

Annual List and Brief Review of Articles on Agrarian History, 1977¹

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FEW important articles on prehistory were published in 1977. Most notable among them perhaps was that by North and Thomas (160), who put forward a new explanation of man's transition from hunting to settled agriculture. They contend that population pressure was crucial, since it prompted nomadic bands to exclude outsiders from resources and in the process become sedentary. Resulting from this, and more important, was the development of exclusive property rights which provided a vital incentive to raise efficiency and develop new techniques.

For the medieval period Bridbury (25) takes issue with those who argue that the English economy was seriously damaged by wartime taxation and that the Black Death ravaged a population already depleted by royal excess. He cites the firmness of rents and prices, and the failure of labour to exact a higher real wage as evidence of continued population pressure right up to the catastrophe. Conditions thereafter are examined in two separate articles. In one, Farmer (73) provides a follow-up to Titow's work by analysing more evidence on grain-yield ratios from the Winchester accounts. Although results for wheat and barley were poor immediately after the Black Death, productivity soon recovered and later increased substantially, perhaps because of higher livestock numbers. The author finds no support for the traditional view that abandonment of marginal land was a factor. In the early 1400's reeves were sowing grains very largely where their predecessors had been sowing them a century before. This tallies with conclusions drawn from accounts of an Essex manor examined by Britnell (27), who shows that the fall in corn yields and prices was associated with a more extensive use of the existing demesne. On another aspect of estate management Jones (120) spotlights the land dealings of the enterprising Prior John, almoner of Spalding, who not only successfully consolidated and enlarged properties on his own account but also allowed villeins to deal in land so that higher rents could be charged.

The early modern period continues to be the most productive. On methodology Overton de-

scribes a way of analysing the agricultural content of probate inventories by computer (164), and provides examples to illustrate regional farming patterns and the spread of roots in East Anglia. The limitations of Gregory King as a social analyst are described by Holmes (101), who finds his estimates of income unrealistically low and his figures of population "more the product of strained deduction, of mathematical jiggling, or even plain guesswork, than of firmly grounded information."

There are a number of articles on Scottish agrarian history. Lindsay (136) explains how commercial woodland management in the Highlands was hindered by an expansion of animal husbandry; since trees had to be protected from grazing stock for up to ten years landowners had to weigh possible future income against certain short-term losses in rent and enclosure costs. The origin of the modern rearrangement of Scottish farms into small related groups is reconsidered by Dodgshon (68). Although it was thought that they emerged out of run-rig divisions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the author maintains that the process began much earlier, and concludes that splitting was an on-going process throughout medieval and early modern times. In an article on East Lothian, Whyte (219) challenges the view of stagnation, even decline in seventeenth-century farming, and suggests that the introduction of lime at this time had a significant impact on land use, yields, and the level of rent. Reasons for the survival of the Aberdeenshire peasantry into the late nineteenth century are explored by Carter (39). He points out that lairds found it more profitable to let out reclaimable land rather than improve it themselves, while they also came to depend on the small peasant units as suppliers of casual labour, and of store cattle for fattening on their own larger farms. For England Beckett takes another critical look at the Habakkuk thesis on landownership (12), testing the main points against changes which occurred in Cumbria between the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. In particular he questions whether improved mortgage facilities and strict settlement played more than a limited role in the growth of large estates there, and although the lesser gentry were selling in Cumbria, he suggests that the causes lay in peculiar financial circumstances and speculative mining ventures, rather than in static rents and extra-

¹ The date of publication is 1977 unless otherwise noted. References to articles or off-prints should be sent to the Bibliographical Unit, Institute of Agricultural History, University of Reading.

vagant life styles as Habakkuk has contended.

The inquiry into social conflict continues. Wells examines the cause of outrage among food rioters in the south-west around 1800 (215), and shows that the belief in a "moral economy" had an important bearing on events. The assumed right to food at a fair price led urban workers to intimidate millers and bakers into releasing supplies in times of scarcity. Booth (20) emphasizes the high incidence of unrest at this time in the north-west, where there was a heavy dependence on imported corn, but here he detects a growing political element. The thesis of the "Great Rebuilding" is reassessed by Machin (146, 147), who argues that activity was basically cyclical in nature and related to changes in farmers' profits and security of tenure. Chartres (41) rejects the "binding mud" analysis of road transport in early modern times, and describes the extensive network of carrier services in operation by the early decades of the eighteenth century.

In two valuable articles on harvest technology, Perkins (170) denies (*pace* Collins) that labour shortage was the main cause of the hand-tool revolution after 1750, at least in Lincolnshire and the East Riding. His main argument is that technical change was a complex process in which numerous forces were at work, including existing modes of husbandry and the landownership structure, as well as soil, and topographical and climatic conditions. Enclosure is receiving more attention. Crafts analyses the process at the macro level (48), and finds that prices, though not necessarily wheat prices, had more bearing than the rate of interest. In a study of land purchase in Sussex (40), Chapman finds that it was mostly craftsmen and tradesmen who bought allotments compulsorily sold to cover enclosure commissioners' costs. The commissioners themselves are the subject of a separate article by Turner (208), who examines their skills and evaluates the importance of the enclosure movement in furthering the surveying and land agents' professions generally. In an important article on aristocratic indebtedness, Cannadine (35) analyses the finances of landed families in the nineteenth century and provides evidence supporting the view that large debts were neither uncommon nor necessarily ruinous up to the 1870's, though after this time declining revenues and loss of confidence severely curtailed them. The degree to which local circumstances could inhibit the progress of new ideas is indicated by Colyer (44), who describes the multitude of difficulties confronting an English land agent in Cardiganshire during the 1840's. For Ireland Ó Gráda (162) traces the beginnings of the creamery system from 1880, concluding that although initially the Irish farmer was slower to adopt it than his Dutch counterpart he quickly made up lost ground, and by 1914 had achieved a revolution in dairying.

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