most 'backward' component of the farming community, tenant farmers. This group was to the forefront in resisting educational change. So the limited compromise was designed in part to appease farmers, notoriously hostile as they were to 'outside' interference. Tensions over education, therefore, existed between farmers and other groups in rural society. Consequently proponents of educational legislation, even

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of the most limited sort, had to walk a very narrow path.

Thirdly, it was especially significant that much of the educational debate of the last part of the nineteenth century was conducted by groups and individuals from the eastern counties. The article will focus on this regional experience, where agrarian and educational problems were seen in a particularly acute form. This emphasis on eastern England is justified both because it deals with an important constituent of the national agricultural economy and because of the prominence of its spokesmen—farmer, labour and parliamentary—in national debates. Furthermore, the eastern counties felt themselves faced by a unique combination of problems, once again emphasizing the role and significance of the regional dimension in the educational debate. It is therefore necessary to make a number of introductory points about the area.

The eastern counties of England, centred on Norfolk and Suffolk but containing all or part of neighbouring counties such as Lincolnshire and Cambridgeshire, formed an area whose main agricultural produce was grain. There was, consequently, a much higher demand for labour at certain times, such as harvest, than at others. Until the middle of the nineteenth century there was a labour surplus. This was reflected in the low wages recorded by Caird in his survey of 1850–51, this situation in turn being reinforced by the operations of the Poor Law in the area. And as Caird further noted, one important constituent of excess labour in the eastern counties was child labour. Children's wages were important to the eastern counties agricultural labouring class because of the low level of adult wages, a point forcibly made by an education inspector of Norfolk in 1842. Children were also important because of the seasonal fluctuations in the demand for labour, and in the type of labour

required. Caird commented, disapprovingly, on the gangs of Norfolk children contracted to undertake tasks such as hoeing. All this led, according to another education inspector in 1845, to Norfolk child agricultural labour occupying 'a larger proportion of the year than I have had occasion to remark in other counties', and to the county's rural schools being closed from early August to late November.¹ By contrast, areas where the dominant form of agriculture was pastoral tended to have a more uniform demand for labour throughout the year. In such areas, therefore, a supply of child labour which could be tapped at times of high demand was much less of a concern.

From mid-century, however, the circumstances of the eastern counties began to change, not least through the impact of rural depopulation. The population of, for example, East Anglia fell from 4.71 per cent of total United Kingdom population in 1851 to 2.83 per cent in 1911. Similarly, from 1861 employment in agriculture in Norfolk went into permanent decline. Furthermore, it was arable areas such as the eastern counties which were to suffer most during the 'great depression', and its associated fall in prices. Consequently, anything which threatened the labour supply, especially at times of high demand such as harvest, was going to be sceptically received by eastern counties' farmers, and this explains their vociferousness over educational matters. Potential curtailments of child labour must be viewed in this context. This article thus develops that of Horn on the 1873 act by placing that legislation in a broader context and indicating its wider relevance to an understanding

¹James Caird, *English Agriculture in 1850–51*, 1852, pp 480, 175; Anne Digby, 'The labour market and the continuity of social policy after 1834: the case of the eastern counties', *Econ Hist Rev*, 2nd series, XXVIII, 1975, pp 69–83; BPP, 1842, XXXIII, *Minutes of the Committee of Council on Education*, p 206; BPP, 1845, XXXV, *Minutes of the Committee of Council on Education*, pp 76–7.

of change in late nineteenth-century rural society.²

little doubt that an end to ganging would be in 'the best interests of the labouring agricultural population'.³

I

Concern about children was expressed throughout the 1860s, focusing, for example, on 'public gangs'. These were large groups of, predominantly, women and children. Such gangs, particularly prevalent in East Anglia, were under the charge of a gangmaster and hired out to farmers as seasonal demand dictated. Ganging had been criticized in official reports, culminating in those of the Children's Employment Commission. These made a series of recommendations, derived in part from the precedents of the Factory Acts, which in modified form were incorporated in the 1867 Agricultural Gangs Act. This placed restrictions on gang labour, including the prohibition of employment under the age of eight. The commissioners also commented on broader child-related issues. First, the desire of 'persons of all classes' for increased educational provision was noted. This was to include gang workers, while ensuring that a high demand for such labour could be met where necessary. The Print Works Act was cited as an example of legislation attempting to regulate employment by imposing educational requirements. Secondly, it was suggested that other forms of child agricultural labour also needed legislative protection. Thirdly, and most crucially, it was felt that restricting child labour would reduce the undercutting of adult male wages in certain types of work, one cause of low wages and underemployment. While acknowledging that a supply of cheap labour could be a source of considerable profit, the commissioners had

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In this context of concern for more working class education and less child agricultural labour, an 1867 meeting of the Norfolk Chamber of Agriculture is a significant indicator of the farming community's fears. The chamber, which had found the commissioners' account of ganging exaggerated, passed a resolution deprecating any further legislation of a restrictive or educational kind, and expressed clear views on the role of education for the labouring class. As one farmer put it, everyone agreed that boys under thirteen ought to receive some sort of education, but only enough to work subsequently as agricultural labourers. Another questioned the right of urban 'theorists' to tell farmers what to do when it was well known that cities were characterized by 'vice, filth and immorality'. A third claimed that boys welcomed the opportunity for labour, and 'would rather be employed in agriculture than at school'.⁴ As will be seen, these and similar views were consistently expressed by eastern counties farmers and their political representatives in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Claims were repeatedly made for the 'healthy' nature of agricultural employment; the limited need for education; the ignorance of those outside agriculture of its problems; and the requirement for child labour especially at harvest time. Underlying such concerns were broader fears over the disruption to an established way of life.

² David Coleman and John Salt, *The British Population*, Oxford, 1992, pp 91, 81; Alun Howkins, *Poor Labouring Men*, 1985, p 10; T W Fletcher, 'The great depression of English agriculture', *Econ Hist Rev*, 2nd series, XIII, 1960-1, pp 423ff; Pamela Horn, 'The Agricultural Children Act of 1873', *History of Education Journal*, 3, 1974, pp 27-39.

³ BPP, 1867, XVI, *Sixth Report of the Children's Employment Commission (1862)*, p xviii, para 63ff; p xxiv, paras 100-1; p xx, para 84; p xxi, para 90.

⁴ L Marion Springall, *Labouring Life in Norfolk Villages*, 1936, p 44; 'The employment of women and children in agriculture', *Journal of Agriculture*, June 1867, pp 41ff.

III

The Norfolk farmers' wish to be rid of external interference was not granted. Almost simultaneously with their meeting, in May 1867, H S Tremenheere and E C Tufnell, authors of the Children's Employment Commission reports and experienced public servants, were appointed to enquire into the employment of children, young persons and women in agriculture. They produced four reports. Of these, the most important was the second, submitted in October 1869 and dealing with England.⁵ Effectively this was two reports, Tremenheere and Tufnell being unable to agree on what conclusions to draw from the evidence gathered. The crucial difference concerned the starting age for child employment. Tremenheere, while acknowledging the 'widespread' feeling that no child under ten should be employed, argued against any minimum. He did so for two reasons. First, he acknowledged the 'vital importance' of children's earnings to many labouring families, who might be doubly deprived of income should they have to pay for education. Secondly, he recognized the 'imperious demand' for young child labour 'in many of the most important agricultural counties'. An awareness of the eastern counties labour market is evident here. Furthermore, since agricultural labour was essentially healthy no minimum was required, and the precedents of factory legislation inapplicable. Instead, Tremenheere proposed a system, based on the Print Works Act, whereby every child would be required to attain a specific number of attendances from the start of employment until the age of twelve. This could be reduced should certain levels of achievement be reached at certain ages.⁶

Tufnell, however, rejected the model of

the Print Works Act, pointing out that it neither worked nor was applicable to agriculture. A minimum employment age was required, this being in the first instance nine, and subsequently eleven or twelve. Tufnell made his suggestions provisional on the introduction of a universal system of education, thereby anticipating the developments of 1870 and after. He approached the issue of family income through education, which should be insisted upon by the state. This would result in better-educated boys leaving agriculture for work elsewhere, with those remaining being of higher quality than previously. Tufnell felt it self-evident that educated labour was more valuable, and attributed the already-declining female labour force to existing educational provision. Only by removing excess population and raising wage levels could labour's condition improve, and educational change should be carried out despite farmers' opposition.⁷ This was clearly a more long-term, and 'enlightened', approach to a labour market such as that of the eastern counties. Differences notwithstanding, the reports had three underlying areas of agreement. First, both saw a need for educational provision supported by restrictions on child labour. Secondly, both identified the question of child employment as central to the related issues of labour supply, family income and the condition of the labouring population. Thirdly, both acknowledged, in different ways, the desire of farmers to retain a supply of child labour. Their conclusions, and the precedent of the 1867 act, constituted an important aspect of the background to the debates of the 1870s.

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The Agricultural Children Bill was introduced early in 1873. Similar measures had

⁵ David Roberts, *Victorian Origins of the Welfare State*, New Haven, 1969; BPP, 1868-9, XIII, *Second Report of the Commissioners on the Employment of Children, Young Persons and Women in Agriculture*.

⁶ BPP, 1868-9, XII, Mr Tremenheere's Report, p xxi, paras 27, 94.

⁷ BPP, 1868-9, XII, Mr Tufnell's Report, pp liii-liv, paras 41-50; pp lx-lxi, paras 81-6; pp lxvii-lxx paras 130-146.

been proposed in 1867 and 1872, and the original Gangs Bill had envisaged some form of educational provision. The relevant clauses had been rejected by the House of Lords. The reintroduction of the issue in 1873 suggests the urgency with which it was viewed. The bill's principal sponsor was C S Read, Conservative member for south Norfolk, aided by Albert Pell, Conservative member for south Leicestershire. Both were prominent in agricultural circles. Read was president of the Norfolk Chamber of Agriculture and has been described by Howkins as 'probably the most prominent spokesman of the Norfolk tenant farmers'. Both he and Pell were also close to the Central Chamber of Agriculture. Such relationships were highly significant. The scepticism of the Norfolk Chamber in educational matters has already been noted. Similarly, the Central Chamber was concerned to forestall the introduction of school boards, fearing the direct compulsion of child attendance and the increase in rates that this would involve. Much to be preferred, in their view, was the indirect compulsion of the 1873 bill.⁸

Read frequently expressed his educational opinions. In 1871, for example, he suggested to the Central Farmers' Club that although in favour of improvements, it should be possible under certain circumstances to employ children in that 'healthy' pursuit, agricultural labour. Indeed just after the passing of the 1873 act, he told the same body that 'he feared that labourers would now be over-educated'. Nonetheless, Read paid considerable attention to the complexities of educating the children of the agricultural labouring class. He was concerned to enhance educational provision while maintaining an adequate supply of child labour and ensuring that

established hierarchies came under as little strain as possible.⁹

The 1873 act amended that of 1867 by prohibiting the employment of children under ten in gangs, and forbidding the employment of children under eight. Over this age, certain educational attainments were required before a child could enter employment. Local magistrates could, however, suspend these provisions if asked to do so by farmers or landowners. Any suspension was to operate for no more than eight weeks in each year. Significantly, a Lords' amendment provided that no penalty was to be enforced against any farmer employing 'unqualified' children at particular times of year, that is at hay harvest, corn harvest or hop gathering. The act's provisions therefore fell between the earlier proposals of Tremeneere and Tufnell. Importantly, there were to be no school boards, and hence no elected supervisory bodies. Neither compulsory rating nor compulsory education were being forced upon the countryside. Applying only to England and Wales, the act was to come into effect on 1 January 1875.¹⁰

This legislation was not simply an attempt to upgrade, however slightly, labouring class education at minimum cost. That the magistracy could suspend education was crucial, an acknowledgement of the ongoing demand for child labour. The power of the existing order was also consolidated and recognized, in that the magistracy was drawn from those social groups likely to be sympathetic to farmers' demands, or to view favourably the claim that children's earnings were crucial to the labouring class. The employment of child labour was a common agricultural practice, particularly in those arable areas, such as the eastern counties, where the type of agriculture lent itself to intensive and seasonal work. Official data,

⁸ Adam Henry Robson, *The Education of Children Engaged in Industry in England 1833-1876*, 1931, pp 175-80; *Dod's Parliamentary Companion*; *Dictionary of National Biography*; Thomas Mackay, ed, *The Reminiscences of Albert Pell*, 1908; Howkins, *Labouring Men*, p 83; Paul Smith, *Disraelian Conservatism and Social Reform*, 1967, p 177.

⁹ *Jackson's Oxford Journal*, 11 Nov 1871, p 7, and 13 Dec 1873, p 7.

¹⁰ Robson, *Education of Children*, p 180.

for example that of the census, seriously underestimated the amount of child labour, particularly that of younger children. This was largely due to the seasonal and transient nature of such work. George Edwards, born in Marsham in Norfolk and later a union organizer and Liberal MP, recalled being set to work crow scaring at the age of six, something acknowledged as happening on a large scale by the Royal Commission on Labour. Even after 1870 the reports of HMI frequently lamented the poor attendance at village schools in eastern England. Once again, this in part explains the high level of concern in the region over proposed curtailments of child labour.¹¹

Moreover, demand for child labour may have increased in this period. By the 1870s rural depopulation was beginning to pose problems for eastern counties farmers. The East Anglian landowner Sir E C Kerrison claimed in 1882 that over the preceding dozen or so years the population of a neighbouring parish had dropped by around 25 per cent. Emigration was not new to eastern England. But by the early 1870s the situation was being looked on by farmers and their spokesmen as uniquely problematical, not least because of the cost implications of diminishing labour supply. The 1873 act, while seeking to curb child employment such as Edwards had experienced, nonetheless sought to retain a supply of child labour at particular times of the year. Unsurprisingly, therefore, this issue was raised throughout the bill's passage. Read stressed the need to suspend the act's provisions 'in certain seasons', while arguing that although some principles of the Factory Acts were being introduced, this was an analogy which could not be taken

too far. So legislation was to be introduced not 'for the purpose of restricting ... employment', but rather to enhance educational provision.¹²

A strongly related issue was raised by the Marquess of Salisbury. While generally welcoming the bill, he had doubts about its 'time and manner', principally because it might deprive farmers of a valuable source of labour at a time of difficulty. The difficulty was the wave of labourers' strikes. Strike action had hit the eastern counties hard, and indeed Read experienced strike action on his own lands. The initial successes of the labourers' unions were putting pressure on farmers already experiencing economic difficulty as the era of 'high farming' drew to a close. Moreover, strikes were not the unions' only weapon. Active campaigns were undertaken to encourage the quitting of the countryside, with the National Union spending, in 1874-5, around £6000 on migration and emigration. When combined with the broader social forces restructuring rural population, this policy had profound implications for labour supply. The need of farmers for child labour in certain areas and at certain points in the year was thereby heightened, most obviously in arable areas at harvest time. In such areas migration could result in labour shortages at one of the most crucial times of year. This was clearly perceived as a problem in eastern England where farmers had, in addition, to contend

¹¹ BPP, 1873, LXXI, *Census England and Wales 1871*, pt 1, tables XVIII, XIX; George Edwards, *From Crow-Scaring to Westminster*, 1957, p 23; BPP, 1893-4, XXXVII, *RC on Labour: the Agricultural Labourer*, pt 2, para 137; R C Russell, *A History of Schools and Education in Lindsey, Lincolnshire*, pt 1, Lindsey, 1965, p 18; Springall, *Labouring Life*, p 64.

¹² C ÓGrada, 'Agricultural decline', in R Floud and D McCloskey, eds, *The Economic History of Britain since 1700*, vol 2, Cambridge, 1981, p 189; J D Chambers and G E Mingay, *The Agricultural Revolution*, 1966, p 187; E L Jones, 'The agricultural labour market in England, 1793-1872', *Econ Hist Rev*, 2nd series, XVII, 1964-5, pp 322-38; E H Hunt, 'Labour productivity in English agriculture', *Econ Hist Rev*, 2nd series, XX, 1967, pp 280-92; E J T Collins, 'Labour supply and demand in European agriculture 1800-1880', in E L Jones and S J Woolf, eds, *Agrarian Change and Economic Development*, 1969, *passim* but especially p 71; BPP, 1882, XIV, *RC on Agriculture: Minutes of Evidence*, q 61,814. For the impact of emigration earlier in the century see, for example, Collins, 'Labour supply and demand', p 69; Anne Digby, *Pauper Palaces*, 1978, pp 92-4; and W A Armstrong, 'The countryside', in F M L Thompson, ed, *The Cambridge Social History of Britain 1750-1950*, vol 1, Cambridge, 1990 p 116. *Parliamentary Debates 3rd Series*, CCCIV, cols 694, 690 and see also Lord Heniker, CCCXVI, cols 714-5.

with the increasingly strong migratory pull of London.¹³

But it was also recognized that the modest curtailment of child labour which the bill entailed might work to the farmers' advantage. It would do so not only by letting child labour remain available at critical periods but also by allowing for an increase in adult wages. Ultimately, a more contented and efficient workforce would emerge. This attitude was clearly articulated by Earl Nelson, who suggested that parents would be effectively compensated for the loss of their children's earnings by the increased value of adult labour. Even if this did not happen immediately, the children themselves would benefit in the future, for the best means of permanently increasing wages and position was education. Others joined in the chorus of qualified approval. The *Louth and North Lincolnshire Advertiser* in 1872 argued that there was increasing agreement on the need for an improvement in agricultural labour while the Warwickshire Chamber of Agriculture was prepared to endorse increased educational provision.¹⁴ It is worth stressing that these were among the more enlightened views of the time. Many farmers continued to be opposed to almost any form of education, and for them the attitudes of landowners such as Earl Nelson were clearly anathema.

The labourer himself did seek to influ-

ence educational provision and this constituted a further component of the unions' threat. From the outset their demands were social and political as well as industrial. Joseph Arch later stressed the desire for a 'higher state of education' in the early days of unionism. This was not least because of the labourers' 'dreadful ignorance', a point borne out by many contemporary observers. The demand for education was taken up by local agitators and propagated by 'leaflets, pamphlets and newspapers'.¹⁵ This concern for education was also associated with religious nonconformity, which had grown rapidly in the 1860s. Many union agitators were Methodists or Primitive Methodists, a point not lost on the primarily Anglican leaders of rural society, who in turn were currently responsible for the vast majority of rural schools. With religious differences causing immense bitterness; with, as Digby suggests, the Anglican Church in difficulty and nonconformity among labourers as much an expression of class difference as of religious belief; with the high correlation between union activism and nonconformism; and more generally, as Armstrong argues, with the emergence of 'class consciousness' in the countryside, it is unsurprising that leaders of the established order could find evidence of subversive conspiracies. For example, the Norfolk farmer and commentator, L M Cresswell, found 'evil' in the union movement, fanaticism in Methodism and ignorance of rural affairs in urban radicals, whilst herself celebrating a traditional order of squires, farmers and Anglican clergymen. This was further evidence of a profound fear of change in the countryside. In this atmosphere, demands for education from nonconformist union

¹³ *Parliamentary Debates 3rd Series*, CCXVI, col 719; Horn, 'Agricultural Children Act', p 30; Frederick Clifford, *The Agricultural Lockout 1874, 1875*, pp 350-1; W Hasbach, *A History of the English Agricultural Labourer*, English edition, 1908, ch V; F E Green, *A History of the English Agricultural Labourer, 1870-1920*, 1920, pts 1-3, J P D Dunbabin, 'The "Revolt of the Fields"', *Past and Pres.*, 26, 1963, pp 68-97; *idem*, 'The incidence and organisation of agricultural trades unionism in the 1870s', *Ag Hist Rev.*, XVI, 1968, pp 114-41; *idem*, *Rural Discontent in Nineteenth Century Britain*, 1974; virtually any edition of *The Labourers' Union Chronicle* in the period 1872-5; Springall, *Labouring Life*, pp 88-9. On other factors encouraging migration see, for example, the evidence of the unionist Joseph Arch, BPP, 1882, XIV, RC on Agriculture: *Minutes of Evidence*, q 60,057; similarly, Clifford, *Agricultural Lockout*, pp 350-1, and K D M Snell, *Annals of the Labouring Poor*, Cambridge, 1985, p 380.

¹⁴ *Parliamentary Debates 3rd Series*, CCXVI, cols 720-1; quoted in R C Russell, *The 'Revolt of the Field' in Lincs*, Lindsey, 1956, p 17; *Jackson's Oxford Journal*, 11 May 1872, p 7.

¹⁵ Countess of Warwick, ed, *Joseph Arch: The Story of His Life as Told by Himself*, 1898, pp 245-9; Green, *English Agricultural Labourer*, p 70; R E Prothero, *English Farming, Past and Present*, 1912, p 410; Russell, *Revolt ... in Lincs*, pp 35, 42; BPP, 1882, XIV, qq 59,912-3.

leaders, abetted by urban radicals, appeared highly threatening, and in part explain the hostility of bodies such as the Anglican Church to agricultural unionism.¹⁶

The union leaders' demands for improved educational facilities can be attributed to a genuine concern for the future welfare of their class, particularly were the franchise to be gained. Within a context of greater social and geographical mobility, and a decreasing supply of labour, a curtailment of child labour would also further increase the movement towards better wages and conditions. For the ordinary labourer, often held to be apathetic or antipathetic towards educational or labour legislation, these issues were more problematical. Tufnell in 1869 found parental indifference to education 'the great obstacle to be surmounted', while Read justified his bill partly on the grounds of bringing to 'indifferent and selfish parents' a 'proper consideration' of their children's educational needs. Many labourers took a view of the household economy not dissimilar to Tremeneere's. This was understandable in contemporary circumstances, particularly in the eastern counties given the operations of its labour market. On the other hand, there could be sacrifice for education: for, as one Norfolk woman put it, 'If I could only get him to be a scholar he should never be a farm labourer'. And the contemporary observer F E Green noted that, despite worries about family income, labourers were generally in favour of education, and certainly more so than

their employers.¹⁷ Agricultural unionism's success in the early 1870s meant that it became an important influence on the 1873 act and was one of the pressures which its proponents had to take into account.

A further aspect of the 1873 act concerned the possible introduction of school boards, particularly in view of the 1872 Education (Scotland) Act. This had made boards and rating compulsory, and was seen as setting a possible precedent for England. Among English farmers it was thought that compulsion in terms of rating, boards and attendance would directly increase costs as well as posing a serious threat to labour supply and costs. The emphasis, therefore, was to be on 'indirect' compulsion. This was to operate primarily by encouraging parents' interest in education, without unduly penalizing them. As Lord Heniker put it, direct compulsion had to get over the 'greatest difficulty of all', that is the effect on children's earnings. But the system proposed would avoid this problem, thereby creating 'an incentive to comply with the Act'. Stress was laid on the 'inappropriateness' of a compulsory system to the countryside. Read suggested it was to be resisted 'to the utmost', since it implied centralized control from London. Moreover, the 1873 act would encourage community leaders to provide educational facilities. Pell argued that any attempt to force boards on the countryside would be educationally counterproductive. Furthermore, while 'many hard things' had been said about squire and clergyman, they had been in the past 'the most practical and useful promoters of education'. The bill, he concluded, had received the assent of the chambers of agriculture and 'provided compulsion in the least offensive

¹⁶ Dunbabin, 'The "Revolt of the Fields"', pp 69, 71; Edwards, *From Crow-Scaring*, pp 31ff; M K Ashby, *Joseph Ashby of Tysoe*, 1974, p 60; Hasbach, *English Agricultural Labourer*, p 282; Clifford, *Agricultural Lockout*, pp 9, 170-1; Springall, *Labouring Life*, pp 90, 83; Anne Digby, 'The local state' and 'Social institutions' in E J T Collins, ed, *Cambridge Agrarian History of England and Wales - vol VII 1850-1914*, forthcoming: I am grateful to Professor Digby for allowing me to consult these essays in advance of publication; Armstrong, 'The countryside', pp 150-3; Green, *English Agricultural Labourer*, p 37; Snell, *Annals*, p 339; A Lady Farmer [L M Cresswell], *Norfolk, and the Squires, Clergy, Farmers, and Labourers*, etc, 1875, pp 29-30, 36 and *passim*.

¹⁷ J S Hurt, *Elementary Schooling and the Working Classes*, 1979, p 201; Dunbabin, *Rural Discontent*, p 201; Horn, 'Agricultural Children Act', p 30; Digby, 'Social institutions'; BPP, 1868-9, XII, Mr Tufnell's Report, p lxiii, para 101; *Parliamentary Debates 3rd Series*, CCXIV, col 693; Springall, *Labouring Life*, p 67; Green, *English Agricultural Labourer*, p 71.

form' possible.¹⁸ The cultural meaning of all this is clear. Urban outsiders could not understand the dynamics of agriculture, not least the demand in arable and labour-intensive areas for child labour. The 'natural' leaders of rural society would, as they had in the past and given further opportunity, provide and administer what was educationally required. That Pell even acknowledges criticisms of squire and clergy suggests a new sensitivity by the rural élite to external criticism, and apprehension over the perceived consequences of enforced change.

School boards also had a more overtly political dimension. Dunbabin points out that the late Victorian English countryside was a relatively easy place to govern, and so the disturbances of 1872-4 came as a particular shock. All this posed a clear threat to the established order. As one farmer put it, the labour upheaval was not simply about a 'paltry' rise in wages. The issue was, 'Are these [union] delegates to rule over us?'.¹⁹ Hence the concern over elected boards. This was heightened by the anti-Anglican profile of the unions; by the association of some of their leaders with Liberalism; and by the support given to the labourers by prominent radical MPs and urban trade unions. This in itself further fuelled farmers' suspicions of outside interference. A challenge to Conservative (and conservative) rural hegemony was therefore perceived. Enforced educational provision was part of such an attack, prompted as it was by radical 'outsiders' in alliance with unionists and nonconformists. Thus the 1873 act was about more than simply education, seeking as it did to maintain the existing order through limited compromise. Read, for example, saw the bill's purpose as providing

every child with a 'thoroughly religious education', while the prayers of the Salisbury Synod in support of the bill were arguably as much concerned with temporal as with spiritual matters. Such fears were not without foundation, since union activists in some areas succeeded in having school boards created in the face of clergy and gentry opposition.²⁰ It was therefore important that the 1873 act specifically did not have any elective or compulsory rating features. Read's balancing act is once again evident here.

Given this, it is perhaps surprising that the unions appeared so impressed by such a limited measure. Early in 1875, just after its coming into force, the *Labourers' Union Chronicle* gave the act extensive coverage, detailing its requirements and stressing the emphasis which the union leadership had always placed on education. Legislation had been passed in the labourers' interests. Now that wages were better parents must look to their duties, 'and one of the first of these is education'. The act was, therefore, a privilege not a burden. Ironically, this came shortly after a vitriolic attack on Read, describing him as, among other things, a purveyor of the 'old Tory twaddle about the "poor"'.²¹ The union enthusiasm is partly explicable in terms of the possibilities the act opened, and perhaps to claim credit for this limited advance. Equally importantly, however, by 1875 the unions were on the retreat, and may have felt obliged to accept anything they could get.

The bill had had its critics. An attempt, led by the future Conservative Home Secretary R. A. Cross, to raise the upper age limit of education from twelve to thirteen was rejected by the Lords, at the

¹⁸ Smith, *Disraelian Conservatism*, p 179; *Parliamentary Debates 3rd Series*, CCXVI, col 714, CCXIV, col 693, CCXIV, col 698; Horn, 'Agricultural Children Act', p 30, and see also there, at p 31, the comments of Edward Stanhope MP.

¹⁹ Dunbabin, *Rural Discontent*, pp 12-13; Clifford, *Agricultural Lockout*, p 43.

²⁰ Dunbabin, 'The "Revolt of the Fields"', p 79; Armstrong, 'The countryside', p 126; *Parliamentary Debates 3rd Series*, CCXIV, col 696 and Earl Nelson's speech at CCXVI, col 720. On the unions and school boards see, for example, the case of Crophthorne in Worcestershire: *Labourers' Union Chronicle*, 6 June 1874, p 3.

²¹ *Labourers' Union Chronicle*, 13 Dec 1873, pp 4-5, 9 Jan 1875, p 4, and 24 Oct 1874, p 1; Horn, 'Agricultural Children Act', p 31.

urging of the Central Chamber of Agriculture. Some Liberals felt that it did not go nearly far enough. A J Mundella predicted, correctly, that without a system of inspection the act would become 'utterly valueless'. Such dissent should be placed in the broader context of radical Liberal agitation for agrarian reform, an important contributory factor to farmers' resentment of outside interference. Indeed not all farmers were prepared to accept even such a modest measure. Pell claimed he had supported it 'at the risk of my seat'. This was perhaps an exaggeration, but can equally be seen as indicating the balance the more 'enlightened', or just politically aware, had to attempt between their own views and those of their more obscurantist constituents, especially tenant farmers. In the Lords, the Marquess of Bath felt it more important that children were fed than educated, and that when rates were high and labour expensive 'it was undesirable to increase the difficulties of farmers'.²² Despite such criticisms the bill passed relatively easily, an acknowledgement, perhaps, of its undoubted modesty.

But if the act was explicitly concerned with economic and political matters, the debates surrounding it also manifest a deep concern over the future of rural society. As Springall perceptively pointed out of Norfolk: farmers 'preferred boys young and men ignorant, for an educated man was discontented, independent, and more fond of reading newspapers than of work'. To put it another way, not only might the labourer, now better mentally equipped, demand higher wages or move away, he might also, through participation in unionism or nonconformity, directly challenge his betters. Hence Cresswell's argument that if education there had to be, it should be in schools stressing 'sound, useful train-

ing' rather than 'book-learning'. A change was taking place in attitudes and circumstances, and in consequence a threat perceived to the established order. Symptomatic of this change, as well as being a contributory factor to it, was education. For exponents of such a view, especially concentrated and vociferous in the eastern counties, educational change had gone far enough, and was now to be resisted.²³

The Agricultural Children Act, therefore, sought to deal with a series of problems faced by agricultural England, and particularly the eastern counties, in the early 1870s. Because of conflicting pressures, the act's sponsors proposed a series of compromises; for example, in arguing for a long term improvement in labour quality they were following in a modified form the strategy suggested by Commissioners Tufnell and, with reservations, Tremenheere. On the other hand, Tremenheere's 1869 approach, stressing the importance of child labour to the farmer and of child earnings to the family, was also influential. The act therefore sought to reconcile such strategies, attempting to ensure economic, social and political stability in a situation of potentially disruptive change.

V

Even before it came into force in 1875 it was clear that the act had problems. In 1873 the Conservative national agent, John Gorst, confided to Disraeli that 'county gentlemen and farmers in agricultural counties really dislike education and school boards'. He contrasted this hostility with the support given to such matters by urban

²² *Parliamentary Debates 3rd Series*, CCXV, cols 1458, 1708 and CCXVI, cols 720, 1151-2; *Jackson's Oxford Journal*, 21 June 1873, p 7; Horn, 'Agricultural Children Act', p 30; Mackay, *Albert Pell*, p 142.

²³ Springall, *Labouring Life*, pp 67-8; A Lady Farmer, *Norfolk and the Squires*, p 35. On attitudinal change see F M L Thompson, *English Landed Society in the Nineteenth Century*, 1963, *passim*; Armstrong, 'The countryside'; Snell, *Annals*; Digby, 'Social institutions'; Hasbach, *English Agricultural Labourer*, pp 360-1; Special Commissioner of the 'Norfolk News', *The Agricultural Crisis*, 1879, *passim*.

Conservatism, a significant comment in itself on farmers' attitudes. In June 1874 Read and Pell were prominent in requesting a meeting with the new Conservative Home Secretary to express the wish that the act did 'not become a dead letter'. The official attitude had, however, already been struck by the outgoing Liberal administration. Its Home Secretary had, in August 1873, told the factory inspectors not to be at pains to enforce the act. The problem was one of enforcement. Read and Pell had argued that public opinion, especially that of the 'natural' leaders of agricultural society, would be the regulatory force, thereby obviating the need for an inspectorate. If sincere, this hope was to be sadly dashed. In March 1875 the Home Office instituted an official enquiry into the act's operation. Among the limited number who responded, the general view was that the act was failing because of lack of official enforcement. The reply from Lincolnshire, for example, noted that few cases had been brought despite 'frequent' violations. This was attributed to the unwillingness of individuals to take action against offenders. Pell was so disenchanted with the problems of enforcement that in 1875 he called for an inspectorate to police the act, a notable reversal of his earlier position.²⁴

The problem of enforcement had two aspects. First, no central government department was prepared to be responsible for the act. The Education Department wrote to the Home Office in January 1875 denying any departmental, or governmental, responsibility. The next month the Home Office reluctantly took control, suggesting a circular be sent to Quarter Sessions and mayors directing them to

instruct the police to enforce the law. Regret was expressed that the police had become involved in educational control. In a Commons debate on rural education in March 1875 the Home Secretary, R A Cross, was at pains to argue that the act had not yet had a chance to operate; that the countryside viewed it as a 'very strong measure'; that critical Liberals were guilty of being 'abstract' and 'politico-economical'; and that should children be suddenly withdrawn from agricultural labour and sent to school, there was the 'danger' of women taking their places. Cross also repudiated Pell's demand for an inspectorate. The whole debate echoed with themes analysed in this article, especially that of rural resentment of urban 'interference'. These episodes demonstrated the lack of any pre-existing network of inspection and the limitations of central government action in this period, and indeed a marked disinclination on the part of the state to expand control into the countryside. As Armstrong has pointed out, the attitude towards rural society in this period was one of *laissez-faire*, and so he finds the Gangs Act and the 1873 act the 'only important legislation passed with specifically rural problems in mind'.²⁵ This lack of central interference puts the farming community's obsession with malign urban influences into perspective.

Secondly, as the Lincolnshire reply suggests, few individuals were prepared to bring prosecutions. The act's provisions were often blatantly flouted. As a correspondent to the *Eastern Daily Press* testified, boys discharged by law-abiding farmers were immediately employed by others 'less honest and more wide awake to the absence of any authority to punish them for a breach of the law'. This was no doubt due in part to the Conservative election

²⁴ Quoted in Smith, *Disraelian Conservatism*, p 180; PRO, HO 45 9373/38913, Correspondence on the Agricultural Children Act, items 1, 24; *Parliamentary Debates 3rd Series*, CCXIV, col 695, and CCXXII, col 1067; BPP, 1875, LXI, *Correspondence between the Home Office and the Justices of Quarter Sessions relative to the operation of the Agricultural Children Act*, p 9; see Horn, 'Agricultural Children Act', p 31, for other examples derived from similar sources.

²⁵ PRO, HO 45 9373/38913, Correspondence on the Agricultural Children Act, items 12, 12a; BPP, 1875, LXI, p 15; *Parliamentary Debates 3rd Series*, CCXXII, cols 1072ff; Armstrong, 'The countryside', p 114.

victory of February 1874. Disraeli himself was one of the Buckinghamshire justices who voted against instructing the police to enforce the act. Moreover, although the labourers' national union strongly supported the act, agricultural unionism was facing severe problems following the 1874 lockout in East Anglia and Lincolnshire. Opinion was clearly hardening against the act, with the magazine *Field* suggesting that to ignore it was no crime, and country schoolmasters being pressurized not to enforce it. A further problem was the perennial one noted by Digby in respect of the Sandon Act, that the responsibility for enforcement was in the hands of individuals who might themselves be farmers, landowners, or those sympathetic to them.²⁶

VI

The early optimism of Pell was, therefore, unjustified. A more accurate measure of farming opinion might be his later claim that he promoted the bill in the face of local hostility. Hostility, especially from the tenant farmers of the eastern counties, there certainly was, based on the belief that education would interfere with labour supply and costs; would tend to encourage rural emigration; and would give labourers ideas above their station, already a problem given the emergence of 'class conflict' in the countryside. The act therefore died virtually at birth, something recognized by Lord Sandon in a memorandum to the Cabinet in November 1875. Acknowledging that to allow school boards in the countryside would challenge Conservative power, he suggested that a measure of compulsion would aid voluntary schools by increasing grant revenue. The act's failure was, furthermore, a politi-

cal embarrassment, since the Conservative Party was taking credit for factory legislation while leaving agricultural children largely untouched by educational provision. Consequently the 1873 act was repealed by the 1876 Elementary Education Act. During the latter's Commons passage Read, claiming to represent the 'residuum of the stupid Party', that is tenant farmers, tried unsuccessfully to modify the bill with respect to agriculture. He objected to agriculture being treated like any other industry, not least because it was, as always, 'healthy'. Similarly, the bill, in attempting to restrict juvenile labour, was doing so in excess of its strictly educational requirements. Read took particular offence that children under ten were to be prohibited from agricultural labour. Certain types of farm work were done cheaper and better by children, and should they not do it, nobody else would. He also suggested, correctly, that the act would cause resentment among the farming community, specifically because of its restrictions on child labour and hence on labour supply.²⁷

The farming community, predictably, remained highly sceptical of education, at least in eastern England. In the early 1880s a Suffolk farmer stressed the high cost of school board rates and the loss of labour. Asked whether boys should be released from school to work at an earlier age, he replied that they might be. This would be to the advantage of the boys' families, and of little detriment to their education. The savings to himself he subsequently made clear in his analysis of the relative costs of employing boys rather than men in tasks such as beet-thinning. The important point here is, once again, the perceived relationship between labour supply and cost, education and, implicitly, the future of the agricultural sector. Farmers now felt they had to pay for education which would

²⁶ Cutting in PRO, HO 45 9373/38913, Correspondence on the Agricultural Children Act; Hurt, *Elementary Schooling*, pp 199, 200; Dunbabin, 'The "Revolt of the Fields"', p 69; Digby, 'Social institutions'.

²⁷ Smith, *Disraelian Conservatism*, pp 247-8; *Parliamentary Debates 3rd Series*, CCXXIX, cols 956-7, and CCXXXI, col 585.

only encourage yet more young men to leave the countryside. As Clifford put it, this was the 'drop of bitterness in the farmers' cup'. In similar vein, Hasbach saw farmers now having only the 'dregs' of the young available, while obliged to support an educational system which 'carries off the young people to the industrial employer'. A bitter price indeed, given the views of the farming community on urban life and urban meddling with agriculture and their concern to preserve what they saw as an stable and structured way of life.²⁸

The education of the children of the agricultural labouring class in the decades from the 1860s was a fraught issue, influenced by a number of interlocking factors. In general, there was a desire to give some form of education, however minimal, to working class children. In the countryside this became entangled with concerns by farmers to forestall the encroachment of potentially disruptive forces. Labour supply had to be protected, and children were crucial in this; school boards were to be kept at bay because of the implications of union participation, nonconformism and compulsory rating; and, more generally, anything which encouraged the labouring class to look beyond life in the fields was to be discouraged at all costs. Educational change, therefore, had more than simply institutional meaning. It was seen as having a range of, mostly unwelcome, economic, political and social consequences. At worst, it represented the intrusion of a hostile and uncomprehending outside world into agricultural affairs. Although not all would have gone as far as the Wiltshire farmer who blamed the depression on the 1873 act, feelings clearly ran high.²⁹ When combined with continued emigration, this

made the nature and duration of education all the more important. Hence the preceding emphasis on the strained circumstances of eastern England, where the potential for disruption to the labour supply and to rural society generally appeared especially acute.

VII

From the 1880s the tenant farmers and their spokesmen were, at least in public, on the retreat. The Royal Commission on Labour noted that educational provision had diminished the supply of boy labour, and that farmers in some areas were still complaining of this. Equally, the commission found the 'more active and intelligent' labourers now being drawn away from agriculture, and those remaining exhibiting a 'general feeling of restlessness'. All this was, the commission felt, self-evident and inevitable. By 1894 Read was claiming that little juvenile labour was now employed as boys were kept so long at school 'that they do not care for farm work very much'. In Cambridgeshire, suggested Pell, male school-leavers were happy to quit the countryside for Pickfords in east London, or the police. All this indicated to Read that labourers had done well through increased wages, which obviated the need for child earnings, and through greater geographical and social mobility. And by 1902 he was further claiming that education had 'done much to depopulate the rural districts', and that school learning had little application to rural life. Consequently, the 'tenant farmer is poor, the landlord is ... poorer still, and the labourer is well employed and well paid'. While clearly a caricature of relative class positions, this is nonetheless further evidence that certain sections of the community felt the old order had come under severe, perhaps fatal, attack in the last few decades of the nineteenth century. But in eastern England schools in rural areas continued to see absences due to agricultural

²⁸ BPP, 1881, XVII, RC on Agriculture: Minutes of Evidence, qq 52,329-41; Clifford, *Agricultural Lockout*, p 351; Hasbach, *English Agricultural Labourer*, pp 268-73; see also Digby, 'Social institutions' and Thompson, *English Landed Society*, pp 196ff.

²⁹ F G Heath, *British Rural Life and Labour*, 1911, pp 256-7. In fairness this farmer's companion, also a farmer, thought education a good thing as it would raise the quality of the workforce.

employment through the 1880s and beyond. The Royal Commission on Labour noted the presence of boys in agricultural gangs in Cambridgeshire and Norfolk in the 1890s, and even in the 1900s children continued to be viewed as an important source of casual labour. Equally, for many eastern counties farmers and even some landowners education remained something to which they were, to a greater or lesser extent, opposed. Fifty years after Caird, Rider Haggard carried out his survey of rural England. On the question of education, he found many farmers, although by no means all, outside the eastern counties grumbling about education. But what they tended to complain of was less the fact of education and more its content, this being seen as unsuited to agricultural life. In counties such as Norfolk and Suffolk, however, the fact of education, and its explicit linking with labour

shortage, continued to be a source of grievance. A number of the themes of this article were neatly summed up by a Mr Poll of Norfolk, who felt the 'principle cause' of the current labour shortage to be the 'system of education in force in the country, where we educated the children for the towns and paid the bill of their rearing, all for the benefit of the cities which used them up'. The continuing fragility of the rural élite's commitment to the education of the rural working class might be seen in the successful campaigning by Norfolk landowners for the release of boys from school to fill vacancies left by volunteers during the early part of the First World War.³⁰

³⁰ BPP, 1893-4, XXXVII, pt 2, paras 89, 137, 107, 139; H Rider Haggard, *Rural England*, vol 2, 1902, pp 529, 384, 492-3, and 513; Russell, *History of Schools*, pp 18-19; Hurt, *Elementary Schooling*, pp 200-203; Howkins, *Labouring Men*, *passim* and p 13; Digby, 'Social institutions'.

Notes and Comments

DR JOAN THIRSK, CBE

Members of the society were delighted to hear that Joan Thirsk had been awarded a CBE in the Queen's Birthday Honours List for 'services to agrarian and local history'. We offer our warmest congratulations. Joan is a founder member of the society. She compiled the annual lists of publications for the *Review* from 1955 to 1965 and the lists of work in progress, 1958-61, and edited the *Review* from 1964 to 1972. A long-serving member of the committee of the society, which she chaired from 1974 to 1976, Joan was president of the society from 1983 to 1986. She was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1974 and has received three honorary doctorates. Her numerous publications are listed in John Chartres and David Hey, eds, *English Rural Society, 1500-1800: Essays in Honour of Joan Thirsk* (CUP, 1990). The latest honour recognizes not only her writings but the unstinted support she has given fellow researchers, professional and amateur alike.

MARIE HARTLEY AND JOAN INGILBY

For over forty years Marie Hartley and Joan Ingilby have written about and pioneered the study of

farming and rural life, chiefly in north Yorkshire. Marie Hartley's first books on Swaledale, Wensleydale and Wharfedale (in association with Ella Pontefract) appeared in the 1930s. In the 1950s Marie Hartley and Joan Ingilby began to work together, and their first book on *The Old Hand-Knitters of The Dales* was published by the Dalesman in 1951. Since then their joint works have included *Yorkshire Village* (J M Dent, 1953), *Life and Tradition of the Yorkshire Dales* (J M Dent, 1968), *Life and Tradition in the Moorland of North East Yorkshire* (J M Dent, 1972) and *Life and Tradition in West Yorkshire* (J M Dent, 1976). For these and their other local history work they were honoured by the Yorkshire Archaeological Society on 1 December 1993. They were presented with the society's silver medal in public recognition of their contribution to the understanding of the county's past. This medal has only been presented on three other occasions. Earlier historians who have been recipients known to the British Agricultural History Society are Professor Maurice Beresford and Dr Arthur Raistrick. The BAHS also sends its congratulations to Marie Hartley and Jean Ingilby on their achievement of this honour.

(continued on page 155)