

Past and Present in the Victorian Countryside

By ALAN EVERITT

[Review article of: G E Mingay, ed, *The Victorian Countryside*, 1981, Routledge and Kegan Paul. 2 vols, xvi + ix + 702 pp, 172 illus. £40.]

The publication of this book is a landmark in the historiography of rural Britain and the study of Victorian society. Its 46 chapters, organized in 5 sections on 'The Land', 'Agriculture in the Victorian Countryside', 'Country Towns and Country Industries', 'Landed Society', and 'Labouring Life', cover an extraordinary diversity of topics. Their 40 authors break much new ground, draw on a massive range of sources, sum up familiar themes with fresh insight, and point the way to many fields where further research is needed. How rich in interest that world was, every bit as fascinating as the over-written Victorian city, and how rich is the literature about it! The Bibliography alone to this book is a mine of information, almost 40 pages of it with 30 or 40 items to the page, a truly daunting catalogue of contemporary sources and secondary works which anyone working on the period henceforth will need to master. To read these two beautifully produced volumes and realize the depth and breadth of research behind them is indeed a chastening experience. Rarely has the work of so many experts been brought together within the limits of a single book. That many of them are already noted for their work on the period indicates the unsuspected wealth of publication on the Victorian countryside over the past generation.

Inevitably in a work of this scope the quality of contributions varies, so that generalizations are difficult to arrive at. Quite a number of the topics discussed must have been difficult to cover in the 10 pages or

so allotted to them; in many cases the longer contributions have an edge over the shorter, and the more factual or statistical over the impressionistic. What I want to do in this article is to comment briefly on the more successful contributions, and then single out a few broad themes which, in the light of the book as a whole, need further consideration by students of the Victorian countryside.

I

In a balanced opening chapter on 'Rural England in the Industrial Age' the editor indicates the essential threads of change and continuity in the Victorian countryside. This is a task of great complexity but the case is clearly stated and illuminated with beautifully chosen quotations. I particularly liked the account of the north-country hand-knitters, who, 'when work was over and the children put to bed, . . . took their cloaks and lanterns "and set out with their knitting to the house of the neighbour where the sitting falls in rotation, for it is a regularly circulating assembly from house to house through the particular neighbourhood. The whole troop of neighbours being collected, they sit and knit, sing knitting-songs, and tell knitting-stories. Here all the old stories and traditions of the dale come up, and they often get so excited that they say 'Neighbours, we'll not part tonight', that is, till after twelve o'clock'" (p 14). It is well to be reminded at the outset of the extent to which elements of tradition were still woven into the fabric of rural society at this time.

This first section contains several other important contributions. R J Olney's sensitive account of 'The Politics of Land' is a model of lucidity in assessing the relative strength of change and continuity in this

field, in exploring the interaction of town and county, in stressing the diversity of the English countryside, and the importance of market towns as well as aristocratic drawing-rooms in influencing county politics. It is followed by three regional chapters. That on Wales is disappointingly generalized; but Malcolm Gray's crisply statistical survey of Scotland benefits from a keen visual sense and from an understanding of the structure of landownership and of regional variation north of the Border. His map of land-use c 1870 is one that might have been imitated by other contributors. His account of the layout and social organization of the great Scottish arable farms, with their miniature armies of ploughmen, cattlemen, 'orramen', shepherds, and so on, all organized on a strictly hierarchical basis, is fascinating. These were genuine rural communities in their own right, whose inhabitants rarely went beyond the bounds of the farm except to attend kirk and school. L M Cullen's revisionist account of Ireland and its problems is one that every English historian of the period ought to read, though unfortunately compressed into a mere eight pages, so that it demands close attention to extract its full significance. Professor Cullen makes so many unfamiliar points that it seems unfortunate that in subsequent chapters Ireland (like Scotland) tends to drop out of the discussion.

These chapters are followed by two impressive essays by F M L Thompson and W A Armstrong. Professor Thompson's account of 'Free Trade and the Land', if somewhat impersonal, provides a masterly reassessment of the Great Depression, its backdrop and its consequences, further developing the ideas behind T W Fletcher's well-known articles of 1961 in this journal and *The Economic History Review*. Regional contrasts are strikingly illuminated, and though in no way minimizing the impact of Depression, Professor Thompson makes the important point that it was the decline of rural industries and their increasing concen-

tration on the coalfields and in urban centres that 'was the main cause of the apparent improverishment of the countryside' (p 115). Alan Armstrong's discussion of rural depopulation in 'The Flight from the Land' is admirably factual, balanced, and wide-ranging, without oversimplifying a process that was more complex than is sometimes supposed. Dr Armstrong seems to be one of the few historians who can write on population without getting themselves locked in a tunnel; unlike some demographers he sees beyond the essential statistics to the society they speak of; it is one of the merits of this chapter that he shews how much work still needs to be done.

These contributions in the opening section of the book are in the first rank of scholarship, and apart from that on Wales well ahead of the rest in substance and perception. The chapters on literature by W J Keith and Louis James, and on 'The Victorian Picture of the Country' by Rosemary Treble, touch on matters of the deepest interest, but are not backed up by an adequate grasp of historical development. Philip S Bagwell has much of value to tell us on rural transport; but in 'Victorian Rural Landscapes' by Hugh Prince, and 'The Land and the Church' by Alan D Gilbert, there is insufficient sense of regional and local contrast or of that balance of ancient and modern which characterized the period.

The second section of the book is shorter, but three of its six chapters are excellent. In 'The Age of Machinery' E J T Collins achieves an almost perfect blend of balanced generalization, telling observation, and illuminating figures. He is the one author to point out that between 1830 and 1880 agricultural output actually rose by 60-80 per cent (p 200), a fact that needs to be firmly set against the somewhat excessive preoccupation of some contributors with rural decline. He points out the extraordinary scale of a few agricultural machinery firms, like Ransomes of Ipswich, with a workforce of 2500, but also stresses that the over-

whelming majority of the 900 or so firms involved employed fewer than 50 hands each. He draws a sharp contrast between the importance of mechanization for reaping and for ploughing, pointing out that at the peak of their popularity the cumbersome and expensive steam-ploughs were no more than an auxiliary to the horse, numbered in hundreds, whereas steam threshers were numbered in thousands. He also tells us that by the 1870s two-thirds of all corn was cut and threshed by machine, yet emphasizes that the 'pace and pattern varied not only between regions and farming systems but often between adjoining farms in the same parish' (p 206). He is especially good at noticing crucial differences of detail, such as the fact that the steam-plough was uneconomic except in large rectangular fields, and that to accommodate it many farms had to be remodelled. For Dr Collins, in short, the Victorian countryside in all its diversity is a real place, whereas to some contributors it is rather something read of in books and documents, not seen with the eye of intelligent observation.

This chapter is followed by Stuart MacDonald's thought-provoking study of 'Model Farms'. He brings a scientific eye and a dry wit to bear on the realities, possibilities, and practical limitations of the species. In a book where most of the illustrations provide atmosphere rather than hard evidence, his is one of the few contributions to integrate illustrations with text. He concludes that the model farm was an aspect of Victorian morality and idealism rather than Victorian materialism. If the example of Alderman Mechi was typical, with his double metropolitan fortune, his dream-farm in Essex, his endless lecture-tours about its profitability, his *How to Farm Profitably: or the Sayings and Doings of Mr Alderman Mechi* (1859), and his death in penury, the point must be conceded. Like modern university science departments, model farms were always greedy, and almost always unprofitable, though perhaps not wholly useless as centres of

experiment. One point might perhaps repay further exploration: is it possible that the home-farm of the ordinary landed estate, wheresoever limited element of experimentation may have been undertaken, offered the tenant farmer a more practical and familiar source of ideas?

In Chapter 18 Nicholas Goddard gives us a clear, straightforward account of the agricultural societies of the period. He provides a useful map of the 93 local agricultural associations known to have existed in England and Wales in 1835, and another of agricultural societies, farmers' clubs, and chambers of agriculture c 1900. He also tabulates (p 248) the remarkable numbers attending the annual shows of the Royal Agricultural Society between 1860 and 1902. It is interesting to note that, except at Windsor, all the highest figures were associated with the great urban centres rather than agricultural towns: Manchester, with 217,980 in 1897; Kilburn (London), with 187,323 in 1879; Cardiff, with 166,899 in 1901; Birmingham, with 163,413 in 1876; Windsor, with 155,707 in 1889; Nottingham, with 147,927 in 1888; Leicester, with 146,277 in 1896; and Leeds, with 145,738 in 1861. This intriguing circumstance perhaps tells us as much about the Victorian city as about the Victorian countryside: the romance of life on the farm at Ambridge has a long ancestry behind it.

II

It was an admirable idea to include a section on 'Country Towns and Country Industries', and taken as a whole this is perhaps the most successful of the five. C W Chalklin's eleven succinct pages on 'Country Towns' are excellent value. He has done his homework in a wide range of directories, census reports and local histories, covering towns like Tadcaster, Huntingdon and Tonbridge, and counties like Leicestershire, Oxfordshire and Sussex. He makes the important point, too often unrecognized, that 'There

was some industry in nearly every country town' (p 283) at this time; he is particularly good on millers, and on breweries, maltings, foundries, and tanneries. J A Chartres carries the story further in his chapter on 'Country Tradesmen', one of the few to attempt a systematic investigation of the *structure* of the rural population. His occupational analyses based on the census reports for 1851-1901 and on Yorkshire directories for 1820 and 1879 are just what we need; though why he finds it 'something of a puzzle to meet the general shopkeeper' in country towns and villages (p 309) as well as the specialist I am at a loss to imagine; they still exist — why not visit one?

With G L Turnbull, Dr Chartres follows this with a second chapter, on 'Country Craftsmen'. Again the statistics are fascinating, demonstrating the crucial role of craftsmen like wheelwrights, carpenters, millwrights, coopers, blacksmiths, saddlers, and harness-makers throughout the period. While some traditional occupations like straw-plaiting declined, the number of blacksmiths (for example) increased from 94,780 in 1851 to 140,020 in 1891, and saddlers and harness-makers from 16,800 to 30,680 in 1901, while wheelwrights and coopers broadly maintained their numbers at about 29,000 and 16,000 respectively. The two detailed pages on blacksmiths and their creative ingenuity in meeting the new needs of the time are particularly well-observed. My one small criticism of this chapter, and of Jennifer Tann's otherwise workmanlike account of 'Country Outworkers: the Men's Trades', which follows it, is that they do not always make sufficient distinction between town and country. Blacksmiths and carpenters, for example, were by no means confined to country towns and villages; much of the framework-knitting and shoemaking mentioned by Dr Tann was situated in industrial towns like Leicester and Northampton. It must be admitted, however, that the boundaries are often difficult to draw without intensive local research.

Pamela Horn's balanced, sympathetic survey of 'Women's Cottage Industries' suggests how much more there is to this subject in the nineteenth century than some of us have realized. To me at least, the button-makers of east Dorset and the net-braiding industry around Bridport were unfamiliar; in the latter there was a good deal of specialization in different types of net as between different villages. Though the evidence is sometimes sketchy, Dr Horn has the gift of picking out the telling detail: "you could smell a matter a mile off" (p 350) was one local woman's vivid comment on the rush-seat makers of Buckinghamshire. This chapter is followed by one of the outstanding successes of the volume, David Hey's account of 'Industrialized Villages'. It is successful because Dr Hey, like Dr Collins, has the gift not only of seeing the general in the particular but of selecting the illuminating example. He ranges widely over the country and discusses many different types of industrial settlement, quite a number of them wholly new foundations, several of them adding fresh dimensions to the familiar concept of 'open villages'. For Dr Hey, as for Dr Collins, one feels that the Victorian countryside is a real place, not something just read about in books and documents; a sense of its localized idiosyncrasy is one of the secrets of his success. This is a chapter whose ideas will surely be followed up in detailed studies in many industrialized areas.

In section IV, on 'Landed Society', Michael Havinden and Eric Richards contribute excellent chapters on 'The Model Village' and 'The Land Agent', while Jill Franklin's on 'The Victorian Country House' is outstanding. Mr Havinden succeeds because, like David Hey, he combines the visual evidence with an intimate understanding of the social and economic history behind it. This is a field where the visual evidence is particularly eloquent, moreover, and he is thus able to extend his well-known study of the Berkshire villages of Ardington and Lockinge (1966) and range over a wide

spectrum of comparable villages in other parts of England.

Eric Richards's study provides a most suggestive account of the growing power, prestige, and expertise of the land-agent in Victorian England, and an important corrective to the tendency to regard that England as purely and simply an 'industrial' nation. As great estate-owners like the Bedfords and Sutherlands diversified their interests into 'big business', their agents came to head a whole bureaucracy of estate officials: bailiffs, stewards, ground-officers, clerks, mineral managers, and sub-agents of all sorts. The best training for such men seems to have been apprenticeship to one of the top managers of the day, such as Clutton, Sturge, Squarey, Woolley, Thomas Smith, or the Lochs, all of whom raised a succession of articulated pupils who moved on into senior positions elsewhere. Most agents were drawn from the middling ranks of society, the younger sons of country gentlemen, clerics, lawyers, or farmers, while a remarkable number were sons or nephews of agents themselves. As a consequence, there were 'many instances of dynasties of land agents whose hereditary claims on the position were almost a parallel to those of their patrons' (p 443), while a few, like the Oxley Parkers of Essex, eventually established landed families of their own. Some land agents acted as highly respected consultants to other estates, moreover, so that an important interchange of expertise developed between one area and another, facilitated by the ramifications of the country house network.

No less fascinating is Dr Franklin's brilliant analysis of the Victorian country house and the social logic behind its complex evolution and arrangement. She has a sharp visual sense, a noticing eye for the telling detail, and an ability to see things through contemporary eyes. Where others might find only irrational inconvenience and confusion, she is thus able to perceive the genuine social rationale behind each detail in the elaborate planning of a country house like

Stoke Rochford in Lincolnshire. This one article, in short, like Professor Richards's, sheds a vivid shaft of light on the structure and ethos of Victorian society as a whole, and on the subtle nuances of its rigidly stratified hierarchy — both upstairs and downstairs — as expressed in the country houses of the time. These are themes that Dr Franklin has explored at greater length in *The Gentleman's Country House and its Plan, 1835-1914* (1981).

The other contributions to the section on 'Landed Society' are not quite up to this level. Mr Beastall, however, has much of value to say on 'Landlords and Tenants', though his account is based almost entirely on the 'great' estates, and his remark that the 'north and the west of England were more influenced by the landlord-tenant system than the south and the east' (p 430) needs elucidation. D C Moore writes on both 'The Landed Aristocracy' and 'The Gentry'; he gives us some idea of the numbers of these groups — though in the latter case a debatable one — and a useful outline of the general trends of power and wealth. These two chapters raise a general point, however, which ought perhaps to be ventilated here. Both Mr Moore (p 390) and Mr Beastall (p 430) seem to imply that the geographical distribution of 'great' estates and 'small' or 'medium' estates was predominantly a factor of relative proximity to London. While it is true that most of the largest estates were at some distance from the capital, it is doubtful how far the smaller average scale of properties in the south-east was in fact directly attributable to metropolitan influence. Within Mr Moore's fifteen-mile radius of London it may well have been so, especially in Middlesex and Surrey; but that area was quite untypical of the south-eastern segment of England as a whole. Many of the greatest estates of the Midlands and the North had themselves been built up on metropolitan wealth, moreover, while among the areas where the average estate was relatively small were remote counties like Herefordshire as well as areas like Essex and Kent. It would be

hazardous to adduce any single factor behind these regional contrasts; but one circumstance worth exploring is the fact that regions of small and medium estates were often regions of old enclosure. There was less scope to build up a great estate in counties like Kent, where landownership had always been much fragmented, than in those transformed by parliamentary enclosure, *inter alia*, like Lincolnshire or Rutland. Metropolitan wealth has played a major role in the build-up of landed property; but it is important to remember that it never operated in a virgin countryside. Its impact has necessarily been conditioned by local *opportunities* for investment and by the resistance of local economies to intrusion. Old-enclosed landscapes, with their often substantial numbers of deeply-rooted proprietors, were better fitted to resist intrusion of this kind than those subjected to extensive remodelling in recent centuries.

III

The final section of the book is devoted to 'Labouring Life'. Though uneven in achievement, it is good to have the searchlight turned on this field. Alan Armstrong begins admirably with a thorough, balanced, and authoritative demographic account of 'The Workfolk'. Among his many figures worth following up we find that of the 249,000 farmers and graziers recorded in the 1851 Census, 23,000 were women; that these farming households comprised a further 269,000 female relatives and 99,000 female servants; and that women-labourers declined in numbers from 143,500 in that year to a mere 13,600 in 1911. These facts alone epitomize a whole tract of Victorian social history; once again Dr Armstrong has pointed the way to an extensive field for further research. In the following chapter, on 'The Labourer and his Work', Alun Howkins gives us a fine account of the hierarchy of skills among farmworkers and the annual, almost rituali-

stic, cycle of work on the farm. Unlike some contributors, he speaks from intimate knowledge of life in the countryside and is thus able to sense the situation from within, as it appeared to the labourers themselves. He does not fall into the vulgar error of regarding these often highly-skilled men as country bumpkins; he is also aware of the importance of regional variation. In a mere twelve pages, in short, Mr Howkins succeeds in giving us the framework of the subject, while making us feel that we also need a volume on it.

Pamela Horn supplies two good chapters in this section, on 'Country Children' and 'Labour Organizations', both of them balanced and objective surveys of subjects she has made her own. Though a little thin, they are illuminated by a sequence of well-chosen illustrations. In the former chapter, for example, her discussion of the gang-system of the eastern counties is brought home by the heartbreaking story of a Northamptonshire gang which included 35 boys and 26 girls aged 7 to 12 years, and 5 boys under the age of 7, of whom one poor little mite had to be *carried* home from work; to its credit the Victorian conscience was deeply shocked by these revelations, which led to the Gangs Act of 1867. It is also interesting to learn that the 'bondager' system, by which a man had to supply a female labourer as part of his contract, was not quite peculiar to Northumberland, as is sometimes suggested, but was also paralleled as far south as Dorset, where it was customary to require married labourers to keep members of their family available for employment, and where Dr Horn has found advertisements for labourers 'with a working family' (p 523) as late as the 1890s.

In discussing the origins of agricultural unionism, Dr Horn sheds fresh light on the familiar role of Primitive Methodism in the new movement. The impression has often been given that it was the structure of chapel organization that was the crucial circumstance; but in fact the motive force behind it

was rather the fire of religious conviction. At the inaugural meeting of the National Agricultural Labourers' Union at Leamington in 1872, the delegates' speeches 'were punctuated with "devout utterances of 'Amen', and 'Praise Him'", while one member remarked to another, "Sir, this be a blessed day: this 'ere Union be the Moses to lead us poor men up out o' Egypt'" (p 584). In this sense the new movement rather looked back to the origins of Methodist enthusiasm than forward to an age of secular organization; it derived its deepest inspiration from that image of the despised and rejected Christ, the Friend of the outcast and the poor, which was so deeply embedded in Evangelical Nonconformity.

Two other contributions to this section are notable for their imaginative approach. Charles Phythian-Adams discusses the survival of traditional rural culture. He is careful not to overstate the case, but with telling examples argues that 'while certain observances had long been discontinued in many areas, and with them some or all of their attendant ritual detail, many of the mental *attitudes* on which such practices were founded do appear often to have survived' (p 620). Towns like Exeter and Tunbridge Wells, for example, still had their 'wise men' in the high Victorian era (p 616); counties like Sussex and Suffolk 'contained pockets of traditional culture down to the Great War at least' (p 618). In discussing contrasting regional attitudes to 'sacred' birds like the robin and the wren, he observes that such traditions 'helped to perpetuate those invisible barriers between one locality and another which together still contributed to the colour and diversity' of rural England: a line of thought that some other contributors might have taken into fuller consideration.

It was a happy inspiration of the editor's to conclude the volume with Michael Winstanley's chapter, 'Voices from the Past: Rural Kent at the Close of an Era'. Mr Winstanley has a gift for getting at what people remember, and getting them to talk about it.

Like any historical source, the oral evidence demands critical appraisal; where opinion is concerned the memory of the aged may be unconsciously distorted; yet on countless points it affords a kind of insight which no other testimony is likely to yield. One revealing example is the way these Kentish country folk, however poor themselves, tended to look down on townsmen, especially on Londoners, because they were so slovenly and dirty. The Cockney families who came down to the hopfields every summer might be "not too bad" and "tremendously good hop pickers" . . . but they were widely regarded as an inferior class of beings. Their women went into pubs and could be seen smoking, both criminal acts in the rural code. Above all they were dirty. "After they went back we always used to pray for good rain", was one Kentish woman's vivid comment (p 635). Like the tin-miners in Devon and Cornwall, the London hop-pickers were thus looked on as social outcasts, as pariahs, as a race apart: I can remember the last of this attitude myself in the 1930's, when every farmhouse window had to be kept shut, and locked, against those ever-pilfering fingers.

The other contributions to the final section of the book are not quite of this calibre. In her account of 'The Rural Poor', however, Anne Digby usefully highlights the importance of voluntary charity, citing a figure of 4-7 per cent of gross income thus expended by the aristocracy and 1-2 per cent by the gentry. Such facts must be seen in perspective; their contribution to the problem of poverty as a whole must have been small; but they need to be remembered if we are to visualize the complex web of personal relationships in the countryside. On 'Country Diet' John Burnett also has many useful points to make, and commendably stresses the influence of regional and occupational diversity in this respect. Like several other contributors he cites the familiar fact that rural wages were generally highest in the north and north-west, and attributes this to opportunities for

industrial employment. In a general way no doubt this is true enough; but Alan Armstrong's figures (p 499) do not suggest quite so straightforward a relationship. England's largest *industrial* city was, after all, in the south-east; wages were also high in predominantly rural counties like Lincolnshire, Rutland, Westmorland, and the North Riding; and in the early nineteenth century, as Mr Burnett himself records, they were actually higher in Cumberland than in the neighbourhood of Oldham (p 555). There must, in short, be other circumstances behind this oft-repeated suggestion which would bear further investigation.

IV

The wealth of issues raised by *The Victorian Countryside* prompts a number of general reflections which seem to me to need further discussion. First and foremost it must be said that the richness of the book and the range of topics discussed entirely dispel the view that the Victorian countryside was but a poor relation of the Victorian city, without any great interest or personality of its own. Some of the contributors whose work I have not commented on seem to share this view and strike me as a little suburban in their outlook, a little remote from the earthy realities of country life, a little too fond of academic abstraction. Abstraction is an essential tool of the historian's craft; but we also need to see the Victorian countryside through the eyes of country people: we need to see it on its own terms, to recognize its diversity and vitality, and to realize its creative potential as well as its grinding poverty. It was, after all, the world of Adam Bede and the Poyzers, of George Sturt and George Borrow, of J C Atkinson and Flora Thompson.

One of the ways, it seems to me, in which we can make further progress to this end is to devote more expert attention to the visual evidence, and to the landscape itself as an historical document. The illustrations to this book are superb; they have obviously been

chosen with great care; but in a work of this kind it is no longer enough to reproduce pictorial evidence as stage-scenery, however evocative, or merely to give the 'feel' of the period. It also needs to be examined, detail by detail, in the light of the economic and social history of the time and place in question: and for that purpose more intellectual rigour needs to be brought to bear on its interpretation. There is a world of nineteenth-century evidence still to be discovered in the surviving landscape and its buildings, moreover, a dimension of which some contributors to this volume seem almost unaware, and in the unique abundance of contemporary maps. There is no county, not even those revolutionized by urban or industrial development, where the third edition of the Ordnance Survey—or for that matter the modern 2½" map—has not much to teach us; scarcely a sheet which does not tell us something of that marvellous interweaving of past and present, of ancient and modern, which moulded the mentality of the age: 'New things and old co-twisted as if Time were nothing', to borrow Tennyson's expression.¹ These are dimensions of rural society which are comparatively little explored in this volume: there are few maps, and there is not much apart from Mr Prince's chapter about the Victorian countryside in the sense of landscape or scenery.

Following on from that we also need to recognize in the Victorian countryside a more complex regional structure than some contributors allow for. In recent years a highly simplistic version of that structure has come to be accepted among English historians; the contrast in particular between a supposedly 'pastoral north-and-west' and 'arable south-and-east' has become far too schematically envisaged. The basic geographical dichotomy behind it, between the Highland Zone and the Lowland Zone, is a fundamental one; but it is important to recognize that, owing to the complexity of

¹From 'Gareth and Lynette', *The Idylls of the King*; it is quoted in J W Burrow, *A Liberal Descent*, 1981, p 220, *vis à vis* E A Freeman.

The Highland Zone and Lowland Zone, c 1866: Arable Land and Livestock¹

	Total Area (1,000 ac)	Corn Crops ² (1,000 ac)	Green Crops ³ (1,000 ac)	Total Crops (1,000 ac)	(%) ⁴	Cattle ⁵ (1,000 Head)	(%) ⁶	Sheep (1,000 Head)	(%) ⁶
<i>I. Highland Zone</i>	19,768	2,666	1,033	3,699	18.7	2,432	61.3	7,178	42.7
1. 16 English Counties ⁷	15,036	2,146	895	3,041	22.2	1,885	47.5	5,510	32.8
2. 12 Welsh Counties	4,732	520	138	658	13.9	547	13.8	1,668	9.9
<i>II. Lowland Zone</i>	17,551	5,253	1,857	7,110	40.5	1,535	38.7	9,617	57.3
1. 12 'Arable' Counties ⁸	8,801	3,192	1,098	4,290	48.8	708	17.8	4,566	27.2
2. 14 'Mixed' Counties ⁹	8,751	2,061	759	2,820	32.2	827	20.9	5,051	30.1
<i>III. England and Wales</i>	37,319	7,919	2,890	10,809	28.9	3,967	100.0	16,795	100.0

¹ Four counties straddle the boundary between the zones: Staffs and Derbys more closely approximate to the Highland pattern, Worcs and Glos to the Lowland pattern; they have been thus allocated respectively.

² Wheat, barley, oats, rye, beans, and peas.

³ Potatoes, turnips, swedes, mangolds, carrots, cabbage, kohlrabi, rape, vetches; lucerne, and any other crop except clover and grass.

⁴ Percentage of total area of counties in question (see column 1).

⁵ 'Estimated'; the figures are close to those for 1867.

⁶ Percentage of total number for England and Wales (see bottom line).

⁷ Ches, Cornwall, Cumberland, Derbys, Devon, Durham, Herefs, Lancs, Mon, Northumberland, Salop, Som, Staffs, Westmorland, Yorks NR, Yorks WR.

⁸ Beds, Berks, Cambs, Essex, Herts, Hunts, Lincs, Norfolk, Notts, Oxon, Suffolk, Yorks ER: in all these arable land exceeded 40 per cent of the total area.

⁹ Bucks, Dorset, Glos, Hants, Kent, Leics, Middx, Northants, Rutland, Surrey, Sussex, Warwicks, Wilts, Worcs: in all these less than 40 per cent of the total area was arable; in Middx special circumstances operated.

the physical structure of these islands, diversity is the keynote of both zones. For the Victorian period the first Agricultural Returns of 1866 prove this beyond any question. Though it is not possible to utilize these to reconstruct a complete picture of agricultural land-use at that date, since 'hill-pastures' are excluded,² it is possible to compare the acreage under crops in each county and the total numbers of cattle and sheep. The figures for England and Wales are summarized in the table above. They should not be regarded as infallible, since the Returns of 1866 provided the first official 'census'; the numbers of sheep in particular were probably underestimated at that time; nevertheless, the overall picture is confirmed by subsequent figures and the main conclusions are sufficiently clear.³

These figures shew plainly enough the pastoral emphasis of the Highland Zone and the arable emphasis of the Lowland Zone; but they do not indicate a black and white contrast. What they point to is rather the diversity of husbandry in both zones and the unsuspected extent of pastoral activity in many Lowland counties. There were nearly 4 m cattle in England and Wales as a whole at this date, and of these more than 60 per cent were to be found in the Highland Zone, in the great stock-raising counties of the north and west with their vast reserves of rough pasture. Yet of the total of nearly 17 m sheep only a little over 7 m, or 42.7 per cent were to be found in the Highland region, whereas

1868, XII, Appendix, pp 4-5. The figures for cattle in 1867 were close to those described as 'estimated' in this source (4,007,000:3,967,000). The fact that the figures for sheep were substantially higher in 1867 than 1866 (22,014,000:16,795,000) suggests underestimation in the latter year, particularly in certain counties, such as Lincs (1,088,000:1,652,000) and Kent (731,000:1,063,000); but the proportions as between the two zones and their constituent parts did not greatly differ.

²For Great Britain, but not for Ireland.

³The table is based on the abstract of the Returns for 1866 and the Census of 1861 in *The National Gazetteer of Great Britain and Ireland*,

there were more than $9\frac{1}{2}$ m, or 57.3 per cent in the Lowlands. Put in another way, these figures shew that there were 555 sheep to every 1000 acres in the latter region but only 370 to every 1000 in the former. In the two counties of Lincoln and Kent alone, indeed, there were more sheep (1.8 m) than in the whole of Wales (1.7 m), while the figure for Kent (731,000) was not far short of double that for Cumberland, a county of similar extent and one of the principal sheep-raising districts of the Highland Zone.⁴

When we turn to the figures for crops, we find that just over 40 per cent of the Lowland Zone was under the plough, or more than 7 m acres in all, in comparison with 18.7 per cent in the 'Highland' counties, or 3.7 m acres. Yet it is also significant to note that there was a pronounced dichotomy in this respect in both zones. In Wales only 13.9 per cent of the total land-area was ploughland, whereas in the English counties of the Highland Zone the proportion was as high as 22.2 per cent and amounted to a little over 3 m acres. In the Lowlands there was an equally striking contrast. On one hand we find the great arable counties of the east, extending from Berkshire and Essex up to the East Riding, where almost half the total area — sometimes more than half — was under the plough: these were indeed the golden counties of English agriculture. On the other hand there was the great arc of 'mixed' Lowland counties, which included Midland shires like Leicester and Warwick and all those south of the Thames except Berkshire, where only 32.2 per cent of the total land-area was under crops, and in some cases substantially less. The extent of ploughland in the Highland Zone of England was thus far from insignificant; in absolute terms it actually exceeded that of the 14 'mixed' counties of southern England. There is a sense, indeed, in which it is sometimes more useful to think of a threefold division of this country, into Highland, Lowland, and

'Upland' countrysides, in place of the familiar twofold division, though this is not an argument that should be pressed too far.

The figures in the table raise many further points of interest which cannot be pursued here; they are also subject, of course, to some fundamental qualifications. They do not mean that *corn-crops* covered 22.2 per cent of the English Highland counties. Neither do they mean that sheep formed a more substantial element in the *economy* of the Lowlands than in that of the Highlands, since much of the former region was more intensively farmed than the latter, and a substantial proportion of its sheep-population was no doubt associated with a sheep-corn husbandry. What they do mean, however, is that the *diametrical* contrast often drawn between 'the pastoral north-and-west' and 'the arable south-and-east' is illusory, and that conclusions based upon it *tout court* should be regarded with suspicion. No amount of ingenuity can explain away the 3 m acres of arable land in the Highland Zone of England, or the major pastoral interests of so many Lowland counties.

When we consider the obvious diversity of landscape to be found in both these zones of Britain, such conclusions should not surprise us. In the Highland Zone, after all, there are dramatic contrasts between the Vale of York and the Pennine Dales, between the Cheshire Plain and the Peak District, and between the Cumberland Plain and the Lakeland fells. Such contrasts as these cannot be averaged out; extensive areas of vale and plain cannot be dismissed as mere 'pockets' or exceptions; they have always formed essential elements in the economy of the northern counties; they have moulded their history quite as profoundly as the fells and the moorlands; much of the fascination of the Highland Zone surely arises from the age-old interaction between vale and upland. The same element of historic counterpoint is also to be found in the Lowland Zone, moreover, in those contrasts between fenland, field, and forest countrysides which have moulded the

⁴In 1867 it was more than double (1,063,000:525,000).

evolution of the southern counties, the Midlands, and East Anglia. There was a notable tendency towards pastoralism in the Highland Zone, and towards arable farming in the Lowland Zone, but it is important to recognize that it was no more than a tendency.

Stretching across these divisions, both modifying and amplifying their development, we must also recognize further contrasts of landscape and scenery: between former common-field areas and areas of farming in severalty; between areas where family farms still predominated and areas of tenant-farming; between areas of nucleated villages and of dispersed settlements; between districts dominated by aristocrats and those dominated by squires or gentry; between predominantly 'Anglican' districts and those where Nonconformity tended to prevail; between 'open' and 'closed' parishes, between different types of parochial structure, and between agrarian parishes, industrialized parishes, and the parishes of country towns: and so on. None of these subdivisions can be explained solely in terms of the contrast between Highland Zone and Lowland Zone, though they were not unaffected by it. There was no direct relationship between common-field communities (for example) and either zone: though they were particularly characteristic of the Lowland Zone, they were also found in the vales and plains of the North, while they were as rare in the forest counties of the south-east as they were in the Pennines. I am not suggesting that regional complexities of this kind are ignored in the present volume; but there are some chapters where they might have been taken into fuller consideration, since they still formed the matrix of rural society in every part of Britain.

They also furnish us with a necessary framework for reconstructing the changing outlines of the rural economy of the period: its demographic development, its agricultural development, its landed structure, its social structure, and its cultural diversity.

These are matters on which this volume has much to tell us; but what they now need is more *systematic* investigation. Unless I have missed it, we are not in fact given a total figure for the rural population of this country at any date; there is little on its changing regional distribution between 1837 and 1901; the remarkable fact that at the beginning of the Queen's reign England and Wales were more thinly populated than Ireland — in many rural areas much more thinly — might usefully have been commented on. There may be readers who feel that we should also have been given some analysis of a great Victorian source like the *Return of Owners of Land, 1873*, though anyone who has utilized it will know the daunting problems involved and understand the omission. Nevertheless, systematic understanding of the structure of the rural economy as a whole is clearly necessary. In that connexion farming society in particular seems to be accorded distinctly short measure in this book. In the Census of 1851 there were more than 260,000 farmers, graziers, and farm-bailiffs in England and Wales alone;⁵ their farmhouses formed focal points in virtually every rural parish; they made or marred the lives of more than 1¼ m agricultural labourers and farm-servants; and they gave subsidiary employment to many thousands of professional families and rural craftsmen. Yet though appearing incidentally in various scattered places, they are given but a single chapter to themselves: and there is scarcely a word on that lynchpin of the Victorian countryside, the farmer's wife.

V

One of the most difficult tasks for the historian of the period is that of striking a balance between progress and decline, between the forces of continuity and the forces of transformation. This is a problem on which this book sheds a good deal of light and the editor strikes a notably judicious tone in his opening chapter. If there is imbalance,

⁵Pamela Horn, *The Rural World, 1780-1850*, 1980, p. 244.

it is in the tendency of some writers, I think, to overstate the theme of decline; this is a point that calls for some discussion.

The process of transformation varied profoundly of course between different types of countryside, different types of community, different types of farming, different types of occupation, and different classes of society; there can be no clear-cut resolution of it; but in approaching it there is a threefold distinction that needs to be borne in mind. First, the period under review was plainly a far from homogeneous one. Speaking broadly, most people would probably admit that a phase of progress and prosperity during the first 30 or 40 years of the Queen's reign was followed by a phase of widespread stringency or decline. That is quite a different proposition from the period of *continuous* decline envisaged by some contributors, and it enabled many traditional threads in the fabric of provincial society to survive unbroken until a surprisingly late date. Secondly, we need to make a clear distinction between absolute decline and relative decline. In his chapter on 'Agriculture and Industrialization in the Victorian Economy' Dr Holderness dwells quite properly on the relative decline of the farming community in supplying industry with its raw materials; in 1830, for example, British farmers may have supplied 90 per cent of the wool for the cloth industry, whereas by 1900 their proportion had fallen to a mere 20 per cent. Over this same period, however, we must also note that they actually increased their *total* annual production from about 120 m lbs to 130–140 m (p 186). From the point of view of their stake in the economy as a whole, their importance was dwindling: but from the point of view of the *rural* economy of Britain they achieved a modest increase: not a sufficient increase to affect their national standing, but quite sufficient to safeguard a way of life from destruction.

Thirdly, we need to distinguish between those changes which entailed the obliteration of traditional activities and those which

involved their adaptation to new opportunities. This is a distinction which needs to be more consistently observed than it often is. In the former category we must reckon the disappearance of the last of the peasantry, for example, and the virtual extinction of traditional country industries like straw-plaiting and lacemaking. But there were many occupations, like those of the blacksmith, the wheelwright, and the village carrier, which remained essential to the Victorian economy and responded to the contemporary challenge with unsuspected vigour and ingenuity. At some points, indeed, industrial development itself for a time breathed new life into traditional activities, as in the case of woodland occupations in the old coppice-countries of England.⁶ There were also a number of social institutions, such as the village alehouse and the provincial market town, where decline was by no means universal. Even the massive growth of tenant-farming, at the expense of owner-occupiers, did not entail a total transformation of the rural economy, since tenant-farmers were often descended from old farming dynasties and their farmsteads still remained the economic centres of agrarian society. What we find, in other words, is an interweaving of progress and decay, a pattern of continuity within a pattern of change.

These remarks are not intended to imply that change and decay were not profound realities of the time, or that in the long run they were not destined to destroy the whole fabric of tradition. What they do mean is that we need to devote more systematic attention to the survival of earlier forms of life, and to cultivate a more sensitive ear to the language of tradition, a more sympathetic understanding of its *mentalité*. Most of us probably find it easier to observe movement than stability; the modern tendency to restrict our historical interests to a single period, however justifiable on other grounds, does not

⁶I owe this information to Dr E J T Collins.

help us to identify elements of continuity. A certain absence of perspective before the nineteenth century seems to me to have led a number of contributors to underestimate the legacy which the Victorians inherited from their predecessors, and to attribute novelty to some aspects of the countryside which in fact stemmed from ancestral roots. It is easy to overstate the decline of rural isolation, for example — though it was certainly real — and to over-simplify the self-sufficiency of the pre-Victorian village; yet a moment's reflection suggests that if rural society had ever been truly self-sufficient there would have been no need for the medieval market town. There are many topics of this kind in which we ought, perhaps, to delve further back into the origin of Victorian species and to hearken, so to speak, to the testimony of the rocks. In that connexion the touching faith of one or two contributors in the inerrancy of government reports perhaps calls for some revision; provincial people did not always tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth to inspectors and officials; they do not do so today.

There is one approach to these problems which, I believe, might help us to appreciate more fully the way in which past and present were interwoven in the Victorian countryside: and that is by reconstructing individual communities and localities in the round, by investigating every aspect of their history, and tracing out all their subtle ramifications, and the manifold interconnexions between them. Some notable progress in this direction has been made by historians like Richard Olney, Raphael Samuel, and Brian Davey;⁷ but as yet it can hardly be said that we have many studies for the nineteenth century that are truly comparable with those for earlier periods like W G Hoskins's *Midland Peasant*

(1957), Margaret Spufford's *Contrasting Communities* (1974), or David Hey's *English Rural Community* (1974). It would not have been appropriate to include studies of this kind in the work under review; yet a recognition of the need to see people as members of a community as well as members of a social class is surely necessary if we are to achieve a real understanding of the complexity of rural society.

In saying that, I am not minimizing the importance of class-ties and class-thinking in the Victorian countryside; they were often paramount. Yet in seeking to escape from the excessive empiricism of the English scholarly tradition, it seems unfortunate that social history often appears unable as yet to think beyond a few well-worn phrases like 'deference', 'paternalism', 'popular protest', and 'social control'. There is nothing wrong with these phrases; they relate to real ideas; they take us some of the way towards an answer; but they are too simplistic. To reach the heart of the problem demands a more rigorous intellectual approach, more originality of mind, and more historical imagination. For country people in the nineteenth century it was a whole web of personal relationships that made up the daily round of life: their links with village, parish, and neighbourhood, with family, farm, and alehouse, with manor house, church, and market town, as well as with social class. For a labourer in the Yorkshire Dales (for example) such relationships as these were necessarily more familiar, more pressing, more ubiquitous in their impact than impersonal links with fellow-labourers elsewhere. That is not to idealize the bonds of the local community, which could be unbearably restrictive, but to acknowledge an inescapable fact of Victorian society, a circumstance built into its structure. For the re-creation of that structure we need imaginative understanding of all those intricate bonds of neighbourhood, community, kinship, and personality in which the country people of the period lived and moved and had their being.

⁷Eg. R J Olney, *Lincolnshire Politics, 1832-1885*, 1973; Raphael Samuel, "'Quarry Roughts': Life and Labour in Headington Quarry, 1860-1920", in Raphael Samuel, ed, *Village Life and Labour*, 1975; B J Davey, *Ashwell, 1830-1914: the Decline of a Village Community* (University of Leicester, Department of English Local History, Occasional Papers, Third Ser, No 5), 1980.

In tracing out these themes, in seeing how they were articulated in the multifarious landscapes and communities of the time, there is also much that we can learn from the circumstantial evidence of contemporary observers. The work of writers like Flora Thompson is frequently cited to good effect in this book; the editor himself makes telling use of William Howitt, whose *Rural Life of England*, first published in 1838, has already been quoted. The nineteenth century witnessed a remarkable efflorescence of literature of this kind, from the days of William Cobbett onwards. Though it varies greatly in historical value, at its best, like the oral evidence, it opens up an interior view of the period, like a Dutch painting of the seventeenth century, which conveys a more vivid impression of reality than the formal structures of professional history. We cannot dispense with those structures, as I have already argued; but in feeling our way into the *mentalité* of the time, into the customs and assumptions of a society which was still so very different from our own, literary evidence of this kind is uniquely illuminating and has little parallel in earlier centuries.

It points up, moreover, one of the great paradoxes of the Victorian period: the fact that, though it was an era of dramatic changes and unparalleled urbanization, it drew so much of its inspiration and idealism from those vestiges of an older world in which, at many points, it was still embedded. For it is not only in nineteenth-century literature that we see this, but in developments like the Ecclesiological Movement and the Arts and Crafts Movement; in the work of the Vernacular Revival architects,

like George Devey, C F A Voysey, and Norman Shaw; in the long line of topographical artists and engravers, like Herbert Railton, Howard Gaye, and F L Griggs; in the great historians of the period, like William Stubbs, Frederic Seebohm, and F W Maitland, from whom all of us consciously or unconsciously are descended; and in countless other aspects of the age. Why was it that the forms and structures of antiquity, the churches and manor houses of this country, the villages, hamlets, and farmsteads, the market towns and old cathedral cities, so haunted the imagination of the Victorians? How can we explain their intense preoccupation with that tufa-like deposit of the past, that gradual, unremitting accretion of minute historic detail which over the centuries had built up the kingdoms and communities they knew? At one level, no doubt, we can dismiss much of it as escapism; yet at another we can see it as a sign of the unsuspected extent to which the past still lived on in the present, was still interwoven with it, still refracted through the prism of the years. These are not matters that are directly explored in the volume under review; yet incidentally *The Victorian Countryside* sheds a vivid light on them, and that is no small measure of its achievement. For in the long run the marvellous inspiration which the Victorians derived from the past, as they remembered it from childhood, as they found it in the rural world around them, and as they expressed it in literature, in architecture, in topographical art, and in historiography itself, may yet prove to be one of their most enduring contributions to civilization.