

Review Article: British Field Systems

By ERIC KERRIDGE

IN *Studies of Field Systems in the British Isles*, edited by A. R. H. Baker and R. A. Butlin, we have a highly useful and informative book.¹ All students of agricultural history will feel grateful to the editors and contributors for bringing together so much interesting and important matter, and applying it to a systematically retrospective study of the origins of British field systems. There is much to be said for following in the footsteps of Howard Levi Gray and Marc Bloch and "reading history backwards," in the best possible meaning of this phrase. As Marc Bloch put it, "Here, as elsewhere, it is change that the historian seeks to grasp. But in the film he is examining, only the last frame remains perfectly clear. In order to reconstruct the faded features of the others, it behoves him first to unwind the spool in the direction opposite from that in which the pictures were taken." Bloch argued that the paucity of documentation for the remote past of the rural landscape necessitated a thorough study of more recent phases, including the present, before moving backwards to study their antecedents. This attitude makes sense in all historical studies, for the historian sees the past and the present as one single entity and has only one mind with which, more or less clearly, to perceive it. There is nowhere more appropriate than in the study of field systems for the retrogressive method, and this is far and away the best application of this method to this subject.

It goes without saying that the mere adoption of the retrogressive method cannot necessarily be expected to lead immediately and unerringly to the desired goal. It is no magic wand, and "reading history backwards," in the best sense, may all too easily degenerate into doing it in the worst, that is by carrying false assumptions about the present (and past), and reading them into the old books and documents. In this way, Gray carried German racial theories with him wherever he went, with dire results for his conclusions. It would be less

than candid, too, not to admit that, despite all our admiration for Marc Bloch, and our detestation of his murderers, his mechanical theory of the origins of field forms, though it may be more acceptable ethically than Gray's, is hardly more correct or intellectually satisfying.

The editors of this book are the first to admit that "The time is not yet ripe—perhaps it will never be ripe—for an ultimate synthesis." The retrogressive method has yielded no startling conclusion, and only limited results. We are told that there were marked regional contrasts between uplands and lowlands (pp. 143, 187); that Gray's broad conclusions are vindicated in the West Midlands (p. 231); that the "East Anglian open field system was both more complex and more advanced than that which prevailed in the majority of Midland parishes" (p. 322); that in and about the Chiltern Hills, "whatever their racial origins . . . the majority of early settlers preferred, for some reason, which is not immediately apparent, to cultivate their land in intermixed strips" (p. 374); and that "ethnic explanations of . . . field systems . . . are no longer particularly convincing" (p. 625). If these conclusions seem disappointing, it is only because expectations were too high. Progressively or retrogressively, sooner or later, the student finds himself on the brink of the great void of the unknowable unknown, where is no record and no literary evidence. History without records is a brick without straw. Where neither record nor literary evidence exists, no history can be, and where no history, no knowledge. Speculation about the unknown future may often be correct, but about the unknowable past, never. Very likely we shall have to reconcile ourselves to the reality that the early origins of field systems are unknowable. This acceptance need not be difficult. Each individual's knowledge of even his own day and age is but slight and fragmentary, which is why it is best to leave each man to earn his own livelihood as he thinks best, why we should all mind our own

¹ Cambridge U.P., 1973; xxvi + 702 pp. £11.

business, and why the heads of government should keep their noses out of it. Since we have to live with the fact that most of what goes on nowadays will never be known to any individual person or to any organized group of individuals, it can hardly be surprising to learn that much of the past is unknowable to us. That is why historians concentrate on things they have evidence of.

In some readers' minds this train of thought may eventually sow small but nagging doubts. Outside the fanatics of the Third Reich and the race-relations industry, were ethnic explanations of the origins of field systems ever particularly convincing? Was it really necessary to fill several hundred pages with rather turgid prose before discarding the racial theories, when there is, for the time of their supposed origination, no evidence whatsoever of the existence of races or of field systems or of any influence of one upon the other? And if one argues that race had no effect on field systems, is not one tacitly admitting the racist argument that such things as races, racial purity, and race relations actually exist?

History and geography have this in common, that they are both disciplines and not subjects. Field systems are the subject here, but what is the discipline? Although their wording falters a little at one place, our editors deserve every praise for their clarity on this point. As they so rightly say, "No single formal intellectual discipline can provide a comprehensive solution to the problem of so complex a subject as the past structure and organization of field systems. The value of multi-disciplinary contributions is indisputable, but of equal significance is the contention that each discipline . . . can bring to the study a particular expertise or approach which will often provide or stimulate new ideas about form, function, and formation. In this volume all the contributors save one are trained geographers, with particular interests in the field of historical geography. . . In essence geography is primarily concerned with spatial organization, with the description and analysis of locations and distributions of largely anthropocentric features of the earth's surface . . . with cartographic analysis playing an important role."

But these are historical geographers. Does this mean that their approach, after all, is

multi-disciplinary, combining geographical and historical disciplines? Not necessarily. Historical geography means, usually, a study in which the data are drawn from the past, while the outlook is geographical. Geography—at least this is how the geographers see it—is simply carried into the past. From the historian's point of view, however, this notion enshrines two serious misapprehensions. First, all geographers, all statisticians, all applied economists, and, indeed, almost all people study the past and data drawn from the past. What else is there to study? The present is too fleeting to catch before it has become the past, and the future is not here yet. All geographers study data drawn from the past, some just go back a little further, that is all. Secondly, studying the past, studying present data drawn from the past, need not make one a historian, for all sorts of people, including archaeologists and statisticians, do that, without in the least becoming historians. A historical geographer is, then, a geographer who goes further back than most, but not necessarily a historian, whose discipline, mercifully, confines him to the consideration of record and literary evidence in one form or another. That the contributors to this book are not exactly the parthenogenetic offspring of Clio may be shown from several instances, and most revealingly by their regarding of archaeological finds (pp. 24, 28, 30), "relict features" in the landscape, which "may be studied as primary documents" (p. 31), and place-name derivations (pp. 276–7), as admissible evidence. Nor is the book by any means free of errors of fact and misinterpretations of evidence of a kind that a trained historian could reasonably be expected to have avoided; but let us gloss over these. No one can blame a geographer for not being a historian.

This is a geography book and must be judged as such. Is it good geography? Has geographical discipline been strictly adhered to or has it been violated? Exactly here, the present reviewer is least able to rid his mind of doubt. Is it really good geography to study agriculture by reference to administrative and political boundaries? Some of these chapters are devoted to counties, ancient or modern, like Northumberland, Durham, Yorkshire, West Midlands, and East Midlands; one to a former kingdom, to wit, East Anglia, which is

erroneously made to include Cambridgeshire; two to the kingdoms of Scotland and Ireland; and two to what are called North Wales and South Wales, which are not divisions of any known kind, neither political, ethnic, administrative, commercial, natural, or agricultural, there being no boundary whatsoever either between the two of them or between either of them and the rest of the kingdom. Two other chapters are formed by reference to the points of the compass, giving North-west and South-east England, but are then subdivided into counties. The remaining chapter, although called 'The Chiltern Hills and their environs', is actually devoted to the counties of Oxfordshire, Buckinghamshire, Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire, and Essex. Should Harwich, Coggeshall, and Dagenham really be considered as the environs of the Chiltern Hills? Why were neither modern nor ancient county boundaries taken, but intermediate ones from the late nineteenth century? How can counties or administrative districts ever be, in an agricultural study, more than areas for the collection of data that must later be sorted according to a genuinely geographical conception of the subject? It would have been understandable to have taken the old English kingdoms, or to have followed Gray's similar scheme, for then any tendency to differentiation along state boundaries could have been isolated and identified. Was there really, for example, an "East Anglian open-field system", devised by one of our kings perhaps? One might have thought that the theory of natural regions was by now sufficiently established to have warranted testing the data against them, in order to see whether field systems in any way conformed to these physical, climatic, and biological divisions. Yorkshire, it is true, is subdivided into physical regions, and "East Anglia" into soil regions (rather inaccurate by the way—Marshall would have called this map a "vile daub"); but hardly one of these regions is studied in its entirety, and most of them are summarily split up and parcelled out, like so many orphans, to various county authorities, so bearing eloquent testimony to the baleful influence of the old Board of Agriculture and its ridiculous president and secretary. Yet even if natural regions had consistently been taken

as terms of reference, this would still have fallen a whole universe short of the requirements of good geography, which demanded simply that the field systems be discovered, identified, located, and divided into regions defined and delineated according to the field systems used in them. Had this been done consistently and comprehensively, the regions emerging would likely have been more or less coincident, in England, with early medieval agricultural countries. That this opportunity was quite overlooked, and its theoretical basis not in the least understood, is quaintly illustrated by a conclusion arrived at (on p. 419), that "Regional variations in farming enterprise were but one of the many facets of the spatial and temporal diversity of the field systems of Kent." This puts the cart before the horse. Obviously, in early medieval England, the diversity of field systems was the chief element in regional agricultural variations. Close adherence to geographical discipline would have shown this.

This strange quotation makes one wonder whether it is a wise course to single out field systems and try to study them apart from agricultural history, apart from rural history, apart from general history. When it becomes possible to write of "the deformations from normal practice that were caused by the impingement of one field system upon the other" (p. 281), is not one running into the danger of institutionalism? "The term 'field system'," according to Gray, "signifies the manner in which the inhabitants of a township subdivided and tilled their arable, meadow and pasture land." (He uses "tilled" in a wrong sense.) Then how can one field system impinge on another unless the inhabitants of one township impose it on those of another, and how could they possibly do that? We must beware of using institutions to drive people off the stage of history. Rather than this should happen, it would be better to abandon the term "field system" and all its unfortunate *Raumforschung* und *Raumordnung* connotations. The present reviewer has, usually, eschewed it, without feeling any great sense of loss.

However, one thing about this book is not in the least doubt—its great utility.