

# **Social Investigation in Rural England, 1870-1914**

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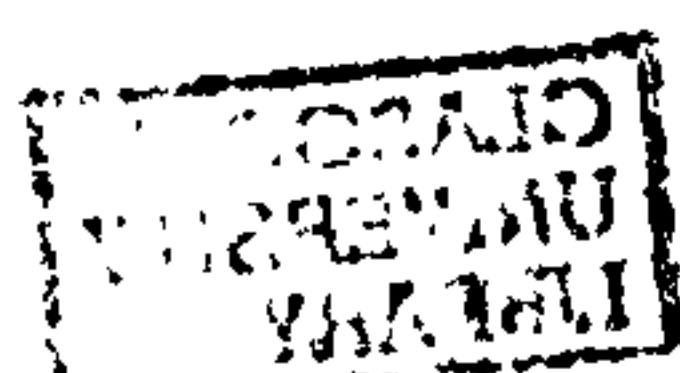
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**May 1999**



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## Abstract

This thesis analyses the work of a large group of social investigators who were active in rural areas in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. It follows on from studies of the investigations of Charles Booth, Seebohm Rowntree, Henry Mayhew and others, and shows how the investigation of rural life proceeded on different lines from the urban social inquiry of the period.

It is argued that the political and social conflicts between town and country, and within the rural community itself, shaped the activities of the investigators considered. The model of a conflict between the 'informant' approach (where trustworthy authorities were asked to comment on the condition of the agricultural labourer) and the 'respondent' approach (where the labourer was consulted at first hand) is used to illustrate the complexity of the structure of rural social inquiries of the period. It is shown that the kinds of information which could be obtained from the two approaches differed, and that the same event or condition could be reported on very differently from two conflicting points of view. This argument is taken a stage further by an examination of another *genre* of writers on the agricultural labourer. It is argued that the social commentary, usually by resident investigators, which tended to be cultural rather than economic in character, was as much a part of the project of social investigation as was the large-scale official inquiry or social survey. Drawing on the work of the few historians who have seriously analysed this *genre* of writers in its urban context, the thesis applies an analysis of this form of investigation in rural areas. The perceived need to communicate with the rural poor on a deeper level was another aspect of the 'respondent' approach to investigation, and is as much a forerunner of modern sociological method as is the classic social survey.

The thesis also shows how the representations of rural communities and of agricultural labourers in the texts of the period affected the practice of investigators, and argues that the notion of the countryside as a scene of social peace and a repository of racial hardihood caused them to approach the task of investigation with particular preconceptions which shaped their diagnoses of the problems of rural life. It is also argued that the representation of the labourer as 'Hodge' discouraged many investigators from adopting a 'respondent' approach. The changing political background to the investigations is carefully traced: the agricultural trade unionism of the 1870s, the depopulation of the 1880s and 1890s, the integration of the labourer into national political life, the 'national efficiency' concerns of the 1900s, and the land question in the 1890s and 1900s. The thesis is always concerned to keep in view the investigated populations themselves, and where possible illustrates working-class responses to the efforts of social investigators.

The sources used are the main official inquiries of the period, in particular the Royal Commission on Labour and the Board of Trade inquiries of the 1900s; Rider Haggard's investigation of 1901-2, including archival material relating to it; newspapers and periodicals; the less well-known rural investigations by Charles Booth and Seebohm Rowntree; the rural social surveys of Maud Davies and Harold Mann; the reports of the Liberal Land Enquiry Committee; and a wide range of published books, including works by (among others) Francis Heath, Augustus Jessopp, Richard Jefferies, Anderson Graham, George Millin, George Sturt, Stephen Reynolds, F. E. Green and T. E. Kebbel.



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## Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank my supervisor, Anne Crowther, who has overseen this thesis from conception to completion, and whose comments on earlier drafts have been invaluable. I would also like to thank the other members of the Department of Economic and Social History, in particular Eleanor Gordon who has given me valuable assistance. The department has kindly assisted me to attend various conferences. Additionally, Bridget Fowler of the Department of Sociology has drawn my attention to some interesting references. I have also learned much from conversations with Peter Hennock and Susan Cohen.

I have been assisted by John Moore of Glasgow University Library; and would also like to acknowledge useful communications from Mr. B. Carpenter of the Devon Record Office, Philip Saunders of the County Record Office in Cambridge and John d'Arcy of the Wiltshire Record Office. The staff of Norfolk Record Office were helpful when I consulted Rider Haggard's papers, and I would like to place on record my gratitude to them. Pauline McCormack and Ewan MacLean have helped me to solve countless computer-related problems.

On a personal level, I want to thank my fellow postgraduates Ian Anderson, Matt Egan, and Nicola Sneddon, whose company during long hours in the department has always been greatly appreciated. Finally, and most importantly, I would like to thank my parents, Alec and Catherine Freeman, whose support and encouragement has been invaluable throughout, and to whom this thesis is dedicated as a small token of my appreciation and gratitude.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

This thesis examines a large group of social investigators who were at work in rural areas in the period 1870-1914. The historiography of social investigation in Britain in the late Victorian and Edwardian periods has primarily concentrated on the pioneering social surveys of Charles Booth in London and Seebohm Rowntree in York, with not infrequent glances back towards Henry Mayhew and his descriptions of metropolitan trades and low-life. All three have attracted full-length studies.<sup>1</sup> The role of Arthur Bowley, the academic mathematician who pioneered the sample survey of poverty, has also been commented upon in the literature;<sup>2</sup> and Roger Davidson has analysed the collection of labour statistics by the Board of Trade under the energetic Hubert Llewellyn Smith.<sup>3</sup> The works of Booth and Rowntree in particular attract considerable academic scrutiny, often under all-embracing titles. Englander and O'Day's collection *Retrieved Riches*, for example, is subtitled *Social Investigation in Britain 1840-1914*, which belies its almost exclusive concentration on Booth and his collaborators. In particular, historians have been reluctant to consider attempts to document rural poverty, partly because Mayhew, Booth, Rowntree and Bowley are all known for their surveys of urban areas. The period was, however, also notable for attempts to investigate rural life. For example, Mayhew's investigations in London, which have been the most admired of mid-century social inquiries, formed only one of three series of articles in the *Morning Chronicle*; another dealt with rural districts.<sup>4</sup> Mayhew's investigative skills and descriptive ability have ensured that his articles have been remembered while those of his colleagues have been largely forgotten, to be cited occasionally by social historians of

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<sup>1</sup> Asa Briggs, *Social Thought and Social Action: A Study of the Work of Seebohm Rowntree* (1960); T. S. & M. B. Simey, *Charles Booth: Social Scientist* (1960); Anne Humpherys, *Travels in the Poor Man's Country: The Work of Henry Mayhew* (Firle, Sussex, 1977); *Henry Mayhew* (Boston, 1984); Rosemary O'Day & David Englander, *Mr. Charles Booth's Inquiry: Life and Labour of the People in London Reconsidered* (1993); Englander & O'Day (eds.), *Retrieved Riches: Social Investigation in Britain 1840-1914* (Aldershot, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> E. P. Hennock, 'The Measurement of Urban Poverty: From the Metropolis to the Nation 1880-1920', *Economic History Review*, 2nd. series, vol. XL, no. 2 (1987), pp. 219-26; 'Concepts of Poverty in the British Social Surveys from Charles Booth to Arthur Bowley', in Martin Bulmer, Kevin Bales and K. K. Sklar (eds.), *The Social Survey in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 189-216.

<sup>3</sup> Roger Davidson, *Whitehall and the Labour Problem in Late-Victorian and Edwardian Britain* (1982); 'Llewellyn Smith, the Labour Department and Government Growth 1886-1909' in Gillian Sutherland (ed.), *Studies in the Growth of Nineteenth-Century Government* (1972), pp. 227-62.

<sup>4</sup> Some of these articles, as well as the series on the manufacturing districts, have been reprinted in P. E. Razzell & R. W. Wainwright (eds.), *The Victorian Working Class: Selections from Letters to the Morning Chronicle* (1973).



rural Britain, but not studied as significant social investigations in themselves. In later years, Booth's survey of *Life and Labour of the People in London*<sup>5</sup> and Rowntree's study of *Poverty* in York<sup>6</sup> were the most ambitious investigative ventures; but their prominence has obscured the efforts of many other social investigators and commentators whose individual impact may have been less than Booth's or Rowntree's, but nevertheless form a large group whose work can tell us much about the nature of the society in which they operated. Historians are beginning to rediscover and reinterpret some social investigators of the period, particularly women such as Florence Bell,<sup>7</sup> Helen Bosanquet<sup>8</sup> and Martha Loane,<sup>9</sup> who fit into a long-established philanthropic and socially educative tradition of house-visiting, as well as Beatrice Webb and Clara Collett who collaborated with Charles Booth.<sup>10</sup> Rural and agricultural historians have been aware of many of the investigators who worked in the countryside. Dennis Mills, for example, has made extensive use of Maud Davies's study of Corsley in Wiltshire (*Life in an English Village* (1909)) in his analysis of the structure of rural society;<sup>11</sup> and historians of country life have cited the work of Francis Heath, Augustus Jessopp, Thomas Kebbel, Rider Haggard, George Sturt, Stephen Reynolds and others whom this thesis will consider. These investigators' activities, however, have rarely been subjected to any serious analysis. It will be remembered that Rowntree himself, one of the best-known investigators of 'town life', was interested in problems of agriculture, and produced a study of agricultural labourers' budgets, *How the Labourer Lives* (1913), as well as other books and articles on rural problems.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, it might be argued that Rowntree's own urban work cannot be fully understood without reference to his views on aspects of rural

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<sup>5</sup> Charles Booth (ed.), *Life and Labour of the People in London* (17 vols., 1902-3 [1st. ed. 2 vols., 1889; 2nd. ed. 10 vols., 1892-7]).

<sup>6</sup> B. Seebohm Rowntree, *Poverty: A Study of Town Life* (2nd. ed., 1902 [1st. ed. 1901]).

<sup>7</sup> Lady Bell, *At the Works: A Study of a Manufacturing Town* (1907). A second edition was published in 1911, and the first edition was reprinted by Virago in 1985 with an introduction by Angela V. John.

<sup>8</sup> See for example Mrs. Bernard Bosanquet, *Rich and Poor* (1896); *The Standard of Life, and Other Studies* (1898); (ed.) *Social Conditions in Provincial Towns* (1912); 'Wages and Housekeeping' in C. S. Loch (ed.), *Methods of Social Advance* (1904), pp. 131-46.

<sup>9</sup> M. Loane, *The Queen's Poor: Life as they Find it in Town and Country* (1905); *The Next Street But One* (1907); *From Their Point of View* (1908); *An Englishman's Castle* (1909); *Neighbours and Friends* (1910); *The Common Growth* (1911). See Susan Cohen, 'The Life and Works of M. Loane', MPhil thesis, Middlesex University, 1998; 'Miss Loane, Florence Nightingale, and District Nursing in Late Victorian Britain', *Nursing History Review*, vol. V (1997), pp. 83-103.

<sup>10</sup> See for example Rosemary O'Day, 'Before the Webbs: Beatrice Potter's Early Investigations for Charles Booth's Inquiry', *History*, vol. LXXVIII (1993), pp. 218-42; 'Women and Social Investigation: Clara Collett and Beatrice Potter', in Englander & O'Day (eds.), *Retrieved Riches*, pp. 165-200.

<sup>11</sup> Dennis Mills, *Lord and Peasant in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (1980), pp. 54-60.

<sup>12</sup> B. Seebohm Rowntree & May Kendall, *How the Labourer Lives: A Study of the Rural Labour Problem*



life. Arthur Bowley, famous for the sample survey of poverty in five towns,<sup>13</sup> also concerned himself with problems of rural economics and demography.<sup>14</sup> The investigators considered in this thesis represent an important investigative tradition - or traditions - even if they often operated in a different mode from the urban surveys.

Not only has the history of social investigation concentrated on the urban social survey, but the social survey has generally been equated with the poverty survey. In the 1930s, A. F. Wells, an early historian of the method, identified the concern with working-class poverty as a defining characteristic of the social survey.<sup>15</sup> Charles Booth is usually regarded as the founding father of this form of social study, although most historians rightly nod in the direction of the Statistical Societies of the 1830s as forerunners in the tradition.<sup>16</sup> The social survey, however, was only one form of inquiry: social investigation includes a great deal of work which in no way fits into the survey tradition. An important tradition which tends to be masked by the historiographical concentration on a few, mostly large-scale, surveys is the cultural study of working-class life. Social investigation was a broader field than the measurement of poverty, as those who were engaged in poverty surveys were well aware, and this thesis will argue that the personal study of the poor, especially the rural poor, was an equally important feature of social inquiry in this period, and has as much in common with modern sociological and anthropological developments as has the classic urban social survey. Some historians have pointed to the more cultural study of working-class life: Ross McKibbin, for example, has considered the work of Bell, Bosanquet and Loane in predominantly urban areas;<sup>17</sup> and Standish Meacham has documented the influence of Toynbee Hall - as much

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(1913); B. Seebohm Rowntree, *Land and Labour: Lessons from Belgium* (1910).

<sup>13</sup> A. L. Bowley & A. R. Burnett-Hurst, *Livelihood and Poverty: A Study in the Economic Conditions of Working-Class Households in Northampton, Warrington, Stanley and Reading* (1915). This was followed by a study of a fifth town, Bolton.

<sup>14</sup> See for example A. L. Bowley, 'Rural Population in England and Wales: A Study of the Changes of Density, Occupations and Ages', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, vol. LXVII (1913-14), pp. 597-652.

<sup>15</sup> A. F. Wells, *The Local Social Survey in Great Britain* (1935), pp. 13, 26-7. This definition excludes, among other things, the 'regional surveys' of Patrick Geddes and his collaborators.

<sup>16</sup> T. S. Ashton, *Economic and Social Investigations in Manchester 1833-1933: A Centenary History of the Manchester Statistical Society* (Brighton, 1977 [1st. ed. 1934]); Eileen Janes Yeo, *The Contest for Social Science: Relations and Representations of Gender and Class* (1996), chs. 1-3; Englander & O'Day, *Retrieved Riches*, pp. 5, 7-10.

<sup>17</sup> Ross McKibbin, 'Class and Poverty in Edwardian England' in *The Ideologies of Class: Social Relations in Britain 1880-1950* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 169-96.



an educational as an investigative institution, but one which nevertheless was central to late-Victorian attempts to bridge the gap between the 'two nations' of Britain - on such men as William Beveridge, R. H. Tawney and Hubert Llewellyn Smith.<sup>18</sup> David Englander has used the unpublished notebooks from Charles Booth's survey to argue that *Life and Labour* was by no means as reductively economic and statistical in its conception as the seventeen published volumes would suggest.<sup>19</sup> This thesis will apply some of these arguments to the rural scene, identifying particular moral problems and preoccupations which affected the investigation of rural areas, and showing that the statistical analysis of poverty did not occur in a moral or cultural vacuum. Most of those who engaged in the transmission of information about rural working-class life were not 'scientific' in approach; and this thesis attempts to show that in rural areas at least, the non-statistical, and in some cases 'anti-statistical',<sup>20</sup> approach was respected as a mode of investigation.

On the other hand, however, in attempting to claim as investigators a number of social commentators who might not normally have been so considered, this thesis will illustrate a methodological awareness, however crude, among journalists and assorted writers who went among the rural poor and commented on their standard of living, outlook and disposition. Henry Mayhew has been reclaimed along these lines, with much justification. E. P. Thompson and Eileen Yeo, concentrating on his less well-known output, have argued that he was a systematic social investigator;<sup>21</sup> and he was indeed an effective investigator of the metropolitan poor, even if unable to provide the sort of quantitative data on which Booth's survey was based. A. F. Wells suggested in 1935 that Mayhew's method 'is essentially non-statistical: it is rather the concrete descriptive method of a journalist or novelist. His spiritual relatives are Dickens and

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<sup>18</sup> Standish Meacham, *Toynbee Hall and Social Reform 1880-1914: The Search for Community* (New Haven, Connecticut, 1987).

<sup>19</sup> David Englander, 'Comparisons and Contrasts: Henry Mayhew and Charles Booth as Social Investigators' in Englander & O'Day (eds.), *Retrieved Riches*, pp. 105-42.

<sup>20</sup> The term is used of Henry Mayhew by E. P. Thompson in 'The Political Education of Henry Mayhew', *Victorian Studies*, vol. XI (Sept. 1967), p. 58: 'His method is in fact anti-statistical and constructively so: by counterposing statistical generalities with actual life histories and individual witness, he is both offering a running commentary - and criticism - of the generalities, and offering a different framework within which they may be read.'

<sup>21</sup> E. P. Thompson & Eileen Yeo (eds.), *The Unknown Mayhew: Selections from the Morning Chronicle, 1849-1850* (1971).

Defoe.<sup>22</sup> Commenting on Mayhew and Edwardian commentaries such as Alexander Paterson's *Across the Bridges*, Wells argued that such works

if their aims and scope are considered, might fall into the category of surveys, but their value as such is somewhat doubtful. Some have been influential. If the impressions which these works give to the reader happens to correspond to the facts, then they may be of use, even of great use. By and large, however, the journalistic method when used by itself is unsafe, even dangerous.<sup>23</sup>

In more recent times, Catherine Marsh has argued that, while Mayhew has been made out to have been a proto-Booth, he was primarily a journalist using qualitative rather than quantitative methods.<sup>24</sup> He was, however, well aware of methodological problems in his work - the calculation of wage-rates in the London trades, for example, as Eileen Yeo has explained;<sup>25</sup> and the technique and practice of interviewing as a research tool, which Anne Humpherys has analysed in some depth.<sup>26</sup> As chapters 3 and 5 will make clear, while there were doubts in some quarters about the reliability of evidence taken in the field by investigators in rural areas, these men tended, like Mayhew, to understand the methodological difficulties inherent in the collection of information about the poor, even if they did not apply this knowledge as rigorously as Booth or others; and the appropriate methodology was often the subject of heated debate.

Although the social survey was but one aspect of social investigation, the concept of the 'survey' retains its analytical usefulness. Eileen Yeo has pointed to the origins of the word, noting that it signifies a view from above - a *sur-view* - and has applied this point to her analysis of the early social survey.<sup>27</sup> Many of those who investigated and explored the poor man's world in the Victorian and Edwardian period were also aware of the difference between a view 'from above' and a view more or less 'from below', or at least from a less 'elevated' position. To take a symbolic example, Henry Mayhew once observed London from a balloon, and Bertrand Taithe has argued that this physical

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<sup>22</sup> A. F. Wells, *The Local Social Survey*, p. 14.

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*, p. 14n1.

<sup>24</sup> Catherine Marsh, *The Survey Method: The Contribution of Surveys to Sociological Explanation* (1982), p. 13.

<sup>25</sup> Eileen Janes Yeo, 'The Social Survey in Social Perspective', in Bulmer *et al* (eds.), *The Social Survey*, p. 53.

<sup>26</sup> Humpherys, *Travels in the Poor Man's Country: The Work of Henry Mayhew* (Athens, Georgia, 1977), pp. 87-94.

<sup>27</sup> Yeo, *Contest*, p. 27.



bird's-eye view symbolically emphasised the sense of distance between the readership of *London Labour and the London Poor* and the poor who were represented in it: the investigator and the readers were estranged from the objects of investigation by a sense of distance, and the view was one which enabled a 'scientization or objectivization' of the lives of the poor.<sup>28</sup> The view 'from above' could reveal little of the cultural lives of the observed. Thus when Charles Dickens's *protégé* John Hollingshead spent 17 hours observing East London from the top of the Monument, ascending at 4pm on December 31st 1857 and coming down at 9am on January 1st 1858, he recognised that his lofty perspective distanced him from those who were living out their lives below him: 'Unequal and vastly different they may be to each other, with all their outer and their inner trappings ... but, to me, they appear only as a set of amusing puppets acting a play.'<sup>29</sup> The individuality of those under observation was denied by the extensive but detached viewpoint Hollingshead enjoyed. Both Hollingshead and Mayhew recognised this, and formulated their approaches to the metropolitan poor accordingly: Mayhew in particular is well known for his close contact with the classes he investigated. However, by analogy, the survey of Charles Booth, for example, viewed the London poor from a perspective which meant that they must be seen as a mass, a crowd, rather than a collection of individuals.

The 'survey', therefore, for the purposes of this thesis, has two meanings: firstly, a method, distinguished by its scope and comprehensiveness; and secondly an attitude. The investigator who approached the rural poor 'from above' would be less likely to consult them about their own condition, and more likely to rely on the testimony of observers, sympathetic or otherwise. The choice of approach - 'from above' *versus* 'from below' - was crucial in the context of the rural social and political scene in this period.

Eileen Yeo has traced *The Contest for Social Science* from the late-eighteenth to the mid-twentieth century, and identifies the political and social contestability of key concepts in the social science arena, and of access to 'scientific space'. She argues that

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<sup>28</sup> Bertrand Taithe (ed.), *The Essential Mayhew: Representing and Communicating the Poor* (1996), pp. 16-17.

<sup>29</sup> John Hollingshead, *Under Bow Bells: A City Book for All Readers* (1860), p. 56.

the nineteenth century middle-class social survey took a particular moral standpoint which emphasised the separateness of working-class life and portrayed the classes under investigation as degraded and almost sub-human.<sup>30</sup> She gives particularly detailed attention to the Manchester Statistical Society and influential early-nineteenth century investigators such as Sir James Kay-Shuttleworth.<sup>31</sup> The statistical approach to investigation, for Yeo, enabled the investigator to bypass working-class culture and reduced the analysis of cultural meanings to the merely numerical. It was, in fact, symptomatic of the cultural distance between investigator and investigated:

The devaluing way in which middle-class social investigators often constructed the poor did not come from or lead to mutual respect. Kay-Shuttleworth's adjectives of "loathsome", "noisome", "squalid", "disgusting", and "revolting" to signify some of the customs of poor people, blocked the recognition of separate and valid cultures among the working classes. People "rubbished" in this way were not likely to be regarded as having legitimate access to the arena of public speech, and their representation of their own experience was likely to be excluded from scientific space ... On the whole, the middle-class investigators had an affinity for statistics partly because they did not need to develop methods of inquiry and presentation which would allow cultural facts about meanings and values, habits and customs, to be expressed. The presence or absence of an activity or of membership in a school or church was a sufficient register of intellectual and moral condition. This kind of information could be expressed statistically.<sup>32</sup>

This was the 'survey' method in both senses: the statistical overview and the 'view from above'. Yeo argues that, unusually among mid-century social investigators, Henry Mayhew avoided this marginalisation of the poor man's experience, because, in allowing the poor to speak for themselves, his picture of working-class life came to some extent from the inside. He allowed the cultural life of the London costermongers, for example, to express itself without being adjectivally damned in the manner of Kay-Shuttleworth's poor. Arguing that there was a 'Mayhew Moment',<sup>33</sup> rapidly swallowed up by wider social and intellectual currents, Yeo suggests that Mayhew was well aware of the 'conflicting vantage points'<sup>34</sup> of the employer and employee, and was inclined to give more weight in his investigations to the opinions of the latter. In this respect, he was an unusual figure in the context of mid-century social investigation, expressing the

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<sup>30</sup> Yeo, *Contest*, ch. 3.

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.*, p. 73.

<sup>33</sup> Yeo, 'The Social Survey', p. 53.

<sup>34</sup> Yeo, *Contest*, p. 86.



working-class side of a 'contest' which was at the time dominated by a middle-class agenda. Later in the century, it is argued, working-class opinion had more input into the social science arena, but still generally remained subordinate in the activities of social investigators.

The particular social structure of the countryside gave rise to a different investigative contest, but one which was no less bitter at times than its urban counterpart. The urban scene did not have a monopoly of class tensions in the nineteenth century. In rural Britain, however, some of the contests were played out in ways largely unknown in urban areas; and their effects on social investigation have not yet been adequately explained. The countryside was thought to possess a particular social structure and mode of social life, the key aspect of which was the paternalist order which still, supposedly, functioned in the villages where it had failed in the towns.<sup>35</sup> Where urbanisation had riven the classes apart, creating the 'two nations' of rich and poor, the rural world was perceived as a scene of relative social harmony. The landlord, tenant farmer and agricultural labourer were often referred to as the three 'orders' rather than 'classes' of rural society, and the paternalism that such an order generated was supplemented by the pastoral role of the country parson and his family. Even in the late-nineteenth century, a roseate picture of country life was served up to the urban reader by authors of country books, who drew the squire and parson as socially involved, conscientious and friendly characters, always ready with a smile for the labouring families in their midst. Certainly this was the ideal that was expected of the rural world. In this context, reinforced by the literary tradition, it was urban, not rural, Britain that was regarded as the place where the investigation of one class by another was necessary.

As various historians of rural life have shown, however, the notion that the rural world was really a scene of social peace is not borne out by a detailed study of rural life. There is a substantial literature detailing rural trade unionism, riots and other forms of social protest. This is not the place to debate this in any detail. A brief glance at the literature, however, is instructive. E. P. Thompson and George Rudé have described the 'Captain Swing' riots of 1830;<sup>36</sup> Barry Reay has argued for the wider significance of the

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<sup>35</sup> See David Roberts, *Paternalism in Early Victorian England* (1979).

<sup>36</sup> E. P. Thompson & George Rudé, *Captain Swing* (Harmondsworth, 1973 [1st. ed. 1969]).



‘Battle of Bosenden Wood’, a Kentish insurrection of 1838,<sup>37</sup> and J. P. D. Dunbabin, Pamela Horn and others have drawn attention to the ‘revolt of the field’ in the early 1870s, when the great strike of 1872, the formation of Joseph Arch’s National Agricultural Labourers’ Union and the bitterness surrounding the East Anglian lockout of 1874 challenged traditional assumptions about rural social harmony.<sup>38</sup> David Jones and Alun Howkins have provided particularly valuable evidence of a continuous undercurrent of social protest and conflict before and after 1872.<sup>39</sup> Although these historians have both dealt with East Anglia, a site of particularly bitter conflict on occasions, there is evidence for similarly strained class relationships in other areas of the south of England. K. D. M. Snell, for example, has shown, using primarily literary evidence, that the Dorset agricultural labourers in the later nineteenth century were ‘associated with about the most squalid and depressed living conditions to be found in England, and the most embittered class relations’.<sup>40</sup> Roger Wells, Alan Charlesworth, Mick Reed and others have taken part in an engaging debate about the nature of the class relationships and ‘protest’ of nineteenth-century rural England.<sup>41</sup> Even where rural discontent did not spill over into revolt, it seems clear that in much of southern England there was at best a mutual suspicion between farmer and labourer. As Howard Newby has suggested (again from an East Anglian perspective), the years 1850-1870 saw ‘a widening of the social and economic gap between the agricultural worker and his employer’<sup>42</sup>, and ‘[t]here is a good deal of evidence to show that farmer and worker became a great deal more remote from each other, socially and culturally, and that the apparent peace and tranquillity which descended on rural England after the “Captain Swing” disturbances was almost everywhere superficial and ephemeral’.<sup>43</sup> Newby has argued that a distinct subculture grew up among the rural working classes, more distinct

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<sup>37</sup> Barry Reay, *The Last Rising of the Agricultural Labourers: Rural Life and Protest in Nineteenth-Century England* (Oxford, 1990).

<sup>38</sup> J. P. D. Dunbabin, *Rural Discontent in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (1974); Pamela Horn, *Joseph Arch (1826-1919): The Farm Workers’ Leader* (Kington, 1971); ‘Labour Organizations’ in G. E. Mingay (ed.), *The Victorian Countryside* (2 vols., 1981), vol. II, pp. 580-90.

<sup>39</sup> David Jones, ‘Thomas Campbell Foster and the Rural Labourer; Incendiarism in East Anglia in the 1840s’, *Social History*, no. 1 (Jan. 1976), pp. 5-43; Alun Howkins, *Poor Labouring Men: Rural Radicalism in Norfolk 1872-1923* (1985).

<sup>40</sup> K. D. M. Snell, *Annals of the Labouring Poor: Social Change and Agrarian England 1660-1900* (Cambridge, 1987 [1st. ed. Cambridge, 1985]), p. 387.

<sup>41</sup> See Mick Reed & Roger Wells (eds.), *Class, Conflict and Protest in the English Countryside, 1700-1880* (1990), which reprints many of the most important contributions to this debate and suggests an agenda for future research.

<sup>42</sup> Howard Newby, *The Deferential Worker: A Study of Farm Workers in East Anglia* (1977), p. 67.



and more separate in areas where social control was weak and where work was done mainly in groups.<sup>44</sup> (It should be added that this form of employment - generally in the arable districts of the south - coincided with the lowest levels of remuneration.) Just as trade unions developed in the later nineteenth century as self-appointed corporate spokesmen for the agricultural labourers, so farmers organised themselves into groups to defend themselves against unionism and to present a common case. It can be argued that these developments represented an intensification, even an institutionalisation, of class-conflict in the countryside. The period saw a developing consciousness in rural areas that the 'face-to-face relations' between different classes were disappearing; and in the 1870s this consciousness would become important to social investigators. Alun Howkins has argued that the repression of the 1830s (following the 'Captain Swing' riots), the country police, patterns of enclosure, the changing nature of agricultural employment, the decline of the 'living-in' system in the south and east, and especially the new Poor Law of 1834 all bred an isolation and demoralisation of the rural poor.

By the 1850s [Howkins contends] ... this process was complete - indeed many were beginning to argue it had gone too far and that behind the sullenness of the villager lay a peasant insurrection ... The rural poor seemed to many to be completely alienated from their 'betters', a separate, secret people, impervious to change and influence. The old relationships had gone, swept away by the demands of agrarian capital, and nothing, apart from the harshness of the reform, had replaced them.<sup>45</sup>

The estrangement of the different 'orders' of the agricultural community gave rise to a situation in which the condition of the agricultural labourer was contested. Different participants in rural life would take a different view of it, usually reflecting their own position within the social structure or their own political preconceptions.

The effects of the social structure of the countryside on the practices of social investigators is one of the main themes of this thesis. A 'contest' was played out in which the location of accurate knowledge about the condition of the labourer was the subject of debate. This was not solely a rural debate, but it had some peculiarly rural dimensions. Catherine Marsh has commented on the early social surveys and

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<sup>43</sup> *ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>44</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 28, 34, 40, 64 and *passim*.

<sup>45</sup> Alun Howkins, *Reshaping Rural England: A Social History 1850-1925* (1991), p. 65.

parliamentary commissions, and explained the problem thus:

There were wide divergencies [*sic*] in the way these early investigators collected their data. One of the most important variations was whether or not they trusted the objects of their inquiry to speak for themselves. Many government officials equated the move towards collecting more systematic, reliable information with collecting it from more stout and reliable informants than from the poor themselves. Royal Commissions and parliamentary committees adopted the method of interrogating people who might be presumed to be experts, rather than taking their information from the horse's mouth.<sup>46</sup>

Official inquiries, especially investigating social problems in rural areas, relied heavily on the questionnaire sent out to supposedly trustworthy informants, and on the cross-examination of the expert. This is perhaps only what might be expected of a venture which sought to discover and evaluate conditions across the whole country, or over a wide area. The interviewing of an expert, who may well have been in contact with the poor at first hand, was a quick way to gain information about a large population. Beatrice Webb, referring specifically to Charles Booth's investigation, characterised this method of procedure as 'wholesale interviewing': this contrasts with the 'retail interviewing' of a venture such as Rowntree's, which sought to make contact with every member of the investigated population, albeit cursorily.<sup>47</sup> In rural society, where the intensity of the social conflict was not apparent to many observers, and there were fewer supposedly expert witnesses to consult, the investigator had to be aware of the 'conflicting vantage points' of different members of the rural community.

Marsh developed some of these points in a valuable article published in 1985,<sup>48</sup> in which she argued that social research underwent a gradual transformation from the mid-nineteenth century, a transformation which is still taking place. She identified three stages in the relationship between researcher and subject. In the nineteenth century, the 'informant' approach to investigation was dominant, epitomised by official investigations and by Charles Booth's reliance on information from School Board Visitors. Interviews and questionnaires were the predominant means of gathering fact

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<sup>46</sup> Marsh, *The Survey Method*, p. 18.

<sup>47</sup> Beatrice Webb, *My Apprenticeship* (Harmondsworth, 1971 [1st. ed. 1926]), p. 234-40. For the concept of 'retail' interviewing, see Bulmer *et al*, *The Social Survey*, p. 22.

<sup>48</sup> Catherine Marsh, 'Informants, Respondents and Citizens', in Martin Bulmer (ed.), *Essays on the History of British Sociological Research* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 206-27.



and opinion, and the investigator stood at one remove from the poor with whom he was concerned. 'Informant' inquiries in time gave way to 'respondent' investigations, in which the investigated populations were trusted to give accurate information. Marsh relates the development of the new approach to the 'enhanced strength and respectability' of the labour movement, which helped to remove much of the mutual distrust that formerly existed between researcher and researched and, on a practical level, enabled the investigator to gain access to working-class populations more easily.<sup>49</sup> The new methods, however, still entailed an unequal power relationship:

The respondents to social enquiries were no longer treated as "objects" to be studied in a social laboratory, but rather as "subjects". They were respected as human beings, but were still at the powerless end of the relationship between researcher and researched: the researcher asked the questions, the respondent provided the answers.<sup>50</sup>

The third stage, the 'citizen' approach, is an ongoing development; a result of changes in the state and society since the Second World War. The relationship between researcher and researched has, Marsh argues, become more equal: opinion polling, for example, is a means of consultation rather than simply the gathering of factual information about a class of society. The development of the 'citizen' approach represents a democratisation of the investigation process. For the purposes of this thesis, the 'informant' and 'respondent' stages are more important than the last stage, although elements of the 'citizen' approach will be identified, especially in chapter 7. The thesis will, however, offer a more detailed analysis of the 'informant' stage than Marsh could in her brief treatment of the subject, and show that methodological debates within the 'informant' structure were an important feature of investigations of rural life.

Moreover, Marsh's analysis suffers from the fact that it is generally restricted to one or two forms of social investigation: the official or large-scale inquiry. Most of these inquiries were concerned to gather accurate information about social problems in order that remedies for these problems might be prescribed. In general, however, this project did not involve any significant or meaningful contact with the investigated populations. As indicated above, many investigators had a more cultural preoccupation,

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<sup>49</sup> *ibid.*, p. 214.

<sup>50</sup> *ibid.*, p. 215.

and developed their techniques accordingly. This thesis will divide the information conveyed into two kinds: the economic and the cultural. The two are not entirely separable; and indeed it is clear that any investigation of material conditions would involve a cultural perspective and entail cultural constraints on the investigator: this is a major theme of the thesis, especially chapter 8. However, the division is useful in that it suggests two objectives which the social investigator could aim to achieve. Firstly, investigators sought social knowledge, a basic category including knowledge of the material conditions of the working classes, and the essential details of their lives. The category reflects the consciousness among investigators that little was known about working-class life, and that the 'two nations' were ignorant of each others' conditions. It will be seen that investigators disagreed, often fundamentally, over the location of social knowledge, and much of this thesis aims to identify and analyse these disputes. This was where the contest between the informant and respondent approaches, at its most basic level, was to be found. The second objective was cultural understanding, which involved rather more than simply knowledge of the material conditions of working-class families. It is a vague category, but very important in the context of this thesis and social investigation in general. Snell has employed the term 'social understanding' to signify a certain degree of empathy with the rural working classes, and an ability to view social life and conditions from their point of view.<sup>51</sup> The evidence presented by some investigators was more qualitative than that produced by a survey of the magnitude of Booth's or Rowntree's, and usually stemmed from a 'micro' approach: a case study as opposed to a survey. Knowledge was an essential background to legislative and philanthropic projects aimed at improving the material position of the working classes; while understanding was important in the context of an apparent breakdown of social relations within the countryside, which had taken effect earlier in an urban context. This thesis will show how cultural investigation was also the subject of various contests: between investigators themselves and between investigators and investigated.

Brian Harrison has compared the more traditional investigation with the individual 'freelance' study such as Mayhew's. He has drawn attention to the informant structure of the official inquiry, stressing the difficulties of obtaining working-class

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<sup>51</sup> Snell, *Annals*, p. 7.



opinion' - as opposed to opinions *about* the working classes - one of the principal problems being that most commissioners had little or no interest in hearing it. Harrison points out, for example, that Joseph Arch complained about the non-representation of agricultural labourers on the commission on the agricultural depression. Furthermore, while Octavia Hill complained to the Royal Commission on the Aged Poor that consulting a pauper himself would be as foolish as consulting a patient on his own treatment, George Lansbury produced a pauper who threw 'a shaft of light' onto workhouse conditions.<sup>52</sup> Some of Harrison's condemnations of the official inquiry may be somewhat too damning - the role of the assistant commissioners of the Royal Commission on Labour, for example, was one which involved at least some contact with the rural working classes themselves - but he is right to make the point that the realities of working-class life were screened from such investigators by the social filtering of information. A similar case can be made against Charles Booth's survey.<sup>53</sup>

For Harrison, in the poverty surveys of both Booth and Rowntree, which had a self-consciously administrative and reforming purpose, something which Mayhew's investigations had is lost: '[t]here is a double sacrifice involved: the role of experience in the whole investigation has been devalued, and in so far as it is discussed at all, it is filtered through a middle-class vocabulary and perception.'<sup>54</sup> Harrison goes on to suggest that Mayhew achieved what was denied to Booth and Rowntree: 'a vivid resurrection' of the lives of the London street-folk, a result of his personal contact and empathy with those under investigation.<sup>55</sup> Raphael Samuel has also pointed to Mayhew's work as an example of a literature dealing with the lives of a class hidden from the view of the labour historian working with traditional sources.<sup>56</sup>

Harrison has suggested that '[s]ocial investigation in the 1840s had not become so sophisticated in technique nor (partly in consequence) so insulated from contact with the observed, as it became later.'<sup>57</sup> Harrison goes on to declare that '[t]he investigator

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<sup>52</sup> Brian Harrison, *Peaceable Kingdom: Stability and Change in Modern Britain* (Oxford, 1982), p. 286.

<sup>53</sup> See Marsh, 'Informants, Respondents and Citizens', pp. 210-11.

<sup>54</sup> Harrison, *Peaceable Kingdom*, p. 306.

<sup>55</sup> *ibid.*, p. 307.

<sup>56</sup> Raphael Samuel (ed.), *Village Life and Labour* (1982 [1st. ed. 1975], p. xvii.

<sup>57</sup> Harrison, *Peaceable Kingdom*, p. 307.

needs always to maintain a balance between three objectives: precise investigation, where statistical precision is appropriate, but also sensitivity to the outlook of those whom he investigates, and preservation of contact with the general public.’<sup>58</sup> This expresses the role of the investigator in representing one class to another: in acting, in a sense, as a social bridge. This thesis seeks to keep Harrison’s three requirements in view in its approach to the investigators and social commentators whose work it considers. The stipulation is as applicable to the historian of working-class life, and should remind him that he is in a position analogous to that of the social investigator. The historian today encounters many of the same problems which faced the contemporary investigator, and can only benefit from a deeper understanding of how social investigators approached their subjects, and how their subjects responded to them.

The one thing that all the diverse investigators treated in this thesis have in common is that they were reporting on one class for the benefit of another. Whatever methods they used, they were engaged in the transmission of information and opinion about rural labouring life to a largely (though not wholly) urban readership. They shaped the way the agricultural labourer and his family were viewed by an educated middle-class reading public; and as such their work deserves analysis. This gap is beginning to be filled. A number of historians have adopted a poststructuralist perspective and analysed representations of labouring life. Karen Sayer’s recent book, *Women of the Fields*, has shown how labouring women were represented in the imaginative literature, parliamentary commissions and social investigation of the nineteenth century;<sup>59</sup> and Alun Howkins has traced the shifting perceptions of the male agricultural labourer in a recent essay on the stereotypes of ‘Hodge’ and ‘Lob’.<sup>60</sup> Such work is a valuable assessment of nineteenth-century urban perceptions of rural life, and occasionally provides some insights into the processes of information-gathering. Its primary objective, however, is the analysis of the distribution of information and opinion, and it largely neglects to analyse the ways in which knowledge of labouring life was obtained.

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<sup>58</sup> *ibid.*, p. 307.

<sup>59</sup> Karen Sayer, *Women of the Fields: Representations of Rural Women in the Nineteenth Century* (Manchester, 1995).

<sup>60</sup> Alun Howkins, ‘From Hodge to Lob: Reconstructing the English Farm Labourer, 1870-1914’, in Malcolm Chase & Ian Dyck (eds.), *Living and Learning: Essays in Honour of J. F. C. Harrison* (Aldershot, 1996), pp. 218-35.



It also tends to treat representation as a one-way process, without giving full weight to the involvement of the represented population in shaping perceptions of itself.

As this thesis treats the investigative process as an aspect of a relationship, an important feature will be an analysis of the interaction between investigator and investigated. This interaction was a crucial feature of the process of knowledge-transmission; and it could be argued that it was an arena of contest in which access to social knowledge and cultural understanding was sought and given according to the performance of the researcher and the researched. How did the person being interviewed or 'interrogated' react to the interviewer? The reaction could affect the character and reliability of the evidence presented to the investigator during the contact process. Certainly most investigators of working-class life who had any personal contact with their subjects were conscious of the potential for information to be refused, or for incorrect information to be given, and were aware that the process of winning over the confidence of the investigated population or individual often involved a cultivated degree of sensitivity and a particular technique. Most explained that, in their opinion, potential difficulties were, by and large, overcome. It requires little effort of the historian's imagination, however, to picture the investigator and the investigated interacting on anything but an equal social footing, and this thesis will contain some examples of this process and the problems inherent in it.

A problem with many studies of the history of social investigation is that they lose sight of the investigated population. Historians concentrate on the methodology of and concepts behind the investigations, paying little attention to those under investigation themselves. With Booth and Rowntree, this is perhaps unsurprising, as in *Life and Labour* and *Poverty* the lives of the poor are so often reduced to statistical abstractions, with only an occasional vignette of real experience to engage the reader's attention. It would be interesting, for example, to know the reaction of working-class householders in York to the visits of Rowntree's investigators, or possibly any tactics used to misinform and mislead the visitor. The nature of social investigation means that there is little evidence from, as it were, the other side of the coin, and we are mostly forced to rely on investigators' impressions of how they were received by the subjects of

their research. In *The Contest for Social Science* Eileen Yeo has 'trie[d] to keep the activity of less powerful groups in focus whether they act as producers of knowledge, or as objects of scrutiny, or as clients of policy or as parties to negotiated outcomes which they affect but do not decisively influence'.<sup>61</sup> Yeo has examined the responses of certain groups to investigation, and their attempts to shape the course of investigation for their own purposes. This has necessarily been largely confined to the organised section of the working classes who had institutions through which their views could be expressed; but she has used the key example of Stephen Reynolds's work to attempt to illustrate some working-class attitudes to social science 'from above'.<sup>62</sup> This thesis will also attempt to keep the responses of the rural working classes in focus, and consider the effect of social investigation on rural communities and individuals. The small scale of many of the investigations considered is of some benefit here: the reader gets an impression of one-to-one conversation between investigator and investigated which can be tentatively deconstructed to assess the social relationships inherent in any process of investigating and representing the poor.

Furthermore, the contest for investigative space was played out not only in the construction of an investigation, but also in its readership. Bertrand Taithe, in his work on Henry Mayhew, has considered the correspondence Mayhew received, and the responses of his readers. Taithe asserts that '[w]orking-class readers of *London Labour and the London Poor* knew the book for what it was: a struggle and a drama ... the result of a Socratic intercourse'.<sup>63</sup> If this overstates the case somewhat, it is nevertheless a powerful reminder that the findings, as well as the methods, of an investigation were contestable. This thesis, where possible, will consider the responses to social investigation among the investigated populations themselves. It must be continually borne in mind that social investigation was a *process*, and that this process, involving the social interaction, however temporary, of members of different classes of society, with differing backgrounds and outlooks, was necessarily a two-way one: a dialogue between researcher and researched.

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<sup>61</sup> Yeo, *Contest*, p. xvii.

<sup>62</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 242-5.

<sup>63</sup> Taithe, *The Essential Mayhew*, p. 21.



The thesis will follow a broadly chronological progression in its treatment of social investigations, though the complexity of the field means that some areas will best be treated thematically. Chapter 2 will trace the development of social investigation, and particularly its rural context, in the first three-quarters of the nineteenth century; while chapter 3 will examine the investigative response to the political and social crises of the early 1870s. Chapter 4 analyses the work of a group of resident investigators, mostly in the 1880s, when a more cultural approach to social investigation was beginning to be taken in rural areas. Chapter 5 assesses the political and social forces acting on investigators in the 1890s, when the depression and the problem of rural depopulation prompted conflicting outlooks among different members and observers of the rural community; and chapter 6 offers a detailed analysis of Rider Haggard's investigations of 1901 and 1902, developing many of the themes from the previous chapter. If the rigidity of the periodisations employed in these early chapters seems artificial, it does facilitate a clearer discussion of the themes which emerge. The remainder of the thesis is based on Edwardian sources. Chapter 7 shows how new sociological methods were applied to the investigation of rural life, under the influence of Rowntree's York survey. Chapter 8 examines George Sturt and Stephen Reynolds, and some of their contemporaries, and illustrates the growing perception of a need to communicate with the rural working classes themselves, and to present a more cultural and intensive study of their lives, dealing with their thoughts and opinions as well as their condition. Chapter 9 is concerned with the particular issues of housing, wages and the land question, and examines the ongoing conflicts among social investigators in the years before the Great War. Chapter 10, the conclusion, will draw the threads of the various chapters together, and attempt to make some generalisations about the investigation of rural life from the diverse group considered in the body of the thesis. It will ask whether the problems of rural life provoked a fundamentally different form of social investigation from urban concerns; and whether the investigative literature produced is of value in illustrating rural labouring life in late-Victorian and Edwardian Britain. In particular, it will relate the debates among social investigators of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to debates among historians today, and show how an awareness of the problems faced by social investigators can benefit the historian of town and country.



## Chapter 2: Investigations and representations: approaches to social inquiry in the countryside before 1872

The object of this chapter is to identify the main strands of social investigation that were developing through the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, especially as they relate to rural life. It will be shown that as the proletarianisation of the agricultural labour force proceeded through the nineteenth century, and the rural world was politicised increasingly along class lines, a contest developed within the practices of investigators which was reflected in their methods of investigation. The chapter will identify the main investigators, official and unofficial, and briefly describe their activities. It will go on to consider in more depth the inquiries of the 1860s, which prefaced the more intensive ventures and heated debates of the following decade. It will show that, while the more widespread and extensive investigation was the most widely-used means of exploring the rural world in the mid-nineteenth century, the more intensive portraits of rural life which found their way onto the nation's bookshelves were of little sociological interest and reflect a romantic conception of country life which had no basis in reality - a conception that began to be challenged in succeeding decades.

Sociologists in Britain tend to trace their lineage back little further than Charles Booth, although the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science is recognised as part of the prehistory of the discipline.<sup>1</sup> If a broader definition of sociology is adopted, however, the historian may plumb the chronological depths somewhat further. Jahoda, Lazarsfeld and Zeisel, in their influential study of the Austrian village of Marienthal in 1933, identified Arthur Young as an early forerunner of the social-scientific investigator. Young's large body of work consisted, as they recognised, of 'more socio-economic travelogues than systematic investigations', but nevertheless contained valuable 'sociographic' data.<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, Jahoda *et al* omitted, in the first German edition of *Marienthal*, to mention the name of Henry Mayhew, one which would now be prominent in most historical sketches of social investigation, an

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<sup>1</sup> See especially Eileen Janes Yeo, *The Contest for Social Science: Relations and Representations of Gender and Class* (1996), ch. 6; Lawrence Goldman, 'A Peculiarity of the English? The Social Science Association and the Absence of Sociology in Nineteenth-Century Britain', *Past and Present*, no. 114 (Feb. 1987), pp. 133-71.

<sup>2</sup> Marie Jahoda, Paul F. Lazarsfeld & Hans Zeisel *Marienthal: The Sociography of an Unemployed Community* (1972 [1st. German ed., 1933]), p. 101.



omission rectified only in a footnote to the English translation of 1972.<sup>3</sup> The earliest investigators they cite, with the exception of Friedrich Engels, were all primarily concerned with rural life. Thus David Davies's inquiry into agricultural domestic budgeting, a venture which pioneered the use of the questionnaire, is honourably mentioned; and Frederic Eden's investigation, for these sociologists, 'marked another step forward in survey methodology' with its employment of an interviewer.<sup>4</sup> These investigations were significant predecessors in the sociological tradition.

It is important to be aware of these early flickerings of interest in the condition of the agricultural population, because investigators such as Young and Davies were frequently referred to by their descendants in the late Victorian and Edwardian period. The approaches adopted, as in later times, varied considerably from investigator to investigator: Young, for example, though sympathetic to the poverty of agricultural labourers, was a firm advocate of the 'informant' inquiry, while Davies, using to full advantage his position as a country parson, appears to have obtained more of his information from labourers. It is not an unreasonable generalisation, however, to say that the labourer himself was not a widely-used source of information on his own condition in the early nineteenth century. Even William Cobbett, who repeatedly trumpeted his sympathy for the labouring classes, does not seem to have come into direct contact with many labourers during his *Rural Rides*. Often he simply recorded his visual impressions of the labourers - he had no trouble in commenting on their clothes, for example, their cleanliness, or their physical characteristics.<sup>5</sup> Though a champion of the poor, who preferred to travel around the country on foot rather than horseback in order more effectively to absorb the information available, Cobbett was a product of an age in which sympathy for the poor man did not necessarily translate into allowing him to set his own agenda for investigation.

In an age when the problems of the newly urbanised population were receiving the bulk of the attention from the ruling and reforming classes, the poverty and destitution of rural life were easily pushed into the background. There were, however,

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<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 104n13.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p. 102.

<sup>5</sup> William Cobbett, *Rural Rides* (Harmondsworth, 1967 [1st. ed. 1830]), pp. 74-5, 206, 140-1.

some notable outbreaks of rural discontent, particularly the Captain Swing riots, and the 'Battle of Bosenden Wood' of 1838, in which a small group of rioting Kentish labourers led by the colourful character Sir William Courtenay were 'massacred' by the 45th Infantry Regiment.<sup>6</sup> This rising prompted a barrister, Frederick Liardet, to undertake a detailed investigation of the circumstances of the labouring families of the region.<sup>7</sup> The tentacles of the Chartist movement also reached into the countryside on occasions, but in general, as one observer remembered in 1891,

[f]rom about the year 1840 down to the great agricultural strike of 1870 [*sic*], the world heard little of the agricultural labourer. The interest of the philanthropical public now became concentrated on the artisan class, on the truck system, and on factory tyranny. But after these grievances had been redressed and political rights conferred upon town populations by the bill of 1867, the public had leisure to turn once more to the condition of the peasantry.<sup>8</sup>

This is not to say that the countryside became a haven of social peace: indeed, as recent studies have shown, there was a continuing undercurrent of often very bitter protest which challenged the settled agrarian order. The effects of this can be seen in the work of the few social investigators who concerned themselves with country life in the period. In general, however, it is fair to say that the activities of social investigators were largely based in urban areas, and those who pleaded for rural problems to be recognised were a minority.

Some of them, however, were noteworthy. The middle of the nineteenth century saw three agricultural tours which are of particular interest to the historian of agriculture and rural life. James Caird's is the best known. Caird, commissioned by the *Times*, travelled around the agricultural districts, in the wake of the repeal of the corn laws, commenting on the economic position of farmers. The articles were reprinted as *English Agriculture in 1850-51*, which has become a standard source for agricultural historians. For many years following this mammoth venture, Caird was the agricultural specialist on the newspaper, yet he remains - literally - a footnote in the official history of the *Times*.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See Barry Reay, *The Last Rising of the Agricultural Labourers: Rural Life and Protest in Nineteenth-Century England* (Oxford, 1990) for a detailed analysis of this rising.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.* See also Barry Reay, *The Last Rising; Microhistories: Demography, Society and Culture in Rural England 1800-1930* (Cambridge, 1996).

<sup>8</sup> T. E. Kebbel, *The Old and the New English Country Life* (1891), pp. 160-1.

<sup>9</sup> *The History of the Times, Volume II: The Tradition Established, 1841-1884* (1939), p. 437n1. The



Caird, however, is especially important, not only as the producer of one of the most important works on nineteenth-century agriculture, but as a respected authority on agricultural conditions whose influence stretched much later in the century until his death in 1892.

Caird's approach was one which involved very little contact with the labouring classes, perhaps unsurprising given that his primary concern was with agriculture rather than specifically with the rural population. As one commentator remarked fifty years later, Caird concentrated 'on the condition of farm-buildings, on the methods of tillage pursued, on the character of the implements and machinery employed, on the breeds of sheep and other kinds of live-stock raised, on the degree of knowledge, ability, and enterprise displayed by owner and cultivator'.<sup>10</sup> The articles were entitled 'Relations between Landlord and Tenant in the Agricultural Districts of England': labour was examined as a commodity rather than as a sector of the population. Caird described his own approach in the introduction to the published volume of the articles: his information was obtained 'by personal inquiry and inspection, principally by walking or riding carefully over individual farms, in different districts of each county, accompanied by the farmers, - by traversing estates with the landlord or his agent, - and by seeking access to the best and most trustworthy sources of local information'.<sup>11</sup> Only one occasion is recorded when he actually spoke to a labourer. This was in Wiltshire, where it was found (through information from farmers) that labourers' wages were 6s. or 7s. per week, and it was recognised that where there was a large family 'great pinching must be endured'. Caird, from questioning a labourer, was able to obtain the details of the family's consumption patterns, and as a result to paint a pathetic portrait of what it meant to be a labourer with a large family on such inadequate earnings.<sup>12</sup> One of the pieces of information a farmer could not give was what a labouring family had to eat - or indeed anything they did within their cottage. Caird obtained a more detailed dietary in Derbyshire, where he interviewed a farmer, some of whose men boarded in the

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footnote is heralded by the single line: 'In James Caird the paper possessed an able commentator upon agricultural topics.'

<sup>10</sup> *Economic Journal*, vol. XIII (1903), p. 207.

<sup>11</sup> James Caird, *English Agriculture in 1850-51* (1968 [1st. ed. 1852]), p. xxxiv.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*, pp 84-5.

farmhouse:<sup>13</sup> labourers who 'lived-in' were clearly more accessible to the investigator who used mainly farming informants than were those who had a purely economic relationship with their employers.

Although his tour was prompted by a particular political crisis, Caird never really described the internal political features of the countryside in which he travelled. Unlike Cobbett, whose tours were carried out partly in response to outbreaks of labouring discontent, the issue of the social framework of the agricultural community was one which did not affect his thinking, except insofar as it bore a direct influence on the development and improvement of agricultural techniques. Caird did take some pains to discover and comment upon the prevailing rates of wages in different parts of the country - which resulted in his famous map, showing the high wage rates of the north and the much lower rates of the south and west, a pattern which repeated itself for the remainder of the century. His tome, however, is of limited use to the social historian concerned with the life of the labouring classes.

If Caird was primarily interested in the condition of agriculture rather than the condition of the rural population, the same cannot be said for the *Morning Chronicle* investigators of 1849-51. The title of these investigations - 'Labour and the Poor' - indicate where their preoccupations differed from Caird's. While Henry Mayhew was carrying out his better-known work on the London trades, Alexander Mackay and later Charles Shirley Brooks were touring the rural districts and producing what Anne Digby has called 'a uniquely detailed picture of rural poverty'.<sup>14</sup> Mackay and Brooks between them covered 28 English counties, extending their investigations to other rural industries as well as agriculture.<sup>15</sup> The investigations were informed by the notion that rural poverty was hidden from the view of urban observers. Mackay thought the spread of railways had detached urban observers from their rural neighbours, and thus that less was known about rural life than formerly. The wide geographical spread of the survey meant

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<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, p. 395.

<sup>14</sup> Anne Digby, 'The Rural Poor', in G. E. Mingay (ed.), *The Victorian Countryside* (2 vols., 1981), vol. II, p. 591.

<sup>15</sup> J. Ginswick (ed.), *Labour and the Poor in England and Wales 1849-1851: The Letters to the Morning Chronicle from the Correspondents in the Manufacturing and Mining Districts, the Towns of Liverpool and Birmingham, and the Rural Districts* (3 vols., 1983), vol. I, p. xiii.



that its approach was necessarily different from Mayhew's in London. Mackay and Brooks were in each place they visited only for a short time; and as Peter Razzell has explained, they tended to adopt the informant approach, using key resident witnesses as short-cuts to social knowledge.<sup>16</sup> This was to an extent inevitable given the time constraints on the publication of the results of the inquiry. Their approach, then, while it may give more insights into the rural working-class economy than a venture such as Caird's, remained one which lay at one step removed from the gathering of information from the working-class informants. Ginswick has praised the wideness of Mackay and Brooks' informant base; but unlike Mayhew, they never really attempted to overcome the barriers of class, status and gender to communicate with the agricultural labourers. Like Mayhew, however, they retain an important place in the history of social investigation, and can be a useful source for the historian.

The third of these mid-century tours, chronologically the earliest but perhaps the most advanced in terms of sophistication of technique of social (as opposed to agricultural) investigation, was Thomas Campbell Foster's venture into East Anglia in 1844. Foster, who had made his name through his coverage of the South Walian 'Rebecca' riots in the *Times*,<sup>17</sup> was commissioned by the same newspaper to investigate the condition of the agricultural labourer in Norfolk and Suffolk at a time of widespread localised social protest, of which arson was the dominant manifestation. In a valuable article on Foster's inquiry, David Jones has likened him to Mayhew;<sup>18</sup> and Pat Molloy, referring to his reports on the 'Rebecca' riots, has praised him as an 'able investigator'.<sup>19</sup> Foster's method, at each centre from which he conducted his inquiries, was to request information on the local situation, either in interview or written form, from various local authorities including clergymen, farmers, landowners and tradesmen, but also to consult the labourers.<sup>20</sup> He may have visited a hundred labourers' cottages.<sup>21</sup> In South Wales,

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<sup>16</sup> P. E. Razzell & R. W. Wainwright (eds.), *The Victorian Working Class: Selections from Letters to the Morning Chronicle* (1973), p. xviii.

<sup>17</sup> Pat Molloy, *And They Blessed Rebecca: An Account of the Welsh Toll-Gate Riots 1839-1844* (Llandysul, 1983), *passim*, esp. pp. 98-104; David Williams., *The Rebecca Riots: A Study in Agrarian Discontent* (Cardiff, 1968 [1st. ed. 1955]), *passim*; David J. V. Jones, *Rebecca's Children: A Study of Rural Society, Crime and Protest* (Oxford, 1989), *passim*, esp. pp. 96-7, 225, 330ff.

<sup>18</sup> David Jones, 'Thomas Campbell Foster and the Rural Labourer: Incendiarism in East Anglia in the 1840s', *Social History*, no. 1 (1976), p. 6.

<sup>19</sup> Molloy, *And They Blessed Rebecca*, p. 336.

<sup>20</sup> Jones, 'Thomas Campbell Foster', pp. 21-2.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*, p. 22.



he also attended secret meetings of 'Rebeccaites'.<sup>22</sup> While Foster was a journalist employing the descriptive method, Jones has called his approach 'avowedly scientific'.<sup>23</sup> The apparent neutrality of Foster's informant structure was one which, as an investigator, helps to give his material a sense of reliability. With incendiarism in East Anglia at its peak, his all-round approach was one which went some way towards neutralising the effects of the political situation in which he was operating.

Many of the journalistic investigations of working-class life in the mid-nineteenth century remain unknown to the historian. Local newspapers certainly undertook some tours of inquiry; and many interesting examples must remain to be discovered by local historians. We know of an influential investigation in the *Norfolk News* in the early 1860s, which came to the attention of commentators in metropolitan journals;<sup>24</sup> and this was just one of many inquiries undertaken by long-forgotten journalists, medical officers, cottage inspectors and others with an interest in rural labouring life. William Alexander, a recently rediscovered contributor to the Aberdeen press in the mid- to late-nineteenth century, is an interesting example.<sup>25</sup> Another group of investigations along similar lines were reported in the agricultural press; and even the *Gardeners' Chronicle* carried a series of articles on 'The Agricultural Labourer'.<sup>26</sup> There is no space here to analyse these widespread and largely localised activities, but it should be borne in mind that an inquisitive spirit was developing, in the countryside as well as in the towns.

At about the same time as Thomas Campbell Foster's investigations, the Poor Law Commission was sending assistant commissioners across England to report on the employment of women and children in agriculture. In the new spirit of deconstruction historians have begun to dissect this and other official investigations in an attempt to analyse the representations of the labouring poor they contain.<sup>27</sup> There is no space here

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<sup>22</sup> Williams, *Rebecca Riots*, pp. 226-7.

<sup>23</sup> Jones, 'Thomas Campbell Foster', p. 22.

<sup>24</sup> Richard Heath, *The Victorian Peasant: An Abridged Edition of The English Peasant by Richard Heath* (Gloucester, 1989 [1st. ed. 1893]), p. 42; John Burnett, *A Social History of Housing 1815-1985* (1986 [1st. ed. Newton Abbott, 1978]), p. 129.

<sup>25</sup> William Alexander, *Rural Life in Victorian Aberdeenshire* (edited and introduced by Ian Carter, Edinburgh, 1992).

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in *Journal of the Statistical Society*, vol. XXIV (1861), pp. 413-14.

<sup>27</sup> See especially Karen Sayer, *Women of the Fields: Representations of Rural Women in the Nineteenth*



to undertake a detailed examination of this commission; but some features should be noted. Although, as Karen Sayer points out, the inquiry was a 'minor affair',<sup>28</sup> never discussed by Parliament and overshadowed in the public arena by the scandalous conditions of women and children in factories and mines, its reports later served as a useful primary source for historians of the condition of the agricultural labourer. The assistant commissioners were limited to just thirty days in which to investigate the counties allotted to them, and this restricted the scope of their investigations.<sup>29</sup> Like James Caird, the four commissioners - all barristers - generally had little contact with the labouring population. The one exception was Alfred Austin, who investigated Wiltshire, Somerset, Dorset and Devon: of the 39 people he personally interviewed, four were labourers and 12 were labourers' wives. However, he also recorded written communications from 15 people, six of whom were vicars or curates, three Medical Officers of Health, one a farmer, one a manufacturer and one the Clerk of St. Thomas's Union, Exeter.<sup>30</sup> Written evidence was by its nature likely to come from the literate classes; this method entailed a built-in bias against the labouring classes. Sir Francis Doyle, who was sent to Yorkshire and Northumberland, took evidence from 68 people: 42 can be identified. There were 19 vicars or curates, a churchwarden, a medical man, 14 concerned in some way with the administration of poor relief, four farmers and three stewards or land agents.<sup>31</sup> As Stephen Denison, the commissioner for Suffolk, Norfolk and Lincolnshire, pointed out, the short time available for the inquiry meant that the commissioners were obliged 'to ascertain rather the general opinion of those persons best qualified to form one, than to attempt to get at the truth by a personal investigation of the facts'.<sup>32</sup> The inquiry served as a model for the more significant commission on the same subject appointed in 1867 (see below), and as such was a milestone in the development of the government investigation of rural conditions.

Another feature of the investigation of rural life in the mid-nineteenth century was the involvement of country parsons and members of local elites in communicating

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*Century* (Manchester, 1995), esp. pp. 34-9, 79-81.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>29</sup> *Reports of Special Assistant Poor Law Commissioners on the Employment of Women and Children in Agriculture*, PP 1843, Cd. 510, pp. 1, 215.

<sup>30</sup> PP 1843, appendices to Austin's report.

<sup>31</sup> PP 1843, appendices to Doyle's report.

<sup>32</sup> PP 1843, p. 215.



information and opinion about rural social conditions to an urban audience. While the sanitary conditions and moral degradations of the slums of London and Liverpool were being revealed by missionary workers and other social commentators, many of the same themes were being addressed from a rural perspective. Awareness of insanitary evils - a particularly prominent social problem in mid-nineteenth century cities - was growing in the country districts. While the attention of sensationalist journalists was focused on the more accessible slums of London, continual pressure was being applied from a different sector of society for the recognition of the no less urgent problems of the countryside.<sup>33</sup> As R. H. Campbell has pointed out, the problems of urban housing were less easily hidden than those of the country, and their comparatively recent origin as a product of rapid early-nineteenth century urbanisation gave them a 'novelty' which was denied to the more long-standing and easily-accepted problems of the villages.<sup>34</sup>

One particularly persistent clerical advocate of better conditions in the rural districts was the Reverend Henry Moule, Vicar of Fordington, a suburb of Dorchester. Moule was the inventor of the dry earth system of sewage disposal, and devoted much of his literary output to illustrations of the practical applications of this method.<sup>35</sup> His family (especially his son Horace) were friends of the young Thomas Hardy.<sup>36</sup> Moule was also responsible for a series of published letters, addressed to Prince Albert, as President of the Council of the Duchy of Cornwall, which owned his parish, in the early 1850s. These letters turned Moule, who had roused the fury of the people of Dorchester with his attacks on the immorality of Dorchester's notorious Cuckold Row, in Robert Gittings's words, 'from a villain into a kind of folk hero'.<sup>37</sup> Channelling his campaigning zeal in a different direction, Moule graphically described the open sewers, filth, overcrowding and poverty of his parish; and, in common with the urban slum journalists of the time, related these problems very closely to the moral condition of the labouring inhabitants.<sup>38</sup> The close proximity of the population made moral

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<sup>33</sup> See Burnett, *Social History of Housing*, ch. 2, for a discussion of the problems of rural housing in the first half of the nineteenth century.

<sup>34</sup> R. H. Campbell, introduction to W. S. Gilly, *The Peasantry of the Border: An Appeal on Their Behalf* (Edinburgh, 1973 [1st. ed. 1842]).

<sup>35</sup> Henry Moule, *The Impossibility Overcome, or The Inoffensive, Safe, and Economical Disposal of the Refuse of Towns and Villages* (London and Dorchester, 1870).

<sup>36</sup> See Robert Gittings, *Young Thomas Hardy* (1975), pp. 36-7, 53-4.

<sup>37</sup> *ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>38</sup> Henry Moule, *Four Letters to His Royal Highness Prince Albert, as President of the Council of the*



contamination inevitable: 'in streets, into which, with the exception of the few who go there on errands of mercy, or the many with purposes of vice, scarcely any one above the labourer or mechanic ever enters, children, from their earliest infancy, are in consequence familiarised with sin'.<sup>39</sup> Similar evidence for squalid conditions, from the other end of England, was adduced by W. S. Gilly, Vicar of Norham in Northumberland, whose pamphlet on *The Peasantry of the Border*, first published in 1841, claimed that of 83 tenements in Norham which had changed hands during the previous two years, 54 were 'deficient in all that is necessary to convenience and cleanliness'.<sup>40</sup>

One particular group who should be mentioned in this context is the Scottish ministers. As a group, they had a long apprenticeship in the communication of information about their own districts, having been the main source of information for the statistical accounts of Scotland, published in the 1790s and 1840s. A glance through the transactions of the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science in the late-1850s and 1860s reveals a persistent involvement of Scottish divines in social inquiry and social reform. The Rev. James Begg contributed a series of papers to the transactions of the Association, mostly dealing with cottage evils and the bothy system. As he remarked in 1858, 'the state of towns has often been discussed', to the detriment of areas like Scotland, where advanced farming and high rents existed side-by-side with squalid housing conditions.<sup>41</sup> Begg, writing from the point of view of the clerical arch-moralist, believed that the old truisms about the health and vigour of country life could no longer be applied, and that the country was rapidly becoming 'more degraded and debased than the cities themselves'.<sup>42</sup>

The professions of the investigators who commented in this vein were reflected in their concern for the moral and spiritual condition of the labourer. Just as the explorers of urban slums were often members of religious organisations attempting to

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*Duchy of Cornwall, on the Dwellings and Condition of Eleven Hundred of the Working Classes and Poor of Fordington* (1854). This was followed in the next year by an expanded version, *Eight Letters to His Royal Highness the Prince Albert, as President of the Duchy of Cornwall* (1855).

<sup>39</sup> Moule, *Four Letters*, p. 17.

<sup>40</sup> Gilly, *Peasantry of the Border*, p. 14.

<sup>41</sup> Rev. James Begg, 'Houses of the Working-Classes of Scotland. The Bothy System' in *NAPSS Transactions*, 1858, p. 621.

<sup>42</sup> *ibid.*, p. 624.

convert the domestic heathen, so the relatively scarce information on rural conditions was largely derived from country parsons, those who enjoyed proximity to the rural population, leisure to attempt to investigate and effect improvements, and a concern with the moral and spiritual life of their parish. The startling heathenism of village life was one on which most of these clerical observers were ready with an observation.<sup>43</sup> As the century progressed, country parsons tended to take more of an interest in folklore and superstition: on the one hand, many took an antiquarian interest in such matters; and on the other, such old country customs were often in direct competition with the religion that they desired to promote. Another feature of the nineteenth-century reforming parson was his intervention in some of the immoral customs of the countryside. Henry Moule, for example, protested successfully against the moral evils connected with the race meetings at Dorchester;<sup>44</sup> while Gilly lamented the moral consequences of the frequent movement of Northumberland hinds from village to village.<sup>45</sup> As far as some of these condemnations of the labourer's life were concerned, the social and cultural detachment of the parson from his flock was one which limited the degree of empathy he could achieve with them, and coloured the reports of labouring life which he sent to urban readers; and this will be a theme that recurs in the course of this thesis.

The parson's great advantage as a social commentator was that his job usually entailed visiting labourers' homes on a regular basis and knowing his parish intimately. As the Reverend John Eddowes, Vicar of Garton-upon-the-Wolds in Yorkshire, pointed out, spelling out his credentials as an authority on the agricultural labourer, '[t]hey who have not occasion to go in and out among the poorer families in country districts, seldom arrive at a correct conception of their social and spiritual condition.'<sup>46</sup> However, it is clear that, though residents of the same village as their parishioners, parsons moved in a different social world from them, and faced a substantial social barrier in their intercourse with them. For this reason, evangelical vicars such as Charles Kingsley, Vicar of Eversley in Hampshire, developed a scheme of domestic visiting which was

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<sup>43</sup> John Eddowes, *The Agricultural Labourer as he Really is; or Village Morals in 1854: A Pamphlet for the Present Day* (Driffield, 1854), p. 16; Henry Moule, *Our Home Heathen: How Can the Church of England Get at Them?* (1868), esp. pp. 6, 16.

<sup>44</sup> See his entry in the *Dictionary of National Biography*.

<sup>45</sup> See especially his condemnation of the practice of 'flitting' in *The Peasantry of the Border*, p. 12.

<sup>46</sup> Eddowes, *Agricultural Labourer*, p. 5.



derived from their awareness of such social difficulties. Kingsley's social involvement in his parish extended through all areas of its economic and social life: he established clubs, schools, mothers' meetings, loan funds, a lending library, night classes and village lectures among others.<sup>47</sup> Kingsley's sociological approach was, in the words of an early biographer, 'to guide these [reformatory] tendencies [in men] by stating forcibly the data of the problem'.<sup>48</sup> This was the sociological and scientific side of the question; but Kingsley also, with his colleagues in the Christian Social Movement, especially Frederick Denison Maurice, developed a technique of house-visiting. He was 'a most regular and conscientious visitor ... personally intimate with every soul in his parish';<sup>49</sup> and appeared to know how to communicate with the poor effectively. In a lecture in 1855, Kingsley showed his awareness of 'that very inward gulf' which existed between members of the different classes of the countryside, which it was the task of the visitor to bridge.<sup>50</sup> Through this more intimate knowledge of the poor could be obtained information very different from a simple catalogue of insanitary evils: it was hoped that a cultural understanding of the labouring classes would be achieved, and this again was a theme which developed in importance later in the century.

Such cultural empathy was crucial in the context of a developing political awareness among the agricultural workforce. However, there were sufficient gaps in the knowledge of the material conditions of the labouring population to cause consternation among some investigators; and the first step for many was to attempt to arrive at an accurate assessment of how much the labourer actually earned. This was a concern of investigators in both town and country; but, as E. H. Hunt has pointed out, 'farm wages were more often and more competently investigated than earnings in any other occupation'.<sup>51</sup> A problem with this project was that agricultural wages varied greatly from place to place. The labourers in Gilly's parish in Northumberland, for example, earned a lot more than those in Moule's county of Dorset. The investigation which

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<sup>47</sup> See Charles William Stubbs, *Charles Kingsley and the Christian Social Movement* (1899), ch. 2, esp. p. 51.

<sup>48</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 69-70.

<sup>49</sup> *ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>50</sup> Charles Kingsley, 'The Country Parish', in [F. D. Maurice (ed.)], *Lectures to Ladies on Practical Subjects* (Cambridge, 1855), p. 63.

<sup>51</sup> E. H. Hunt, *Regional Wage Variations in Britain 1850-1914* (1973), p. 5. The same point is made on p. 66.



was concentrated in one particular location was open to the charge of generalisation from the particular: no area could really be called representative. On the other hand, it could be argued that only the local study could give a true picture: as one observer in the 1880s remarked, '[y]ou might as wisely construct a harmonious theory of British agriculture from observations made in Russia and Spain as by tabulating scraps of information picked up in Devonshire and Norfolk, in Cumberland and the Isle of Ely ... Northamptonshire is not England any more than Norfolk is Wales.'<sup>52</sup> Not only did wages vary, but the conditions of employment, hours of labour and systems of hiring varied substantially. The agricultural labourer, although conveniently referred to in the singular by most nineteenth-century observers, lived and worked in different conditions depending on where he was. One of the best illustrations of the diversity of wages was James Caird's map, referred to above, published in *English Agriculture*, which showed how wages were significantly higher in the primarily pastoral counties of the north of England than in the arable counties of the south. The counties where there was little alternative employment in industry tended to have poorly-paid agricultural workers. This was clearly understood by most contemporaries; and historians have emphasised the diversity.<sup>53</sup> It should also be noted that the majority of investigators in the later nineteenth century were concerned with the south of England, and in particular the south-west, which was known to have the lowest wages of any region.

One of the most contested features of the agricultural labourer's standard of living was the actual value of his earnings. This is a theme which will recur throughout this thesis. The determination of agricultural earnings was highly problematic. Firstly, the labourer's wage was generally augmented by an additional one-off payment at harvest time, and often by additional piece-work; and secondly, payments in kind often formed a substantial proportion of agricultural wages, and had to be given a value if any realistic knowledge of conditions was to be gained. (This would become especially important in the social surveys of the Edwardian period, analysed in chapter 7.) The

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<sup>52</sup> Augustus Jessopp, *Arcady: For Better for Worse* (popular ed., 1887 [1st. ed. 1887]), pp. 199-200.

<sup>53</sup> The best example is Hunt, *Regional Wage Variations*. See especially the tables of agricultural labourers' earnings on pp. 61-4. J. D. Chambers & G. E. Mingay, *The Agricultural Revolution 1750-1880* (1966), pp. 136-42, 190 make a similar point. See also Alan Armstrong, *Farmworkers: A Social and Economic History 1770-1980* (1988), pp. 66, 85, 91, for the point about regional wage diversity, based on, among other sources, Caird, *English Agriculture*, and A. L. Bowley, *Wages in the United Kingdom in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1900).



nominal wage was usually, in theory at least, merely the foundation of the labourer's income structure. As one old hedger remembered, referring to the mid-century period, he started on 9s. per week: 'But that weren't my whole earnings; no fear! Such as that 'ouldn't 'a done. I reckoned the nine and ten shillun, and what it rose to, wer just wet and dry money, and to be added to ... what about the hedgin' and ditchin' in winter times, at so much the chain, accordin' to what it be? Or what about overtime and piecework at such jobs as cuttin' out and hoeing turnips ... or the hay...?'<sup>54</sup> Careful inquiry was needed to measure accurately the actual cash earnings of the agricultural labourer. Furthermore, where investigators were concerned to give a value to payments in kind, it was found, naturally enough, that they were valued very differently by different people. One investigator despaired that 'the practice of payment in kind, with all its perplexing ramifications, opposes an obstacle to the inquirer which it is impossible to overcome without a patient and minute investigation of the system in all its phases – a task, it is needless to add, which the constant work of several years would be no more than sufficient to execute'.<sup>55</sup> Thus, as J. P. D. Dunbabin has remarked, 'it is not surprising that whenever the question of agricultural wages was ventilated, it always occasioned heated disputes as to their real value'.<sup>56</sup> This practical problem, in addition, carried an ideological significance: payments in kind were not merely a material benefit to the agricultural labourer, but had an additional importance as one of the structures which were supposed to cement the paternalistic social relations of the countryside. The practice had long been used by farmers to justify the low wages paid to labourers, as improving their material condition and contributing to the tightly-knit rural community. This community of interests, insofar as it had ever existed outside the minds of pastoral myth-makers, was, as we have seen, under strain throughout the nineteenth century, and appeared to have been exploded by the activities of the unions in the early 1870s.

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<sup>54</sup> Major Gambier-Parry, *The Spirit of the Old Folk* (1913), pp. 301-2.

<sup>55</sup> T. E. Kebbel, *The Agricultural Labourer: A Short Summary of His Position* (1870), pp 222-3.

<sup>56</sup> J. P. D. Dunbabin, *Rural Discontent in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (1974), p. 66. See also Mark Overton, *Agricultural Revolution in England: The Transformation of the Agrarian Economy* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 185-6, which expresses an even greater varieties of complexities to be taken account of in measuring the rural standard of living: 'Wage rates on an hourly, daily or piece-work basis can be divided by the price of foodstuffs ... to give an idea of the standard of living. However, this conceals changes in the extent of employment (or unemployment) for the average labourer which might well have changed over time. It ignores sources of income other than wages including common rights to grazing or fuel, the produce from cottage gardens, and payments received from the poor law or local charities. With the employment of servants, it is necessary to give a monetary value to the benefits of living on the farm such as board and lodging. Even labourers received additional payments from farmers, such as a bushel of wheat, keep for a pig, or the right to run one or two animals with those of his employer.'



However, the quasi-philanthropic aspects of the perquisite system could give rise to a conception of the labourers' position which admitted their straitened material circumstances but demurred from any suggestion that they were in poverty, because of the interconnectedness of the society and mutual support systems of which they were supposedly a part; and this was a key theme of the responses of many spokesmen for the farming and landowning interests to illustrations of the poverty of agricultural labourers.

The investigation of rural life in the mid-nineteenth century, based as it was on the evidence obtainable from the literate classes, most of whom had a vested interest to defend, took a particular approach which reflected this social basis. In the 1860s, however, some commentators began to approach the labourers more frequently, and trust them to supply more information about their own conditions. As a consequence the stirrings of conflict among the investigating classes began to be felt, and the period can be seen as an overture to the more intensive conflicts of the 1870s.

The 1860s saw some governmental efforts to discover more about problems of rural labouring life, notably the appointment in 1867 of the Royal Commission on the Employment of Children, Young Persons and Women in Agriculture, which, despite the specificity of its brief, was described by one commentator as 'nothing less than an inquiry into the whole condition of the agricultural peasantry'.<sup>57</sup> This inquiry, prompted by the public outcry which followed the publication of Seymour Tremenheere's report on agricultural gangs in the same year,<sup>58</sup> was a much larger venture than its predecessor of 1843, and the discussion of the condition of the labourer coalesced around its reports. Assistant commissioners were sent out to all parts of Britain, and ordered to report on the issues of the day. The urgent problems of gang labour and education were the subject of the bulk of the report. Each assistant commissioner was asked to send out a printed circular of questions to 'the most competent persons you can meet with'.<sup>59</sup> They were also asked to visit the areas in question, and take information from all sectors of society. The commissioners were reminded, however, of the potential untrustworthiness of

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<sup>57</sup> Kebbel, *Agricultural Labourer*, p. 1.

<sup>58</sup> H. S. Tremenheere, *I Was There: The Memoirs of H. S. Tremenheere* (compiled and edited by E. L. & O. P. Edmonds, Windsor, 1965), p. 111.

<sup>59</sup> *Royal Commission on the Employment of Children, Young Persons, and Women in Agriculture: First Report of the Commissioners*, PP 1867-8, C. 4068, p. 161.



information derived from the working classes: '[i]n receiving the statements of the labouring class you will, as far as possible, record them in their own language; and in case of doubt submit them to their employers, teachers, or others, for explanation or correction.'<sup>60</sup> In general, the reports of the assistant commissioners, and the Commission itself, were based on the information derived from rural elites, and in particular from the clergy, whose importance as a source of social knowledge about the countryside was reinforced by this investigation. For example, George Culley, reporting on Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire in 1868, received 168 completed circulars, of which 75 were filled out by clergymen, 31 by landowners, 54 by 'occupiers of land' (of whom 49 were Poor Law Guardians) and 8 by 'other persons'.<sup>61</sup> From Derbyshire and Hertfordshire, 57 were received, of which 13 came from clergymen, 18 from landowners or their agents, 23 from occupiers of land (again mostly also guardians) and 3 from others.<sup>62</sup> Culley's investigations were centred on the boards of guardians in each area he visited;<sup>63</sup> and also show the importance of clerical informants in inquiries like these. This importance is also evident in Rev. James Fraser's report on East Anglia, Sussex and Gloucestershire. Fraser, later Bishop of Manchester (and a sympathiser with agricultural trade unionism), used his fellow clerics as his main informant group.<sup>64</sup> He also used public meetings, arranged in each area by the clergyman or churchwarden, which were to be attended by 'the owners and occupiers of land, the clergy, the magistrates, the overseers and guardians of the poor, the medical and relieving officers, &c.'<sup>65</sup> Fraser attempted to take some information from labourers,<sup>66</sup> but it was not used in his report. Partly as a result of this bias in the informant structure, the commission tended to represent the rural labouring population in an unflattering light. The adverse moral effects of the gang labour system, in particular, were stressed, and the labouring woman presented as a most undesirable specimen. Karen Sayer has analysed these representations in more detail.<sup>67</sup> It is sufficient here to note the methods and attitude of the inquiry, which in many respects typified the official social inquiry of the period,

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<sup>60</sup> *ibid.*, p. 161.

<sup>61</sup> *Royal Commission on the Employment of Children, Young Persons, and Women in Agriculture: Second Report of the Commissioners*, PP 1868-9, C. 4202, p. 75.

<sup>62</sup> *ibid.*, p. 106.

<sup>63</sup> PP1867-8 - appendix to 1st report, p. 122.

<sup>64</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 5-6.

<sup>65</sup> *ibid.*, p. 4n.

<sup>66</sup> *ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>67</sup> Sayer, *Women of the Fields*, pp. 76-81.



heavily reliant on the traditional informant base.

The task of investigating the rural poor was not eagerly taken up by those who were engaged in applying new techniques to the investigation of urban communities. Although government was beginning to take more of an interest in agricultural matters, this was still usually from the point of view of the practical agriculturist or the macroeconomist. Not only was government slow in approaching the investigation of the labourer, but the social-scientific elite also seemed to take little interest. The *Transactions* of the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science contain very little information on the conditions of the agricultural labourer; and what discussion there was was usually carried on by a hardened group of enthusiasts. Most of the information on rural conditions contained in the series of NAPSS transactions was, like the example of James Begg cited above, derived from clerical and ministerial informants. Thus the Rev. Nash Stephenson commented on the evils of the statute fair;<sup>68</sup> the Rev. John Montgomery of Inverleithen on rural overcrowding;<sup>69</sup> the Rev. Peter Hope on the economic and social gulf between the farmers and labourers;<sup>70</sup> and the Rev. Thomas Hutton contributed a well-known paper on agricultural gangs.<sup>71</sup> The preponderance of such sources of information is not surprising. Clergymen were not a particularly well-represented group within the Association's membership;<sup>72</sup> but for the purposes of commenting on rural society for the benefit of the urban elite represented by the Association, they were in an almost unique position. Whereas urban life could be described by investigators such as Louisa Twining, Secretary of the Ladies' Workhouse Visiting Society, and others whose involvement in organised philanthropy gave them a valuable insight into the social problems of the metropolis and other large towns, the countryside was not a scene of such organised charity, and social knowledge had to be derived from elsewhere. The interest of the Social Science Association as a body in rural questions appears to have been minimal, however; and thus clergymen and others with a

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<sup>68</sup> Rev. Nash Stevenson, 'On Statute Fairs: Their Evils and Remedy', *NAPSS Transactions*, 1858, pp. 624-31; 'On the Rise and Progress of the Movement for the Abolition of Statutes, Mops, or Feeing Markets', *NAPSS Transactions*, 1860, pp. 797-805.

<sup>69</sup> Rev. John Montgomery, 'On Overcrowded Villages', *NAPSS Transactions*, 1860, pp. 787-90.

<sup>70</sup> Rev. Peter Hope, 'On the Right Condition of an Agricultural Community', *NAPSS Transactions*, 1860, pp. 791-7.

<sup>71</sup> Rev. Thomas Hutton, 'Agricultural Gangs, their Influence upon the Morals and the Education of the Young', *NAPSS Transactions*, 1864, pp. 650-5.

<sup>72</sup> See Yeo, *Contest*, pp. 152-5.



reforming agenda often had to look elsewhere – to pamphleteering, for example - for an outlet for their views.

Before considering the work of investigators in the 1870s, therefore, it is appropriate briefly to survey the activities of Canon Edward Girdlestone, which are of interest as having taken place in an area of social conflict before the great strike of 1872, and in exhibiting many of the characteristics of a more sympathetic approach to the labouring classes. Girdlestone became Vicar of Halberton in Devon in 1862, after a long residence in industrial Lancashire, and on arrival found himself horrified at the condition of the agricultural labourers in his parish, having previously lived in a high-wage area. During his stormy incumbency at Halberton, Girdlestone (who became known as the ‘Agricultural Labourers’ Friend’)<sup>73</sup> attacked the local farmers for their treatment of their labourers, and began a scheme of migration to higher-wage areas: consequently some 500 Halbertonians were dispatched to distant parts of the country, especially Lancashire. Girdlestone’s social commentary was taking place at a time of intense social conflict in his own parish, and, after 1872, across the country. As a respected commentator in a number of influential periodicals, as well as at the Church Congress, Girdlestone’s importance lies in the fact that he was an early influential sympathiser with the labourers and their unions, and in his attempts to expose the true state of economic and social affairs in a part of the country distant from the metropolis, and hidden from middle-class view.

One thing of which Girdlestone was certain was that the farmers’ view of agricultural conditions should not be accepted. He was scathing about the comments of the farming spokesman Clare Sewell Read at a meeting at the Society of Arts in May 1868. Read had told the meeting that ‘the main objects of unions was to do the least amount of work and receive the largest amount of pay’; to which Girdlestone replied that Read was ‘not perhaps very likely to look with a favourable eye upon anything which has a tendency to make the agricultural labourers independent’, adding that Read was probably a member of a Chamber of Agriculture himself, and arguing that, if other

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<sup>73</sup> P. J. Perry, ‘Edward Girdlestone 1805-84: A Forgotten Evangelical’, *Journal of Religious History*, vol. IX (1977), p. 292. This article is a good introduction to Girdlestone’s career before, during and after his incumbency at Halberton.

professions and sectors of the agricultural community had their unions, so the labourer should also have his.<sup>74</sup> This was a theme he returned to in later years.<sup>75</sup> At another conference, at Willis's Rooms, Read had said that the labourer's wages in Norfolk were 12s. per week, or 13s. with harvest money, which Girdlestone disputed. Girdlestone pointed out that stoppages for wet weather brought the average wage down to below 12s. He remarked that 'Mr. Reade [*sic*], known in the House of Commons as the farmers' member, and himself a tenant farmer, is often looked up to as a great authority on the condition of the agricultural labourer. So he is no doubt from a farmer's point of view.'<sup>76</sup>

One theme which Girdlestone continually reiterated was the role of perquisites and payments in kind. As the agricultural wage was the central issue in rural politics at this particular time, the valuing of perquisites became a live political issue, and in itself illustrates the deep divisions and bitterness in southern rural society. In 1868 Girdlestone demonstrated that the perquisites paid to labourers were often non-existent, and those that did exist were ludicrously over-valued by the farmers. In Halberton the labourers received 9s. per week, partly paid in grist, and three pints of 'very sour and often very weak cider' per day. Furthermore, the fuel that was supplied had to be carried off by the labourers themselves, potato ground was paid for at a high rate, and the labourers were often forbidden to keep pigs or poultry.<sup>77</sup> Girdlestone kept up this assault on the practice of payment in kind throughout the early 1870s, reminding his readers that one of these 'extras' was payment in (inferior) beer or cider, a practice he condemned, and stressing that the farmer 'not infrequently exaggerates the value of the so-called privileges, and also makes the wages he professes to give appear much larger than they really are, or even pays in kind of an inferior quality'.<sup>78</sup> Potato-ground, for example (a particular obsession of Girdlestone's), was 'much-vaunted' as a privilege, but it had to be rented from the farmer, and at a much higher rate than the farmer paid to the

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<sup>74</sup> Edward Girdlestone, 'Landowners, Land and Those Who Till it', *Fraser's Magazine*, vol. 78 (December 1868), p. 745.

<sup>75</sup> Edward Girdlestone, 'The Agricultural Labourer', *Macmillan's Magazine*, vol. XXVI (1872), p. 261.

<sup>76</sup> Girdlestone, 'Landowners', pp. 732.

<sup>77</sup> *ibid.*, p. 729.

<sup>78</sup> Edward Girdlestone, 'The National Agricultural Labourers' Union', *Macmillan's Magazine*, vol. XXVIII (1873), p. 441.



landlord.<sup>79</sup>

Girdlestone's view of things did not go unchallenged. He cited one Halberton farmer's estimate of his labourers' wages, which were apparently nominally 8s. per week, but were actually 10s., plus grist, pig ground and other perquisites which made the full value 14s. But as Girdlestone explained to the readers of *Fraser's Magazine*, such a calculation was quite ridiculous:

The wages of 8s. per week are calculated at 10s. a week by adding the receipts for over work, when a hard day's work has been already done, while on the other hand, no deduction is made for wet days with no work and no wages ... The convenience for a pig either means a sty which ought to be annexed to every cottage, or an occasional run for the pig in an adjoining field, which not one farmer in a thousand allows. These, together with other things, which are not named, and which in reality do not exist, are calculated from a farmer's point of view at 4s. a week!<sup>80</sup>

In his report on Devon for the employment commission, Edwin Portman talked to the farmer who had made this statement, Mr. Pearce of Uploman, who defended his argument against the Canon's criticisms.<sup>81</sup> Girdlestone was the maverick outsider who challenged the traditional assumptions which lay around rural life, and he inspired criticism from many sources. Even the *Daily News*, a newspaper of Liberal sympathies, remarked that '[t]he correspondents of the newspapers that represent the opinions and prejudices of farmers will angrily deny the correctness of [Girdlestone's] picture; and they will be partially justified.'<sup>82</sup>

Another investigator who paid close attention to the complicated agricultural wage structure was Thomas Kebbel, whose *The Agricultural Labourer* (1870) was a rather more traditional work on rural society, unsurprisingly as his self-appointed task was to spread the findings of the Royal Commission on the Employment of Children, Young Persons and Women in Agriculture to a wider audience than would be likely to read official 'blue books'. His interests were the same as the commissioners': women

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<sup>79</sup> *ibid.*, p. 442.

<sup>80</sup> Girdlestone, 'Landowners', p. 729n1.

<sup>81</sup> PP1868-9, p. 34.

<sup>82</sup> Quoted in *Journal of the Statistical Society*, vol. XXXII (1869), p. 117.

and children's work, especially the gang labour system; the public house; the hiring fair and education (in the context of the legislation of 1870). A similar approach was taken by Charles Whitehead, whose *Agricultural Labourers* appeared in the same year. Karen Sayer has explained that, in performing this task, Kebbel and Whitehead were 'actively engaged in the dissemination and universalisation of ideologically constructed "facts" in order to achieve "the gradual influence of public opinion" to improve rural conditions, and therefore English society as a whole'.<sup>83</sup> While both these investigators shared a reforming agenda, their approaches were markedly less sympathetic than Girdlestone's, and there is little evidence of any direct consultation with labourers in the pursuance of their inquiries.

Kebbel's view of the labourer's position was essentially 'optimistic'. Although he recognised many of the drawbacks of the agricultural life,<sup>84</sup> he asserted that even the commissioners' generally optimistic outlook was an understatement.<sup>85</sup> Unlike Girdlestone, he stressed the value of supplementary earnings to the labourer's domestic economy, illustrating with examples of families with more than one earner. One man - according to a table given to Kebbel, significantly, by a farmer - while he received only £27 12s. in wages in a year, took home £38 17s. when harvest, haytime, piecework and other extra money payments were added; and he and his three sons earned a total of £103 9s. between them in the course of a year.<sup>86</sup> Kebbel conceded that in half of all agricultural families the chief male breadwinner did not receive enough in permanent wages to keep his family, and that many children's earnings did not cover the cost of their keep.<sup>87</sup> However, he emphasised four 'facts' which were very different from those identified by Girdlestone: many labouring families earned over £100 per annum in total, and many more between £70 and £80; many had money in savings banks; their personal health and appearance were generally good; and they enjoyed considerable longevity.<sup>88</sup> Whitehead advanced a similar case: the Devon labourer, he confidently asserted, earned 11s. per week in money wages, 'which, in spite of all that has been alleged to the

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<sup>83</sup> Sayer, *Women of the Fields*, p. 120.

<sup>84</sup> Kebbel, *Agricultural Labourer*, pp. 15-16.

<sup>85</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 23-4.

<sup>86</sup> *ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>87</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 17-18.

<sup>88</sup> *ibid.*, p. 223.



contrary, is fairly believed to be the minimum average wage, even in the western counties'.<sup>89</sup> Whitehead was a defender of the traditionally paternalistic social order of the countryside, and thought that migration (as encouraged by Girdlestone) would 'embitter the relations between employer and employed, and ... completely sever those ties which have existed in such peculiar force between farmers and their labourers'.<sup>90</sup> He pointed to many farmers who kept their men on full wages even at slack times of the year, and to many benefits enjoyed by labourers such as free cottages, cheap flour and fuel, 'which are ... in many cases forgotten by those who make the most of their unsatisfactory state'.<sup>91</sup>

In the years prior to 1872, then, there was a growing debate about the conditions of agricultural labourers, and about the methods which should be taken to investigate their condition, and the aspects of their lives which should be stressed by social observers. An awareness of the value of supplementary earnings, which Seebohm Rowntree and others would come to appreciate in later years in an urban context, was a significant feature of social commentary, particularly where the investigator wanted to paint an optimistic picture of labouring life. On the other hand, observers like Girdlestone emphasised short-time working and the exaggerated value of perquisites. The fact that all these observers had experience of different areas of the country was important - clearly, different conditions prevailed in different areas, and the south west was generally agreed to be the worst region in which to be a labourer - but their differing political perspectives were also important, and this was a feature of social investigation which would intensify in the aftermath of the Warwickshire strike.

What, then, was the general conception of labouring life at the dawn of 1872? It is important to draw a general picture of how country life was perceived in the period. Two particular aspects need to be identified: the positive image of rural life, and the negative image of the labourer, which dominated the discourse of the period. The first was characterised by a nostalgia for the past, a rustic ideal which was a potent force. The second was epitomised by a view of the labourer which emphasised his apparent

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<sup>89</sup> Charles Whitehead, *Agricultural Labourers* (1870), p. 7.

<sup>90</sup> *ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>91</sup> *ibid.*, p. 9.

ignorance and inarticulateness. The ideas which shaped these notions of country life were very complex, and have been analysed in more detail by other historians.<sup>92</sup> They should, however, be briefly surveyed in terms of their impact on social investigators.

Anne Digby has argued that, for all the detail of the *Morning Chronicle* survey and other mid-century ventures, '[t]he more dispersed poverty of the countryside remained substantially hidden, and even in its more obvious manifestations it bore a quaint rusticity which induced nostalgia in observers rather than remedial activity.'<sup>93</sup> Certainly in mid-century country books, devoid of the political venom of Cobbett and others, the labourers were often presented romantically, but still as part of the rustic scenery rather than as fully-formed characters. The very popular books of Thomas Miller, of Nottinghamshire, furnish some good examples. They are full of charming rustic illustrations - for example, a pretty milkmaid carrying her stool, or a hay-cart surrounded by harvesters.<sup>94</sup> It is difficult to believe that Miller had any meaningful contact with the labouring classes: if he did, it is certainly absent from his literary output. He told the stories of some country characters - such as Butcher Heron the poacher and old Abraham the woodman<sup>95</sup> - who were likely to appeal to an urban readership, but these were interesting precisely because they were unusual and exotic, different from the ordinary agricultural labourer. Similarly, the most famous of the mid-nineteenth century school of rustic romanticising, Mary Russell Mitford of Berkshire, was fond of relating tales of country characters, and presented a picture of a closely-knit rural community.<sup>96</sup> Her 'sketches of rural character and scenery', which appeared in the widely-read and influential *Our Village* series, contained love stories, comic narratives and descriptions of Berkshire scenery. On one occasion Mitford did relate, perhaps somewhat exaggeratedly, the fear that descended on the respectable inhabitants of the village during an outbreak of incendiarism;<sup>97</sup> but in general conflict is absent from her

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<sup>92</sup> See K. D. M. Snell, *Annals of the Labouring Poor: Social Change and Agrarian England 1660-1900* (Cambridge, 1987 [1st. ed. Cambridge, 1985]), pp. 5-9, 388-91; Alun Howkins, 'From "Hodge" to "Lob": Reconstructing the English Farm Labourer 1870-1914', in Malcolm Chase & Ian Dyck (eds.), *Living and Learning: Essays in Honour of J. F. C. Harrison* (Aldershot, 1996), pp. 218-35.

<sup>93</sup> Digby, 'Rural Poor', p. 591.

<sup>94</sup> See for example Thomas Miller, *English Country Life* (1859), pp. 118, 288.

<sup>95</sup> Thomas Miller, *Rural Sketches* (1839), pp. 109-22, 150-7.

<sup>96</sup> See Mary Russell Mitford, *Our Village: Sketches of Rural Characters and Scenery* (2 vols., 1863 [1st. ed. 5 parts, 1824-32]).

<sup>97</sup> *ibid.*, vol. II, pp. 318-24.



descriptions. For Mitford the beneficial effects of the outdoor life were plain: she was convinced that 'in every condition of life goodness and happiness may be found by those who seek them, and never more surely than in the fresh air, the shade, and the sunshine of nature'.<sup>98</sup>

The romantic view of country life was not confined to writers like Miller and Mitford: it affected even the most hard-headed of investigators. Economic considerations could not be divorced from cultural preconceptions. Adam Smith once remarked on '[h]ow much the lowest class of people in the country, is really superior to those of the towns is well known to every man whom either business or curiosity has led to converse with each'.<sup>99</sup> Even William Cobbett, not averse to challenging the classes who (he thought) conspired to keep the labourer in a position of wretchedness, was not untouched by sentimental considerations:

And, bear in mind, that if the state of the labourer has its disadvantages, when compared with other callings and conditions of life, it has also its advantages. It is free from the torments of ambition, and from a great part of the causes of ill health, from which not all the riches in the world and all the circumstances of high rank are a compensation. The able and prudent labourer is always *safe*, at the least; and that is what few men are who are lifted above him. They have losses and crosses to fear, the thought of which never enters his mind if he act well his part towards himself, his family, and his neighbour.<sup>100</sup>

The investigator had to penetrate this veil of romance and rusticity if he was to present an accurate picture of labouring life. The literary tradition had no place for the sort of squalor that W. S. Gilly and Henry Moule described. John Eddowes argued that the picture of country life drawn from reality was very different from the 'fancy-sketch' drawn from the romance of rusticity.<sup>101</sup> Another commentator, in the *Cornhill Magazine* in 1874, remarked on the differences between the popular conception of a rural summer and the harsher realities of winter:

To those who think it is such pleasant and picturesque employment, that the labourer's life is an idyll, only needing to be translated into words, we would

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<sup>98</sup> *ibid.*, vol. I, p. v.

<sup>99</sup> Quoted in Rosamond Bayne-Powell, *English Country Life in the Eighteenth Century* (1937 [1st. ed. 1935]), p. 204.

<sup>100</sup> William Cobbett, *Cottage Economy*, (17th ed., 1850 [1st ed. 1821]), parag. 15.

<sup>101</sup> Eddowes, *Agricultural Labourer*, p. 6.

recommend that they should go, not only on some fine summer's evening when the heat of day is declining ... but with Roger on a foggy November morning, to spread rotten muck over the heavy clay land; not only to "hear the milk sing in the pail, with buzzings of the honied hours", but to milk those same cows at four o'clock in winter, when the frost is on the grass, and a keen north wind blowing across the pastures.<sup>102</sup>

A number of investigators saw it as their duty to overturn this romantic picture of country life; and this remained an important theme until the Great War. Girdlestone remarked that roses, honeysuckles and other visually-pleasing features of the rural environment were deceptive, and concealed the 'misery, poverty, and abject dependence' of labouring families from the view of the outsider.<sup>103</sup> The rustic idyll, however, was remarkably resilient to efforts to explode it.

The labourer himself, on the other hand, was usually accorded considerably less esteem than the environment in which he lived. Most observers thought him slow-witted and unsophisticated, intellectually inferior to his urban counterpart. He was represented as an archetypal figure: 'Hodge'. Jan Marsh, in reminding us of the derivation of the term (it was a diminution of 'Roger'), has remarked that it sounds like 'a cross between hedge (where he spent much of his time, especially in bad weather) and clod (the substance on his boots and in his brain)'.<sup>104</sup> The stereotype was powerful and influential. Hodge's life was devoid of colour; and he was wholly ignorant of the world outside his own parish, and probably, like some of Canon Girdlestone's migrants to the north, thought Manchester was across the sea.<sup>105</sup> His work, like his brain, was slow and deliberate. Past and future were nothing to him. One commentator memorably characterised him as being 'of strong faith and a gross feeder'.<sup>106</sup> Hodge was a figure on the margins of poverty: his pocket was not quite empty, but his mind was.

For investigators, conditioned for the most part to view the labourer in this way, the implications of the stereotype were clear. The labourer was not expected to be able

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<sup>102</sup> *Cornhill*, vol. XXIX, no. 174 (June 1874), p. 693.

<sup>103</sup> Girdlestone, 'Landowners', p. 734.

<sup>104</sup> Jan Marsh, *Back to the Land: The Pastoral Impulse in England from 1880-1914* (1982), p. 60.

<sup>105</sup> See G. E. Mingay, *Rural Life in Victorian England* (1976), p. 99; F. G. Heath, *The English Peasantry* (1874), p. 155.

<sup>106</sup> 'A Wykehamist', *The Agricultural Labourer* (1873), p. 10.



to convey very much of use or interest. Thus the *Morning Chronicle* investigators described their experience of interviewing the generic labourer:

When you accost him, if he is not insolent - which he seldom is - he is timid and shrinking, his whole manner showing that feels himself at a distance from you greater than should separate any two classes of men. He is often doubtful when you address, and suspicious when you question him; he is seemingly oppressed with the interview while it lasts, and obviously relieved when it is over.<sup>107</sup>

There was some justification behind the perceived inarticulateness of the labourer. Thomas Kebbel referred to the labourer's 'life of silent, uncomplaining toil...his undeniable privations, his simplicity, his helplessness, so unlike the loud self-assertion and menacing pugnacity of the city artisan'.<sup>108</sup> Certainly agricultural workers were not, at this period, unionised as were the skilled workers of the towns, and did not participate in the agitation for parliamentary reform that marked the mid-1860s and culminated in the riots in Trafalgar Square. Even the National Agricultural Labourers' Union of the 1870s, significant as its activities seemed at the time, had a membership of only 86,214 at its peak in 1874: a small fraction of the total agricultural labour force.<sup>109</sup> The agricultural labourer had no spokesman: there was no rural equivalent of the 'Journeyman Engineer' (Thomas Wright) who commented lucidly in respectable periodicals on the condition and outlook of his own class.<sup>110</sup> Some astonishingly gifted individual labourers were able to advance to a higher social position. George Edwards and Joseph Arch are examples, both of whom have left interesting autobiographies;<sup>111</sup> but both these men used the vehicle of trade unionism to advance their careers. One mid-century example of a labourer-made-good was Alexander Somerville, the 'Whistler at the Plough', whose own investigations make interesting reading;<sup>112</sup> and another was

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<sup>107</sup> *Morning Chronicle*, 1/12/1849, quoted in Snell, *Annals*, pp. 6-7.

<sup>108</sup> Kebbel, *Agricultural Labourer*, p. 238.

<sup>109</sup> Dunbabin, *Rural Discontent*, p. 80.

<sup>110</sup> For example [Thomas Wright], *Some Habits and Customs of the Working Classes* (1867); *The Great Unwashed* (1868). See also A. J. Reid, 'Intelligent Artisans and Aristocrats of Labour: The Essays of Thomas Wright', in J. Winter (ed.), *The Working Class in Modern British History: Essays in Honour of Henry Pelling* (1983), pp. 171-86.

<sup>111</sup> George Edwards, *From Crow-Scaring to Westminster* (1922); Joseph Arch, *The Autobiography of Joseph Arch* (ed. by John Gerard O'Leary, 1966 [1st. ed. 1898]).

<sup>112</sup> Alexander Somerville, *The Whistler at the Plough; Author of Letters 'One Who Has Whistled at the Plough' and Agricultural Customs in Most Parts of England, with Letters from Ireland: Also 'Free Trade and the League': A Biographic History* (Manchester, 1852); see also *The Autobiography of a Working Man, by 'One Who Has Followed the Plough'* (1848).



George Mitchell, 'One from the Plough'.<sup>113</sup> By the very act of escaping from the plough, however, these men had distinguished themselves from the body of the labouring population. Their route was not followed by many; and, in general, before the advent of agricultural unionism, the labourer was regarded as having little of interest to impart to investigators, and as a result was subject to representations which he was largely unable to shape.

These representations were challenged, as the next chapter will show, by the activities of the unions, but remained remarkably stubborn and difficult to shift right down to 1914. Some early voices, however, were ready to challenge the use of the term 'Hodge'; and, unsurprisingly, one of these voices was Girdlestone's. He saw the idea of 'Hodge' as an aspect of the rural ruling classes' self-interested justification of a *status quo* which was to him unacceptable. In criticising the unenlightened landowners, still predominant in Devon, who were the product of a restricted social base which fostered a narrow-minded and prejudiced view of labouring life, Girdlestone complained:

As for the labourer, such sort of landowners call him Hodge. They think of him as Hodge. They treat him as Hodge. In their eyes the labourer is a serf, and ought to remain a serf. He must be content with a cottage, in comparison of which a barn or stable is a palace; wages barely enough when he is at work every day and all day long to keep body and soul together ... with nothing in prospect but parish pay and the union.<sup>114</sup>

Girdlestone's declamatory style notwithstanding, these sentiments represent a thoughtful response to the 'Hodge' stereotype. 'Hodge' was a result of the social make-up of the agricultural community. With little social sympathy between the agricultural 'orders', there was a deficit of cultural understanding, and little effort was made to penetrate beneath the labourer's inarticulate surface. As K. D. M. Snell has explained, the 'Hodge' character was the result of 'social ignorance and class isolation'.<sup>115</sup> The cultural gulf between urban and rural life also contributed to the rather unflattering stereotype. This helps to account for the reluctance of investigators in this period to adopt the

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<sup>113</sup> George Mitchell, *The Skeleton at the Plough, or The Poor Farm Labourers of the West, with the Autobiography and Reminiscences of George Mitchell*, 'One from the Plough' (1874). See also F. G. Heath, *The 'Romance' of Peasant Life in the West of England* (2nd. ed., 1872 [1st. ed. 1872]), ch. 3.

<sup>114</sup> Girdlestone, 'Landowners', p. 735.

<sup>115</sup> Snell, *Annals*, p. 5.



‘respondent’ approach and trust the labourer to comment on his own condition.

The different representations of the labourer and his condition described in this chapter were diffused through a variety of channels, including newspapers, pamphlets, periodicals and official reports. Caird’s and Foster’s articles would have been read about by a substantial section of the metropolitan middle classes, being published in the *Times*; and the same can be said for the *Morning Chronicle* investigators. Vicars tended to publish their work in pamphlet form or, in the case of Girdlestone, in journals such as *Fraser’s* and *Macmillan’s*. Reports of official inquiries, though not widely read in themselves, gained a wider audience through the work of investigators such as Keibel and Whitehead. As one commentator in the *Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society* remarked some years later, ‘if there is one thing which more than another the ordinary English reader dreads to tackle, it is the ponderous volumes issued in such variety by the Government printers for the instruction of our legislators, the blue covers and general aspects of which are in themselves sufficient to frighten away at first sight all but industrious students’.<sup>116</sup> The information contained within these reports was conveyed to the reading public through other channels. Newspapers and journals had a wider circulation, and were more readable than a lengthy tome. All these investigations, however, whichever methods they employed, had one thing in common: all were written largely for the benefit of an urban, and especially metropolitan elite; and, whether the main purpose was to inform or to campaign, all were conveying information and opinions that were derived from a particular investigative process. The differences in method and approach dictated, to a large extent, the character of the material conveyed.

The extensive remit of this chapter - to survey the development of the conceptual background and methodological practices of social investigators in the countryside over a period of nearly a century - has prevented very many of them from being discussed in any depth. However, the general picture which emerges from such a survey is one which highlights the variety of possible approaches to such investigation, and the complexity of the conceptions of rural life which coloured the activities of investigators. The underlying structural conflicts within the rural community, which would become

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<sup>116</sup> Herbert J. Little, ‘Report on Agricultural Education’, *Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society of England*, 2nd. series, vol. XXI (1885), p. 127.

increasingly important in later years, are clearly identifiable within the sources for this chapter; and it was no accident that the investigative imperative seemed strongest when some particular political crisis seemed to threaten the traditional settled order of country life. The most important features of these investigations should be drawn from this chapter and carried on into the more detailed considerations which follow. Firstly, the conflicts in rural society shaped the practices of investigators. This feature, which was to intensify in importance in the 1870s, was signalled with particular force by Canon Girdlestone and others in the 1860s, but it can be traced back much earlier. Secondly, rural life was comparatively inaccessible. Rural transport was not highly developed; and there were few residents of the countryside who could supply reliable and unbiased information about labouring conditions. For this reason the country parson was, and would remain, a crucial figure. Thirdly, the realities of rural conditions were masked by a conception, derived from country books, of the rural as the source of strength, beauty and happiness, in contrast to the unnatural and unhealthy lifestyle which prevailed in the towns. Fourthly - and the involvement of evangelical parsons is of great significance here - some residents of the countryside were beginning to engage in a project of achieving cultural empathy with the working classes, through which it was hoped a more effective communication would result. This was in itself a result of the realisation that the agricultural 'orders' seemed to have become sundered from each other through the process of the capitalisation of agriculture. Traditional forms of investigation - the informant approach as used by Arthur Young - were beginning to seem inadequate, and men like Girdlestone realised that different kinds of knowledge and understanding could be derived from different sectors of the community. This was the source of the methodological contest among social investigators which developed in the 1870s.



### Chapter 3: Social conflict and social inquiry: the 1870s

This chapter analyses the activities of a number of investigators of rural life in the 1870s. Their work is not well known: its usefulness has been confined to supplying illustrative material to historians of agriculture and rural life. A closer examination of such material, however, will show that the investigations of Archibald Forbes, Francis Heath and Frederick Clifford, as well as other little-remembered names, throw much light on the processes of social inquiry and the conflicting contemporary perspectives on rural life. The last chapter dealt with perceptions of labouring life on which the underlying social conflicts of the countryside acted. The outbreaks of labouring discontent across the country in the wake of the formation of the National Agricultural Labourers' Union in 1872, however, were of a new kind. For the first time since the Tolpuddle Martyrs, agricultural trade unionism became a serious political issue; and the scale of the organisation, while still by no means overwhelming, was of a different order from that of the combinations of the 1820s. The political dimension of the outbreaks of the 1870s gave social investigators a role in transmitting information, not just about social conditions in the countryside, but also about relationships within rural communities. This chapter shows how social tensions acted on investigators, and shaped both their methods and their perceptions of rural life. It concentrates on the special correspondent journalism that was carried on in the wake of the strike of 1872, and goes on to consider some of the responses of the farming community to the radical criticisms to which they were being subjected.

The Warwickshire labourers' strike of 1872, led by the charismatic Joseph Arch, brought the rural labour problem into sharp focus.<sup>1</sup> This sharpness was redoubled by the apparent suddenness of the Warwickshire strike. As Alun Howkins has explained in a recent book on rural society,

The labourer ... had been regarded for decades as hopelessly backward by urban radicals while to the elite he was seen as stupid but contented, the far end of a chain of paternalism. The unions struck at the heart of both these myths, but it was the attack on the latter which was most disturbing. By "interfering" in the sacred

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<sup>1</sup> See J. P. D. Dunbabin, *Rural Discontent in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (1974); Pamela Horn, *Joseph Arch (1826-1919): The Farm Workers' Leader* (Kington, 1971); Pamela Horn, 'Labour Organizations' in G. E. Mingay (ed.), *The Victorian Countryside* (2 vols., 1981), vol. II, pp. 580-90.

relationship between master and man the union hit at the core of the paternalist social structure.<sup>2</sup>

The first of these myths was certainly shaken by the activities of the unions. Observers looked with disbelief on the fact that Hodge was rebelling. As the Countess of Warwick remembered, '[i]t had seemed to us impossible that there should be any stirring of the dry bones.'<sup>3</sup> The stereotype of Hodge was by no means broken by the activities of agricultural unionism, as chapter 4 will show, but the apparent fissures in rural society which were opened up by the agitation, as Howkins shows, presented an urgent problem. It must be remembered that the outbreaks of 1872 came a full seventeen years before the urban 'new unionism', and seemed to shake one of the more stable sectors of British society. The National Union was the most significant outbreak of widespread rural discontent since the 'Swing' riots. Whether the union had killed the paternalistic structure of rural society, or whether the erosion of this structure had prompted the outbreak of agricultural trade unionism, was a chicken-and-egg question on which commentators disagreed, but it is not especially important to the issues which will be discussed in this chapter. It is enough to understand that observers were conscious of severe social tensions in the countryside. Anxieties about rural social harmony and the decline of feudalistic social structures were not new to the 1870s: Cobbett had expressed them, for example, and the Swing Riots and other mid-century outbreaks of localised discontent suggest underlying malfunctions of the social order. As David Jones has suggested, '[a]t certain periods, as in 1843-4 and 1849-51, such intimidation and destruction of property reached a massive scale and indicated that paternalism and deference were virtually fractured.'<sup>4</sup> In 1872, however, the agricultural labour problem seemed to shift from being a source of parochial social protest and disorder, and took its place, if temporarily, at the centre of the national political stage.

Catherine Marsh has pointed to the increasing importance of the organised labour movement as one of the factors behind the transition from informant to respondent investigations.<sup>5</sup> This point might also be made about the countryside. The unions'

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<sup>2</sup> Alun Howkins, *Reshaping Rural England: A Social History 1850-1925* (1991), p. 186.

<sup>3</sup> Introduction to *The Autobiography of Joseph Arch* (with a preface by Frances Countess of Warwick, edited by John Gerard O'Leary, 1966 [1st. ed. 1898]), p. 12.

<sup>4</sup> David Jones, 'Rural Crime and Protest' in Mingay, *Victorian Countryside*, vol. II, p. 567.

<sup>5</sup> Catherine Marsh, 'Informants, Respondents and Citizens', in Martin Bulmer (ed.), *Essays on the History*



challenge to the stereotype of Hodge gave an urgency to attempts to communicate with the labourers; and also, for the first time, gave the labourers an organised voice to put their own case across. Thus the condition of the labourer in the 1870s was contested; and this contest, among investigators, often coalesced around methods of investigation. Politically, the division was quite clear: the Conservative press would trust the word of the respectable informant, while the Radical, sympathising with the demands of the union, would be inclined to ask the labourers for information about their own condition. Thus, as this chapter will show, an investigative contest in rural society in the 1870s was played out between the informant and the respondent approaches. The apparent splintering of the social basis of agriculture led to conflicts among investigators over the location of social knowledge.

The Warwickshire strike was reported at length in the national press, owing much to the reports of Archibald Forbes in the *Daily News*. Forbes was a war correspondent, and his articles on the Franco-Prussian War had played the leading role in the growth of the newspaper's circulation and influence.<sup>6</sup> That such a celebrated correspondent should be sent reflects the perceived importance of the strike. Forbes was dispatched to Wellesbourne, the centre of the union's activity, in March 1872, two weeks after the *Times* had first reported the strike.<sup>7</sup> He visited a number of villages with Arch, and attended several meetings of strikers. His articles generally expressed support for the labourers. Arch paid tribute to him in his autobiography: 'Those articles opened the eyes of a large section of the public to the gravity of the struggle going on in South Warwickshire at that moment, and materially helped to turn the scale in our favour at a critical time.'<sup>8</sup> Arthur Clayden, a member of the Consulting Committee of the Union, also expressed gratitude for the 'really valuable service' rendered by the articles.<sup>9</sup> Forbes's inquiries initiated a debate on the agricultural labour problem and heralded a

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of *British Sociological Research* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 206-27.

<sup>6</sup> The paper's circulation tripled to 150,000 in one week. See R. J. Cruikshank, *Roaring Century, 1846-1946* (1946), p. 168. There is a character sketch of Forbes in Joseph Hatton, *Journalistic London, Being a Series of Sketches of Famous Pens and Papers of the Day* (1882), pp. 58-62.

<sup>7</sup> See Horn, *Joseph Arch*, p. 50.

<sup>8</sup> *The Autobiography of Joseph Arch*, p. 48. See also Horn, *Joseph Arch*, pp. 51-3.

<sup>9</sup> Arthur Clayden, *The Revolt of the Field: A Sketch of the Rise and Progress of the Movement Among the Agricultural Labourers, Known as the 'National Agricultural Labourers' Union', With a Reprint of the Correspondence to the Daily News During a Tour Through Canada With Mr. Arch* (1874), p. 95. See also p. 8.

new approach to social inquiry, emphasising first-hand contact with the investigated population.

Forbes's articles prompted other investigations of the rural labouring classes, particularly Francis Heath's tour of the west country in May and June 1872. Heath was born in Devon in 1843, and entered the civil service in 1862, where he achieved a certain success and notoriety. He was a surveyor in HM Customs, a campaigner for urban parklands<sup>10</sup> and a prolific author of nature books.<sup>11</sup> These were immensely popular: *The Fern Paradise* was into its 7th edition by 1905, and *The Fern World* its 12th by 1910. Heath's main interest for the social historian, however, lies in his work as a special correspondent for the *Morning Advertiser*, in which capacity he worked for seven years, and made tours of inquiry into rural conditions in the West Country in 1872 and 1873. Out of these tours arose two series of articles for the *Advertiser*, and two important books, *The 'Romance' of Peasant Life* (1872), *The English Peasantry* (1874); and these were followed by *Peasant Life in the West of England* (1880), in which Heath's own investigations were supplemented by information from correspondents. Heath was aware of Forbes's articles, and forty years later he remembered how 'the clever war correspondent performed his task with a graphic ability that at once focused public attention and aroused widespread sympathy'.<sup>12</sup> His own articles dealt with Devon, Dorset, Somerset and Wiltshire: a region in which agricultural wages were even lower than in Warwickshire. Taken as a whole, Heath's investigations provide an excellent illustration of the approach to understanding labouring life in the context of agrarian discontent.

The 1870s was a fertile period for the agricultural special correspondent; and this chapter will examine two others. Richard Heath (no relation of Francis), a Christian Socialist who toured the countryside intermittently in the 1870s for the *Golden Hours* and *Leisure Hour* journals, is an interesting example. A keen visitor of labourers' cottages, a campaigner for parish councils and a vociferous champion of Nonconformity,

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<sup>10</sup> F. G. Heath, *Burnham Beeches* (1879).

<sup>11</sup> For example F. G. Heath, *The Fern Paradise: A Plea for the Culture of Ferns* (1875); *The Fern World* (1877).

<sup>12</sup> F. G. Heath, *British Rural Life and Labour* (1911), pp. 192-3.



Heath epitomised the Radical special correspondent in this period. By contrast, Frederick Clifford, who toured East Anglia for the *Times* in the wake of the agricultural lockout of 1874, was a figure of the establishment; although, as will be seen, even he was affected by the tendency to approach the labourers for information about their own conditions, and was appalled by some of the conditions in which the labourers of Norfolk and Suffolk lived. This chapter will also consider some of the other reactions to the social turmoil in rural England during the 1870s, particularly the responses of the farming and landowning interests; and show how the condition of the labourer was fiercely contested by parties with divergent interests within the social structure of rural England.

Archibald Forbes's approach, communicating at first hand with the labourers rather than relying on informants, yielded a new kind of information; information which, for example, had been denied to James Caird. In his first article, on 27th March, he reproduced a rough family budget: 'Wages, father 12s.; son 3s.; = 15s. per week. The week's bread and flour, 9s. 4d.; one cwt. of coal, 1s. 6d.; schooling for children, 2d.; rent of allotment (1 chain), 1d.; total 10s. 8d. Leaves for butcher's meat, tea, sugar, soap, lights, pepper and salt, clothes for seven persons, beer, medicine, and pocket money, per week, 4s. 4d.'<sup>13</sup> Such information could only be obtained from an interview with the family itself. Forbes went further than this, however, and actually took up residence in the family home.<sup>14</sup> There were seven in the family, earning 15s. per week between them. Breakfast was dry bread and poor tea, dinner potatoes fried in scraps of bacon rind, and supper bread and boiled potatoes. Sometimes, he heard, they ate a single herring divided between the seven. One day, Forbes reported, he and the housewife formed 'a committee of ways and means' to examine her budgeting - an exercise so soul-destroying that it made her cry. Staying with a family, in this way, could give an excellent insight into the conditions and domestic economy of agricultural labouring life.

There was an interesting sequel to this particular experience. A few days later, Benjamin Disraeli gave a speech at the Free Trade Hall in Manchester - the famous

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<sup>13</sup> *Daily News*, 27/3/1872, p. 6; also quoted in F. G. Heath, *The English Peasantry* (1874), p. 2. Forbes also commented on a similar budget in Cambridgeshire (*Daily News*, 5/4/1872, p. 3).

<sup>14</sup> *Daily News*, 28/3/1872, p. 2.

‘exhausted volcanoes’ speech - in which he claimed that the agricultural labourer had shared in the growth of national prosperity, in increased money wages, easier work as a result of the development of machinery, and the universal system of allotments; and denouncing ‘gentlemen of the press going to dine with an agricultural family when he has seven children and only one red-herring for dinner ... for there seems something so extremely greedy and rapacious in the experiment that it ought to be held up to public condemnation’.<sup>15</sup> There were, of course, only five children, not seven; and Forbes’s reply to Disraeli was that he had paid for his meals and could produce the receipts. To embarrass the Leader of the Opposition, Forbes then went to Hughenden, finding poor conditions among the labourers there. Responding to Disraeli’s allegations, he pointed out that he ‘carefully abstained from interrogating any man who was not at work, with intent to avoid the imputation of obtaining [his] information from [what Disraeli had called] “clever fellows who do nothing”’.<sup>16</sup> He came across a number of poor cottages, with which he indicted Disraeli. A week later, however, the vicar of Hughenden wrote to the *Daily News*, speaking as he claimed with ‘a pretty accurate knowledge of every house in [his] district’, pointing out that only about a dozen cottages in the area were really bad, none of which belonged to Disraeli himself.<sup>17</sup> This example, though comical, is illustrative of the political dimension of investigations of this kind, particularly where they were undertaken during a time of social conflict.

Forbes’s articles sparked much controversy in the columns of the *Daily News* and elsewhere. Forbes had stated unequivocally the labourers’ point of view, and had derived most of his information from labourers themselves or from those, such as the parish schoolmaster of Leintwardine in Herefordshire, who were likely to be sympathetic to them.<sup>18</sup> Correspondents often disagreed with his assessment of the situation, however, and a number spoke up for the farmers in the debate.<sup>19</sup> ‘An East Essex Farmer’, for example, wrote to remind readers that the labourers’ earnings in Warwickshire were

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<sup>15</sup> *Daily News*, 4/4/1872, p. 3.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>17</sup> *Daily News*, 16/4/1872, p. 3.

<sup>18</sup> *Daily News*, 30/3/1872, p. 3. The vicar of Leintwardine was the founder of the cumbersonly-named North Herefordshire and South Shropshire Agricultural Labourers’ Improvement Society (1871), which, while not condoning strike action, followed Canon Girdlestone in assisting labourers to migrate in search of higher wages. (E. L. Jones, *Agriculture and the Industrial Revolution* (Oxford, 1974), p. 228.)

<sup>19</sup> For example, letter from ‘A Farmer’s Boy’ in *Daily News*, 13/4/1872, p. 3.



really higher than the 12s. claimed by Forbes and the union. In his area, ordinary money wages were 13s. per week, but with extras they amounted to up to 16s., and many families with supplementary earners received a total of between 25 and 35s. per week.<sup>20</sup> (He did not, however, point out that deductions were often made in wet weather or slack periods, which brought the average earnings down.) The Essex farmer was answered by the Rev. J. W. Leigh of Stoneleigh, a leading clerical supporter of Arch's union.<sup>21</sup> Other correspondents pointed out that conditions were better elsewhere: in North Yorkshire, Durham and Northumberland, for example, where in contrast to the southern 'Hodges' the labourers were 'a shrewd, athletic, cheery race, who, with well-filled stomachs, do not shrink from doing a good day's work'.<sup>22</sup>

The debate spread much further than the columns of the *Daily News*. While Forbes's approach was unashamedly journalistic, his articles were noticed by the social-scientific community, being remarked upon, for example, at the Social Science Congress, held that year at Plymouth.<sup>23</sup> Joseph Arch's activities prompted this body to initiate a debate on the condition of the labourer. A variety of contributors contested the issue. Baldwyn Leighton pointed out that the agricultural classes had been sundered by the new methods of farming, and advocated industrial partnership and cooperation as a possible solution to the labour difficulty.<sup>24</sup> The farming spokesman Clare Sewell Read remarked that he paid his labourers 12s. per week, compared with only 9s. per week twenty years earlier;<sup>25</sup> and Mr. E. Thorne of Plymouth reckoned that the English agricultural labourers and their wives were 'the most extravagant of the working class in any part of the world', and tended to waste their money on drink.<sup>26</sup> Thorne emphasised the liberality of the system of payment in kind. The contributors to this discussion were farmers, landowners or clergymen: as in the 1880s, for the membership of the Social Science Association, these were the sources of social knowledge in the rural community; and their emphasis of the beneficial aspects of the paternalistic social structure of the

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<sup>20</sup> *ibid.* See the reply to this from the political economist Henry Fawcett in the *Daily News*, 1/4/1872, p. 2.

<sup>21</sup> *Daily News* 2/4/1872, p. 2.

<sup>22</sup> Letter from 'A North Yorkshire Landowner' in *Daily News*, 2/4/1872, p. 2.

<sup>23</sup> National Association for the Promotion of Social Science [NAPSS], *Transactions*, 1872, pp. 415-16.

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 393-401. See also Sir Baldwyn Leighton, Bart., *Agricultural Labour, Being a Paper Read Before the Social Science Congress at Plymouth, September 13th, 1872* (1872).

<sup>25</sup> NAPSS *Transactions*, 1872, pp. 411-12.

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*, p. 415.

countryside reflected their social backgrounds.

The subject of paternalism was one about which a number of commentators felt very strongly. Responding to Forbes's articles, a 'Merchant', who was also a tenant farmer of eighteen years' standing, regretted the decline of face-to-face relations in the countryside, which he dated to about 1840.<sup>27</sup> The issue could be given two distinct emphases, however, one from the employer's and one from the labourer's point of view. One respectable commentator, a Suffolk clergyman, pointed out the seriousness of the social cleavage: 'there is a bitter feeling rankling in [the labourers'] minds that they have not been well treated by the employers' who happily ejected them from cottages and threw them onto the poor law when they were old and sick.<sup>28</sup> On the other hand, the farming interest could claim ingratitude on the labourers' part. Richard Jefferies's letters in the *Times* are an example. He pointed out that in his own county, Wiltshire, regular wages ranged from 10s. to 13s. per week, while there were some examples of much higher pay; and that the labourer enjoyed a cottage, garden, free beer, and additional earnings from piece work and harvest. He went on seriously to indict the labouring population:

[Labouring men and women] are too ungrateful for the many great benefits which are bountifully supplied them - the brandy, the soup, and fresh meat readily extended without stint from the farmer's home in sickness to the cottage are too easily forgotten. ... Never once in all my observation have I heard a labouring man or woman make a grateful remark; and yet I can confidently say that there is no class of persons in England who receive so many attentions and benefits from their superiors as the agricultural labourers ... No term is too strong in condemnation for those persons who endeavour to arouse an agitation among a class of people so short-sighted and so ready to turn against their own benefactors and their own interest.<sup>29</sup>

Jefferies wrote self-consciously as a spokesman for the farming interest, and the *Times* editorial of the same day expressed sympathy with his conception of agricultural life: 'Every farm, and, to a great extent, every parish, is, for the Labourer, one household, and he has the gratuitous use of common advantages.'<sup>30</sup> These letters provoked a response

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<sup>27</sup> *Daily News*, 3/4/1872, p. 2.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>29</sup> *Times* 14/11/1872, p. 8.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*, p. 7.



from a number of correspondents to the *Times*, including Canon Girdlestone,<sup>31</sup> who, predictably, disagreed with Jefferies's assessment. A reply to Jefferies from 'The Son of a Wiltshire Labourer', detailing the poor quality of cottages, the expense of both cottages and allotments, and the long hours worked in harvest time in return for the additional harvest payment, makes it clear that the conflict aroused extreme passions on both sides.<sup>32</sup> The *Times* editorial on the same day contained an interesting analysis of the conflicting points of view of farmer and labourer:

'The Son of a Wiltshire Labourer' has something to say for the class. When a Labourer does happen to find a son to speak for him he can hardly fail to tell us what neither Landlord, nor Farmer, nor even political friend can hit the exact truth of so well. Everybody and every class see things from their own point of view - best, of course, what is nearest and most familiar. Mr. JEFFERIES ... describes truly and well what he sees and knows, but then he speaks at large and as if from a survey. Our new correspondent, on the contrary, takes instances, hits blots, and finds flaws in what he regards, not unreasonably, as an indictment.<sup>33</sup>

The unusual terminology of this editorial adds to its interest. Jefferies was not an investigator as such - he was really just a hack journalist with some limited experience of practical farming who saw an opportunity to air some of the prejudices of his class on the national stage - but his attitude, and the scope of his view, was that of the 'survey'. Forbes's approach contrasts nicely: he wrote in the *Daily News* (echoing Mayhew) that '[y]ou cannot judge of a country from a balloon; you must walk over the ridges and along the furrows.'<sup>34</sup> The intensive approach to social investigation, which emphasised the closeness of contact with the labouring classes themselves, was thus endorsed by Forbes, whose sympathies, unlike Jefferies's, lay firmly with the striking labourers.

Francis Heath's approach in 1872 and 1873 was, similarly, to take the bulk of his information from the labourers themselves, and to see their conditions for himself rather than trust to any third party's word. By implication, he was critical of the Royal Commission on the Employment of Children, Young Persons and Women in Agriculture: not only was its brief unnecessarily limited to women and children,<sup>35</sup> but a

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<sup>31</sup> *Times*, 27/11/1872, p. 10.

<sup>32</sup> *Times*, 25/11/1872, p. 6.

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>34</sup> *Daily News*, 30/3/1872, p. 3.

<sup>35</sup> Heath, *Peasantry*, pp. 2-3.

more serious flaw was that 'the facts were principally gathered from Boards of Guardians, clergymen, agents, and individual farmers. The Commissioners did occasionally take evidence from the labourers and their wives, but it was the exception, and not the rule, for them to do so.'<sup>36</sup> Heath was forced to rely on evidence from this commission, from the reports of the assistant poor law commissioners of 1843, and from Caird's *English Agriculture* to compile a survey of conditions before 1872;<sup>37</sup> but in his own investigations he 'rarely failed to question any labouring man or woman' whom he met on his travels.<sup>38</sup> In 1872 he heard from farmers in northern Somerset that the agricultural labourers of the area were 'dissipated in their habits', but found on personal inspection that this was not so.<sup>39</sup> He was aware of the problems of mixing fact and interpretation, however, and was quick to point out that he asked different people the same questions to obtain a balanced view.<sup>40</sup>

An example of the different kinds of information to be obtained from employers and labourers appears in Heath's investigations of 1872. Writing to the *Morning Advertiser* from Bath, Heath described E. D., a 63-year-old labourer. 'I was informed by a gentleman who had known him for many years, [that] E. D. bore an unblemished character. He could read and write very well and was what was termed a skilled agricultural labourer.' This gentleman, perhaps a parson or farmer, was also the source of information for E. D.'s wages, which were 12s. per week. On the other hand, E. D. himself told Heath that he had brought up ten children, and that four years previously all twelve of the family had sat down to Christmas dinner together; that at one time Mrs. D. and five of the children were ill and required charitable assistance; that Mrs. D. took in needlework; and that they never partook of luxuries such as sugar and butter.<sup>41</sup> All these things were probably unknown to E. D.'s employer, and to the 'gentleman' who supplied Heath with his information.

A second example from the tour of 1872 concerned the wages at a glove factory

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<sup>36</sup> *Morning Advertiser*, 21/7/1873, p. 6.

<sup>37</sup> F. G. Heath, *Peasant Life in the West of England* (1880), p. 8.

<sup>38</sup> Heath, *Peasantry*, p. 116.

<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>40</sup> *ibid.*, p. 116.

<sup>41</sup> *Morning Advertiser*, 3/6/1872, p. 2.



at Stoke-sub-Hamdon in Somerset, which employed a number of women and children from labourers' families. Heath claimed, no doubt using selective information supplied by the employees, that '[s]ome of them are able to earn from the factories two or three shillings a week - for very excellent work a little more.'<sup>42</sup> Six days later, an indignant letter appeared in the *Morning Advertiser* from Richard Southcombe, the glove manufacturer, hotly disputing Heath's claims. In fact, he said, *children* earned 2s.-3s. per week, and 'a young person, who works a whole week' earned 7s.-10s., and sometimes more, 'and when an agricultural labourer has a family of grown-up girls, each of them can, and does, earn very nearly as much as the father'.<sup>43</sup> This gives a very different impression from Heath's description, though probably neither claim was actually untruthful. Heath was merely stressing the worst aspects of the problem, and the manufacturer felt obliged to speak in his own defence.

Heath's most important work, however, was in his cottage visits. He was particularly concerned to portray the life behind the doors of the rural cottages, and to understand something of their 'internal economy'.<sup>44</sup> He was especially assiduous in detailing the importance of the pig to the labourer's economy, for example.<sup>45</sup> His brief portraits of the families whom he met were often designed to show the reality behind the wage figures, and how the money was spent. In 1872 he met John P. from Barnwell, who earned only 5s. per week, and lived in 'terrible squalor', paid his master out of his miserable earnings £2 10s. rent and 10s. for pig-running, and also rented an acre of potato-ground for 15s.<sup>46</sup> Near Minehead in 1873 he came across a carter earning 10s. per week plus 3-4 pints of cider per day. As Forbes had done, however, Heath looked more closely into the domestic economy of this family, and found that the carter's rent had recently been increased from £2 2s. to £3 5s., and that he also paid 7s. 9d. for 'a few yards' of potato-ground. Furthermore, they spent 10s. per annum on poor rates, school rates and gas rates, although they were not supplied with gas.<sup>47</sup> This expenditure, taken

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<sup>42</sup> *Morning Advertiser*, 27/5/72, p. 5.

<sup>43</sup> *Morning Advertiser*, 3/6/1872, p. 2.

<sup>44</sup> *Morning Advertiser*, 22/7/1873, p. 5.

<sup>45</sup> Heath, *Peasantry*, pp. 112-15.

<sup>46</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 47-9; *The 'Romance' of Peasant Life in the West of England* (2nd. ed., 1872 [1st. ed. 1872]), pp. 27-30.

<sup>47</sup> Heath, *Peasantry*, pp. 107-8. This example is used in John Burnett, *A Social History of Housing 1815-1985* (1986 [1st. ed. Newton Abbott, 1978]), pp. 121-2.

from 10s., left the carter, his wife, five children and bedridden old mother 8s. 7d. per week on which to subsist. Heath was discovering the realities behind the statistics of poverty, by learning from the labourers themselves and not trusting to a third-party assessment.

A perceptive journalist's questioning of an agricultural labourer could bring to light information which may never be divulged to a squire, farmer or parson. Even seeing the inside of a cottage was unusual, and Heath made the most of his opportunities by sending back rich descriptions of the poverty he encountered behind the pretty exteriors of Somerset labourers' homes. The *London Figaro* paid him quite a compliment when it said '[w]ith no small share of Dickens's graphic power of description Mr. Heath has sketched the homes of the peasantry.'<sup>48</sup> By concentrating on details which were not immediately apparent, Heath portrayed the miseries of their lives in a way that was not reducible to simple determination and analysis of their wages and budgeting. Thus E. D.'s information brought home to him the simple but powerful 'fact' that '[c]andles ... are rarely used by the labourers, who have often during long winter evenings to sit without candle light, often without fire', and enabled him to empathise with the agricultural labourer: 'It is difficult to imagine anything more wretched than sitting hungry for hours in the darkness.'<sup>49</sup>

Heath did not admit to 'having much difficulty in communicating with the labouring classes of the countryside. He insisted that there were really few problems: in general, he found people quite friendly, and on more than one occasion was willingly invited into a cottage.'<sup>50</sup> In addition, he seems to have been adept at striking up a conversation with a labourer in a lane or working in a field (though we have only his word for this, of course), and much of his information was derived from such chance encounters. In 1873, it appears that he walked rather than drove from village to village - it was a much shorter tour of inquiry than that of 1872 - and questioned many other pedestrians. He had no complaints of unhelpful labourers. Indeed, after his tour of 1873 he felt compelled to pay tribute to 'the simple and earnest kindness which one meets on

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<sup>48</sup> Quoted in back matter of Heath, *Peasantry*.

<sup>49</sup> *Morning Advertiser*, 3/6/1872, p. 2; Heath, *Romance*, p. 68.

<sup>50</sup> Heath, *Peasantry*, pp. 78-9, 107-11.



every hand' in Devon; and at the same time remarked upon the 'respectful salutation' he had invariably received from the rural poor on country roads.<sup>51</sup>

It should be noted, however, that the tone of the walkers, and of the householders, remained respectful: the 'salutation' on a country lane was presumably a deferential one. One of the most hospitable housewives he encountered on his tour of 1873 curtsied before inviting him into her cottage,<sup>52</sup> and in the same house all the inmates stood up when he entered the room, 'too humble to sit in the presence of a stranger in respectable attire'.<sup>53</sup> In 1872, at Stoke-sub-Hamdon, Heath found it 'impossible ... to see such scenes of wretchedness without feeling compelled to tender some relief before quitting the miserable hovels'.<sup>54</sup> He was the patron, they the eager recipients of charity: he was hardly meeting the 'peasantry' on an equal footing. His explanation, four decades later, that he had gone among the labourers (in 1873) '[p]encil and notebook in hand'<sup>55</sup> conjures up visions of a slightly intimidating character of whom the 'peasantry' might be rather wary. On the other hand, he had the advantage of undertaking the bulk of his investigations independently of the landed interest in the area. He was implicitly critical of James Caird's reliance on farming and landowning informants, challenging these people's claims to be considered 'the best and most trustworthy sources of local information'.<sup>56</sup> Such a companion would have been a great encumbrance to the investigator who wanted to converse with rural labourers. Caird's main purpose was to investigate the condition of agriculture, while Heath's concern was to explore the lives of the labouring population: consequently the approaches were different.

Heath's explorations had a dual purpose, reflecting the social tensions which prompted them. Firstly, he was reporting to a metropolitan audience, with its own particular preconceptions about rural life and labour, on the realities of the newly-rediscovered rural poverty. Secondly, he was bridging a gulf within rural society itself.

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<sup>51</sup> *ibid.*, p. 126.

<sup>52</sup> *ibid.*, p. 107.

<sup>53</sup> *ibid.*, p. 109.

<sup>54</sup> Heath, *Romance*, p. 43.

<sup>55</sup> Heath, *British Rural Life and Labour*, p. 181.

<sup>56</sup> Heath, *Peasant Life*, p. 10. See James Caird, *English Agriculture in 1850-51* (1968 [1st. ed. 1852]), p. xxxiv. See above, p. 25.

The first of these roles entailed the adoption of a self-consciously exploratory outlook, which was derived from an urban tradition. Heath's intrepidity was akin to that of the daring special correspondent who explored the slums and casual wards of London and other large cities. He was certainly aware of this kind of journalism. He paid a fearless visit, for example, after the completion of his tour of 1873, to a degraded and dangerous family known as the Devon 'savages'<sup>57</sup> whom James Greenwood, the 'Amateur Casual', had visited in 1871.<sup>58</sup> Heath's account of the visit is a classic of mid-Victorian social exploration. The villagers of Nymet Rowland, where the 'savages' (in reality a family of freeholding farmers) lived, told him to approach the family with caution, or he would be met with foul language and probably physical violence: 'I had only to let the "savages" know that I was a "special correspondent", and it appeared my fate would be sealed ... As I was respectably dressed the probability was that they would not exhibit anything like a passive demeanour towards me.'<sup>59</sup> When he finally gained entry into their home, he found the 'savages' to be dirty, inefficient, incestuous (though how he discovered this in his brief visit is unclear) and rude, as well as wary of interference: 'They told me that some one had [like Heath] come to them once to ask for a cup of water, and although he had not been allowed to come inside the yard gate he had gone away and advertised them in the papers.'<sup>60</sup>

The example of the 'savages' is a comic one, and no doubt Heath exaggerated most of it, but it does demonstrate his awareness of the tradition of social exploration, of which Greenwood's work was a particularly vivid example. Like the slum journalists, Heath intended to 'reveal to luxurious Londoners a state of things that is terrible in its reality of misery'.<sup>61</sup> He was acting as a bridge between the urban and the rural. He invoked the image of the train journey on the Great Western railway from London, on which the traveller could look out of the window and see only attractive countryside, without noticing any of the deprivation that existed there.<sup>62</sup> Karen Sayer has drawn attention to the imperialistic spirit behind Heath's investigations:

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<sup>57</sup> *Morning Advertiser*, 12/8/73, p. 3; 14/8/1873, p. 3.

<sup>58</sup> James Greenwood, *In Strange Company, Being the Experiences of a Roving Correspondent* (1874), pp. 109-22.

<sup>59</sup> *Morning Advertiser*, 12/8/1873, p. 3.

<sup>60</sup> *Morning Advertiser*, 14/8/1873, p. 3.

<sup>61</sup> *Morning Advertiser*, 21/5/1872, p. 6.

<sup>62</sup> Heath, *Romance*, ch. 1; *Morning Advertiser*, 21/5/72, p. 6.



He used the pastoral term “peasantry” as a way of highlighting the fact that the rural working class belonged to a specific, identifiable category different from the urban proletariat. He collected his evidence, his facts and information as a colonial explorer might have done ... highlighting the image of the rural working class as somehow distinct from the rest of the mass. ... His definition of the rural was of a separate land that was remote, its people historically “uncared for and forgotten”, which was only just becoming civilised as social reformers began to explore its depths, and as the state began to legislate for it. For the urban working and middle classes the rural was a mini-empire within the borders of England, which had to be explored.<sup>63</sup>

His task was to show the Londoner, who, influenced by Goldsmith, Gray and others, pictured the labourer ‘in the fields under the blue canopy of heaven’<sup>64</sup> in ‘rose-bound cottages’,<sup>65</sup> that the ‘romance’ of peasant life was a fiction. The theme of pretty cottage exteriors masking the squalid interiors of cottages was as rhetorically effective as the contrasting images of opulence and destitution that were employed to describe scenes of poverty in London.<sup>66</sup> Heath and others were showing that ‘Darkest England’ existed in rural areas as well as in London and the big cities; and attempting to reconcile the urban and rural worlds which industrialisation appeared to have alienated from each other.

Heath was not only reporting vividly for a London audience, however. His other role as a special correspondent was to report on one class for the benefit of another. The stir caused by the publication of his articles in the *Morning Advertiser* of 1872, a stir wholly out of proportion to that newspaper’s modest circulation, led to their reprinting in both book form and, perhaps as importantly, in a number of local newspapers in the West Country. In a sense, the journalist was acting as a conduit for information about the condition of the labourer, of which the superior classes of the villages were unaware. The *Somerset County Gazette*, referring to the opposition aroused amongst agriculturists to Heath’s articles, recognised the value of an outsider’s view of the situation in its own county:

Human nature is in some things apt to be less affected by that which is nearest to it. The open sewer of a dirty village is seen by very different eyes by the dweller in a

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<sup>63</sup> Karen Sayer, *Women of the Fields: Representations of Rural Women in the Nineteenth Century* (Manchester, 1995), pp. 121-2, citing Heath, *Peasant Life*, pp. 296-302, 376-9, 386.

<sup>64</sup> Heath, *Romance*, pp. 6-7.

<sup>65</sup> Heath, *Peasantry*, p. 110; *Morning Advertiser*, 8/7/1873, p. 5.

<sup>66</sup> See for example Heath, *Peasantry*, pp. 58-9; *Romance*, pp. 42-3, 71-2, 96.



city in which sanitary measures are carried into perfection to those of him who has been bred and brought up in close proximity to the unconcealed abomination. ... Familiarity breeds not only contempt, but obtusiveness; and many an evil is indebted for its long existence solely to the quiescence that consents to let things remain as they have always been.<sup>67</sup>

As Canon Girdlestone pointed out in 1872, it could be an advantage not to be one of those 'who have lived all their lives in the country, and have in consequence been so long accustomed to the miserable plight of the peasantry as to take no heed of it'.<sup>68</sup> Heath himself put the point even more forcefully at the start of his tour in 1873, in a passage that vividly demonstrates the role of the campaigning social investigator as he perceived it (and, incidentally, reflects some of the terminology of the 'Darkest England' school of social observation):

[The landowners and farmers in the West Country] have lived hitherto, most of them, in a kind of close community, with the labourers as the pariahs or outcasts of their community. From long experience, I know what a really singular amount of narrow-mindedness exists in these little rural communities. All the wrong and injustice which have been dealt out to the poor labourers, and all the wretchedness and neglect from which they have suffered, have arisen from the fact that they have not hitherto been looked upon by the close communionists of the little villages and hamlets as human beings. ... Look for a moment at yonder gate leading up to the splendid country mansion of Squire ---. It is flung wide open to admit the dashing equipage of the squire. The carriage is filled with handsomely-dressed ladies, and drawn by a pair of sleek, well-fed, well-groomed horses. It passes rapidly cottage after cottage, through the straggling street of the village, without one thought from those who are in it of "the poverty, hunger and dirt" which find their home in these "smiling" cottages, and of the poor heathens [*sic*] who dwell in them, - a crying reproach to a "Christian" land which sends its charitable wealth to reform the blacks in foreign climes. But, thank Heaven! the great outside world has at length looked in upon these abodes of wretchedness and squalor, and has discovered that the poor peasant is one of God's human family; and with a power and an urgency which cannot be gainsaid it cries out through its minister, the Press, that these things shall no longer be.<sup>69</sup>

Heath actually claimed in 1880 that one Duke, with substantial estates in the West Country, 'admitted, to a mutual friend, that his first knowledge of the dilapidated condition of some of his own cottages, which he had not seen for many years, was

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<sup>67</sup> Quoted in *Morning Advertiser*, 4/6/1873, p. 5.

<sup>68</sup> Edward Girdlestone, 'The Agricultural Labourer', *Macmillan's Magazine*, vol. XXVI (1872), p. 258.

<sup>69</sup> *Morning Advertiser*, 4/6/1873, p. 5.



derived from the perusal of the present writer's description of them'.<sup>70</sup> The Duke then visited his cottages and quickly remedied the situation. This landowner may have been the Duke of Devonshire, who held land in the Vale of Wrington, but had not, in 1872, visited the area more than twice during the previous six years. Even his agent lived in Bath.<sup>71</sup> Many landowners knew of their cottages only at second hand, and Heath concluded from his tour of 1872 that:

Could the wealthy dukes and others of the great landowners have gone as I have done into the cottages of the peasants and have seen the misery and wretchedness which I have seen, their hearts would have ached to see the "chill penury" which has found its way into the houses of the labouring population. If, instead of receiving the glowing descriptions often rendered to them by agents and stewards, the wealthy landlords would go from cottage to cottage on their estates, and find out for themselves the actual and deplorable conditions of their peasantry, they would cease to talk about [what the Duke of Marlborough had called] the "existence of mutual feelings of generosity and confidence."<sup>72</sup>

This emphasised the journalist's role in bridging the social chasm between landowner and labourer. In showing that the paternalistic ideal was a myth - that the true fracturing of rural society lay hidden behind an idealised conception of social relations - Heath was contributing to a new discourse on country life. The local elites were sundered from knowledge of the poor in their midst. The journalist, while he would still face many social barriers in his intercourse with the rural poor, was in a position to obtain more information about rural life from the labourers and cottagers themselves, and may with skill have been able to tap into any seething discontent that was present.

In his third and last investigation of the south-western peasantry, Heath's own inquiries were supplemented by information from correspondents, for which he had advertised in various newspapers and journals.<sup>73</sup> This may have been in part a response to criticisms of the necessary subjectivity of the opinions - however carefully dressed up as 'facts' - of the special correspondent. The reviewer of *The English Peasantry* in the *Quarterly Review* had thought the more balanced inquiries in that volume more valuable than the information collected by Heath himself: 'although there is something in [the

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<sup>70</sup> Heath, *Peasant Life*, p. x.

<sup>71</sup> *Morning Advertiser*, 24/5/72, p. 3.

<sup>72</sup> Heath, *Romance*, p. 88.

<sup>73</sup> Heath, *Peasant Life*, p. 220.

book] of the tendency ... which, if we might coin a phrase, we should call "Our-own-correspondentism," - there is much valuable information derived from trustworthy sources'.<sup>74</sup> Naturally, any correspondence received would necessarily come from the literate classes, and Heath's seems to have come primarily from curates, vicars, medical men and farmers. The local farmer or clergyman was in reality no more trustworthy an informant than the travelling correspondent or the labourer himself, but the 'informant' approach to investigation was one which, in being structured around the traditional settled hierarchy of rural life, was more likely to appeal to a Conservative commentator. Heath, however, was not averse to using a less traditional set of informants. For example, at Woodford in Wiltshire, he talked to Mr. William Conduit, a smith who had started a pig insurance society.<sup>75</sup> Village artisans, who were often also Nonconformist ministers, were a group commonly consulted by Liberal-inclined investigators, deriving their authority as informants from the respectability attached to their craftsmanship, their political awareness and Liberal sympathies, and the closeness of their personal and social contact with the labouring classes.

It is clear, then, that Heath's political sympathies lay primarily with the labourers; and yet by 1880 his investigations were beginning to take a rather more conventional form, adopting a more sophisticated methodology and a more balanced witness structure. In his third inquiry he stressed that both farmers and labourers were consulted.<sup>76</sup> He remains, however, an excellent example of the special correspondent who attempted to penetrate the world of the rural labouring poor, with an investigative agenda which emphasised communication with the labourers themselves, rather than a second-hand approach. In this respect both he and Forbes should be seen as representative of the transition towards a 'respondent' approach to the investigation of the rural poor, at a time when the standard practice was to represent the labourer through the channels of his social superiors. This opened up a contest with observers who worked in a different way.

Richard Heath took an approach similar to that of his namesake. In 1870 he

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<sup>74</sup> *Quarterly Review*, vol. 137, no. 274 (Oct. 1874), p. 500.

<sup>75</sup> Heath, *Peasant Life*, part IV, ch. 11, esp. p. 324.

<sup>76</sup> *ibid.*, p. 346.



pointed out that the Employment Commissioners had been travelling around the country 'calling meetings of landowners and farmers, receiving letters from hundreds of clergymen and other parish authorities examining persons of all classes and every condition'.<sup>77</sup> As he appears to have recognised, this group did not include labourers or Nonconformist ministers. A Primitive Methodist preacher himself, Heath would naturally be attracted to Nonconformist ministers as a source of information,<sup>78</sup> and, like Francis Heath, he used village artisans as informants.<sup>79</sup> The labourers themselves were also consulted: in the Cheviots in 1871 Heath 'took the opportunity of conversing with the people, and learning from their own mouths the true state of things'.<sup>80</sup> In 1872, on talking to the labourers, he found a profound discontent: 'Talk with the peasantry, and you will find discontent everywhere. Not a grumbling, unreasonable discontent, but a deep sense that things are very far from what they should be.'<sup>81</sup> Heath felt that he was looking beneath the surface of rural society, going beyond the traditional assumptions derived from the literate classes of the countryside.

Richard Heath, even more than Francis, appears to have found communication with the rural poor remarkably easy. He rarely made mention of any difficulties in penetrating the labourer's home. At one cottage in Northumberland, he found one woman who displayed initial coldness when he entered her home, but this woman soon made him tea and gossiped furiously while knitting.<sup>82</sup> He also described how, when in a number of cottages, he took out his sketch book and began to draw the interiors.<sup>83</sup> The inmates apparently accepted this without demur. As Keith Dockray has put it, '[c]harm, affability and the common touch he must surely have had: not only were the labouring men and women of all kinds prepared to talk to him, but also often invite him into their homes ... ply him with tea and even allow him to sketch what he found there.'<sup>84</sup> Heath made the point that the people of the New Forest, for example, were not as suspicious,

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<sup>77</sup> Richard Heath, *The Victorian Peasant: An Abridged Edition of The English Peasant by Richard Heath* (with an introduction by Keith Dockray, Gloucester, 1989 [1st. ed. 1893]), p. 43.

<sup>78</sup> *ibid.*, pp. xxv, 144-7.

<sup>79</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 102.

<sup>80</sup> *ibid.*, p. 127.

<sup>81</sup> *ibid.*, p. 164.

<sup>82</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 135-6.

<sup>83</sup> *ibid.*, p. 132.

<sup>84</sup> *ibid.*, pp. x-xi.

unfriendly and rude as might have been expected in so isolated a place.<sup>85</sup> The point is that he was clearly highly conscious of the need to communicate with the labouring people if any accurate assessment of their standard of life was to be reached; and this was something that would not have occurred to an investigator such as James Caird.

The new investigators did not have things all their own way, however; and the agricultural upheavals of the 1870s occasioned a controversial debate in the national press and elsewhere about the conditions of the rural working classes.<sup>86</sup> Many spokesmen for the farming interest entered the debate, including the veteran James Caird in 1878. He admitted that wages before the disruptions of 1872 were often insufficient, especially in the south,<sup>87</sup> but argued that wages had increased, and the condition of the labourer was better than ever before: 'Compared with the labourer in the towns, his position is one of greater comfort; he lives in a better atmosphere, he is more free from anxiety, and has a closer and more friendly relation with his employers, and with the schoolmaster and clergyman of the parish.'<sup>88</sup> In 1874, Caird wrote in the *Times* arguing that conditions had improved, citing sixteen married labourers on a Hampshire farm of which he had knowledge, who earned a nominal wage of only 13s. per week, but supplemented this with piece-work bringing the average wage up to just over 16s. 6d. per week, with some labourers earning over 20s. This favourable position was further strengthened by the cheapness of cottages and allotments; and by an average of 4s. 2d. per family per week added by supplementary earnings.<sup>89</sup> The *Quarterly Review* praised Caird's letter, calling it 'a statement which derives, from the long-continued attention which the author has devoted to the subject, an authority very different from that of the stump-oratory of agricultural agitators'.<sup>90</sup> In 1878 another farming spokesman, Herbert Little, of Wisbech in Cambridgeshire, lamented the new strains in social relations in rural areas (which he not unnaturally blamed on the 'very aggressive and dictatorial tone' of the labourers' unions) and expressed pessimism for the future:

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<sup>85</sup> *ibid.*, p. 118.

<sup>86</sup> The debate continues today. See the recent article on agricultural wages in the 1870s: George R. Boyer & Timothy J. Hatton, 'Did Joseph Arch Raise Agricultural Wages?', *Economic History Review*, 2nd. ser., vol. XXXXVII, no. 2 (1994), pp. 310-34.

<sup>87</sup> James Caird, 'General View of British Agriculture', *Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society of England*, 2nd. ser., vol. XIV (1878), p. 301.

<sup>88</sup> *ibid.*, p. 302.

<sup>89</sup> *Times*, 3/1/1874, p. 4.

<sup>90</sup> *Quarterly Review*, vol. 137, no. 273 (July 1874), p. 180.



The relations of master and man, which up to this time had certainly been of a far more cordial and sympathetic character than those engendered by the manufacturing system, have thus, lately, received a rude shock, and one from which it may be doubted whether they will ever recover. ... a certain soreness has manifested itself on the part of the farmer, and a certain dogged intractability and surly independence of control on the part of the labourer, which do not augur well for the return of the old friendliness in future relations.<sup>91</sup>

Little thought that the estimates of labourers' wages which were given took too little account of perquisites and of supplementary earnings. He took as an example 'John Jones', a real labourer on the Fens of whom he had knowledge, and who received nearly £30 at harvest in 1877:

The man in question, if asked, would probably assert that his wages were 15s. a week; and inasmuch as that is the standard of wages for ordinary work upon the farm in question, he would be so far justified in his statement. An examination of the books of the master, however, would show that they frequently amounted, even in winter, to as much as 21s. a week, and that (independently of harvest) the average earnings of himself and family during the summer months were about 11. 10s. per week.<sup>92</sup>

In fact, he argued, 'John Jones' and his family received £97 0s. 9d. in a year, an average of nearly two pounds per week, of which 21s. were earned by Jones himself. Little thought that labourers were thriftless, the housewives were often very poor managers, and that young single men in Lincolnshire lived 'extravagantly', eating nearly 1lb. of butcher's meat per day and consuming plenty of tobacco.<sup>93</sup> Cottages were good and cheap, and in modern ones with gardens, a pig - 'the almost invariable accompaniment of a well-to-do labourer's occupation'<sup>94</sup> - could be kept. This was quite the opposite view to Canon Girdlestone's, possibly because Little was writing with knowledge of a higher-wage area, but also in part due to the different social and economic standpoint from which he viewed rural society. Little was, like Clare Sewell Read, an apologist for a farming interest which, understandably, felt besieged in a period when the agricultural labourer suddenly seemed to have so many spokesmen. In the same journal in 1875

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<sup>91</sup> H. J. Little, 'The Agricultural Labourer', *Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society of England*, 2nd. ser., vol. XIV (1878), p. 772.

<sup>92</sup> *ibid.*, p. 775.

<sup>93</sup> *ibid.*, p.p. 777-8.

<sup>94</sup> *ibid.*, p. 785.

Frederick Clifford, who had toured East Anglia for the *Times* in the previous year, thought that while the labourers deserved sympathy, especially in the matter of their poor cottages, this sympathy 'ought to be an intelligent one, based upon a correct appreciation of the difficulties of those for whom they work'.<sup>95</sup>

Clifford's own tour for the *Times* provides many good examples of the difficulties of obtaining an accurate and unbiased picture of conditions among the labourers. The tour, like Forbes's, was undertaken at a time of agrarian strife, and Clifford was highly conscious of the need to approach the conflict as neutrally as possible, and to do nothing further to strain the relationship between farmers and labourers.<sup>96</sup> The lock-out of Union members had begun in April 1873, and had embittered whole communities in the eastern counties. The effectiveness of the employers' actions caused what Girdlestone called 'a severe check' to agricultural trade unionism,<sup>97</sup> and intensified the widespread sense of fundamental conflict within rural society. Clifford thought the lock-out caused 'the rupture of intimate relations between employer and employed'<sup>98</sup> and that 'the day of paternal, perhaps even of friendly or cordial relations, had passed away during this six months' struggle'.<sup>99</sup> He attended meetings of both farmers and labourers during the lock-out, and was not above criticising both sides in the dispute. Clifford was also aware that information about labouring life varied according to who gave it. Explaining some of the complaints of farmers about the difficulty of making farming pay, for example, he was careful to point out that this was merely the farmers' perspective: 'As far as it went, it was a truthful sketch; though, perhaps, we see in it too little of the labourer, who likes to draw the picture from his own point of view.'<sup>100</sup>

Clifford tended, however, on the vexed question of agricultural earnings, to trust to the word of the farmer rather than the labourer. Indeed, except when visiting cottages,

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<sup>95</sup> Frederick Clifford, 'The Labour Bill in Farming', *Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society*, 2nd. ser., vol. XI (1875), p. 122.

<sup>96</sup> Frederick Clifford, *The Agricultural Lock-Out of 1874, With Notes upon Farming and Farm-Labour in the Eastern Counties* (1875), p. vi.

<sup>97</sup> Edward Girdlestone, 'Lessons Learned in the Eastern Counties', *Macmillan's Magazine*, vol. XXXI (1874), p. 160.

<sup>98</sup> Clifford, *Lock-Out*, p. 53.

<sup>99</sup> *ibid.*, p. 140.

<sup>100</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 72-3.



he generally approached the labourers through intermediaries. For example, he attended a meeting between Henry Stanley of Bury St. Edmunds (a large farmer and honorary secretary of the West Suffolk Defence Association) and his employees, to which it appears that he was invited by the employer.<sup>101</sup> One of his main sources of information, including details of wages, perquisites and other aspects of labouring life and conditions, was a farmer, Mr. Mathew of Knettishall.<sup>102</sup> Just as Little had recommended examining the books of the farmer rather than trusting to the word of the labourer, so Clifford tended to rely on such information for the wage-data he required.<sup>103</sup> He found that labourers would often tell an investigator their nominal weekly wages, exclusive of all extras, as one way of 'enlisting sympathy'.<sup>104</sup> He undertook a detailed analysis of all extra payments and perquisites available to the labourer, including harvest-work, piece-work, allotment produce, cheap cottages, gardens, pigs, gleanings and so on;<sup>105</sup> not to mention assistance from farmers' and clergymen's wives in times of illness, the borrowing of wagons from farmers, and other services 'which can be estimated by no money value'.<sup>106</sup> This view corresponded with that expressed by Richard Jefferies in the same newspaper two years earlier. Clifford was also keen to point out, in the *Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society*, that many farmers kept old and infirm hands on their payroll when they were unable to work.<sup>107</sup> He agreed with many farmers that agricultural labourers often did not actually know what their earnings were, living as they did from hand to mouth and never taking the trouble to calculate their average earnings.<sup>108</sup>

Clifford did, however, visit many labourers' cottages, and found many which were not of an acceptable standard. His accounts, like Francis Heath's, are full of descriptions of time spent in tiny hovels, where several people slept together, regardless of sex, in the same room. In at least one cottage he was unable to stand upright.<sup>109</sup> Like Heath, he found some cottages which were unknown even to their owner, in this case

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<sup>101</sup> *ibid.*, p. 58.

<sup>102</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 110, 294-316.

<sup>103</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 26, 30.

<sup>104</sup> *ibid.*, p. 180.

<sup>105</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 223-35, 243-5, and *passim*.

<sup>106</sup> *ibid.*, p. 238.

<sup>107</sup> Clifford, 'Labour Bill', p. 120.

<sup>108</sup> Clifford, *Lock-Out*, pp. 75-6.

<sup>109</sup> *ibid.*, p. 36.

Lord Stradbroke. At the hamlet of Brundish in Suffolk he found the cottage of James Burgess, an industrious worker, in which seven people, mostly adults, all slept in the same room. Clifford commented: 'Like enough, Lord Stradbroke doesn't know he has such a cottage on his estate.'<sup>110</sup> Stradbroke, an implacable opponent of agricultural trade unionism,<sup>111</sup> replied in a letter to the *Times* that he was indeed unaware of the cottage, and was grateful to Clifford for drawing attention to it, adding that '[t]his case is a great card for the radical and democratic press. I request you to believe that, so far from finding fault with your reporter, I thank him',<sup>112</sup> which, given his characterisation of the *Times* as an organ of the 'radical and democratic' press, sounds rather like protesting too much. Nonetheless, the point is reinforced that rural poverty and squalor was often hidden even from its neighbours, and that the activities of the unions issued a fundamental challenge to traditional notions of country life.

Clifford, like Francis and Richard Heath, found that the cottagers whom he visited were very welcoming, and the women clean and tidy. They did not mind intrusion from an outsider: 'That you are a complete stranger does not matter ... they heard "this Union" had made some gentlefolk curious to see how poor people live, so they frankly show you all.'<sup>113</sup> Clifford was aware, however, of the possible suspicion of the presence of a special correspondent, and at the meeting between Henry Stanley and his labourers alluded to above, the labourers did not know Clifford was a reporter, and he took care not to frighten them by taking notes during the discussion.<sup>114</sup> It was quite possible to meet with accusations of intrusion into the lives of the poor, and to put potential informants on their guard; and it is clear that investigators like Clifford were becoming aware of this in this period.

The special correspondent had to be alert to the political situation in which he found himself. Clifford seems to have been quite adept at attuning himself to the prevailing climate, but others found that an unsympathetic approach could provoke condemnation from some quarters. While union leaders were grateful for the services of

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<sup>110</sup> *ibid.*, p. 192.

<sup>111</sup> See Alan Armstrong, *Farmworkers: A Social and Economic History 1770-1980* (1988), p. 127.

<sup>112</sup> Clifford, *Lock-Out*, p. 194n.

<sup>113</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 201-2.

<sup>114</sup> *ibid.*, p. 58.



men like Forbes, they expressed indignation at the intrusive and patronising behaviour of some correspondents who presented the labourer in an unfavourable light. A *Daily Telegraph* reporter, for example, travelled around the south of England mocking the crude political opinions that he heard from labourers in tap-rooms of public houses, at a time when organised agricultural labour was clamouring for the franchise. He described with some glee how the labourers did not know the difference between Liberal and Conservative, and had no interest in current affairs. This reporter met with a hostile response from the *Labourers' Union Chronicle*, which characterised him as

“our own commissioner,” which is another word for “a reporter” who runs about in search of impressions, which he throws into black and white as quickly as they are made, and sometimes, apparently, before, and which are of the same intrinsic value as thistledown, which is blown about hither and thither, bearing everywhere thistle crops of superficial sentiment and opinion, instead of solid corn and wine of earnest thought and heart-feeling. We need hardly say that our “commissioner” looks down from a pretty considerable elevation upon “John Whopstraw,” as he pleases to call the agricultural labourer, in weariness of repeating the more hackneyed name of “Hodge.”<sup>115</sup>

The writer protested that the correspondent was judging the labourers ‘by superficial standards, and upon the briefest possible acquaintance’ a problem which some of those considered in the next chapter explored in rather more detail. This is a good example of the possible reactions of a rural population (or in this case, of one who purported to be its spokesman) to an apparently intrusive investigator. Francis Heath was aware of such problems, and appears sometimes to have taken some pains to conceal his identity.<sup>116</sup> The process of investigation entailed a relationship between members of two classes; and the complete investigator would be alert to the complexities of this relationship.

The *Telegraph* correspondent, whom Heath quoted in *The English Peasantry*, was probably judging the labourers on no shorter an acquaintance than Forbes or Heath, but he happened to take a less sympathetic view of their conditions, possibly in part because he met these particular ‘John Whopstraws’ in the public house rather than in their own cottages. A group of labourers having a lively discussion, probably intoxicated with beer or cider, provided less opportunity for an investigator to indulge in the pathos

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<sup>115</sup> Quoted in Clayden, *Revolt of the Field*, p. 95.

<sup>116</sup> Heath, *Romance*, p. 70.

of Heath's or Forbes's accounts. The *Telegraph* correspondent's other articles were not all as unsympathetic as this one, though they were critical of the striking labourers and conveyed a conception of rustic contentment that was directly at odds with the findings of Heath and Forbes.<sup>117</sup> Even where the approach was friendly, there seems to have been a consciousness among some of those under investigation that they were perceived by their investigators as somewhat lacking in intelligence. Archibald Forbes stumbled across a song sung by the rank-and-file at a union meeting in Warwickshire, critical of some of the labourer's supposed friends, which he cited as a salutary example to those who would not give the labourer his due credit for independence of mind:

We'll tell the Reverend Vicar Leigh  
And Canon Girdlestone  
And Bromley Davenport M. P.  
We'll call our minds our own.<sup>118</sup>

The agricultural crises of the 1870s, then, prompted a resurgence of the activities of the special correspondent in rural areas, and sparked off a debate on agricultural conditions in the national press, from which the political aspects of the question could not easily be disentangled. While the problems of the late 1840s had prompted the tours of the *Morning Chronicle* reporters and James Caird for the *Times*, the strikes and lockouts of the 1870s were thought to portend a still greater catastrophe in rural social relations. As the example of Francis Heath shows, social investigators were conscious of a gulf between the orders of rural society, and saw themselves as reporters on a class which, while unknown to or misunderstood by urbanites, seemed also to have been forgotten by the very classes within rural England who should have been looking after their interests. The position of Frederick Clifford, at the centre of a bitter political dispute, illustrates the problem even more clearly. The schisms in rural society indicated potential difficulties in obtaining accurate and unbiased information about the labouring classes of the countryside. This was known to be a problem in urban areas, as Henry Mayhew had discovered in his *Morning Chronicle* survey of London trades;<sup>119</sup> but in rural areas the investigator was confronted with additional problems: firstly of finding

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<sup>117</sup> See the article quoted in Heath, *Peasantry*, pp. 27-40.

<sup>118</sup> *Daily News*, 29/3/1872, p. 3.

<sup>119</sup> See Eileen Yeo, 'The Social Survey in Social Perspective', in Martin Bulmer, Kevin Bales & K. K. Sklar (eds.) *The Social Survey in Historical Perspective 1880-1940* (Cambridge, 1991), p. 53.



the apparently hidden rural population, and secondly of communicating with them and winning their confidence. While the evidence for their success or failure in this endeavour is necessarily one-sided - the rural working classes themselves were not in a position to corroborate the stories of the correspondents - most were quick to claim that they had little difficulty in gaining entrance to labourers' cottages, and eliciting information from the people. The fact that they made this point would seem to show that they had thought about the potential problems; and the care taken by Clifford and Heath to cross-verify statements made by informants suggests an awareness of the dangers of failing to take account of the conflicts within rural society. The investigators more sympathetic to the labourers' cause were conscious of the social distance between themselves and those under investigation. This was not so important to the more traditionally-minded investigators such as James Caird, who only rarely thought it necessary or expedient to consult the rural poor themselves. Clearly the new voice given to the agricultural labourer by the National Union played an important part in the development of a new approach to investigation. The investigators of the 1870s, while not marking a complete break with their predecessors, were certainly more aware of the contestability of the information they received. They may also have been aware of the possibility that news of their work would reach the labouring classes themselves. Some of the investigators considered both in this chapter and in the last attempted to look somewhat more deeply into the lives of those under investigation, and argued that increasing wages itself was not necessarily sufficient to improve the lives of the agricultural labouring classes. Observers such as Girdlestone and the Heaths were beginning to identify a kind of poverty that was not wholly economic in character. Such features of labouring life had to be investigated in a different way. As the next chapter will show, this became an increasingly important aspect of social observation in the 1880s.

#### Chapter 4: Approaches to cultural investigation: the 1880s

This chapter will concentrate on cultural investigation in the 1880s, focusing primarily on the work of Augustus Jessopp, vicar of Scarning in Norfolk, and Richard Jefferies, a nature-writer and respected commentator on most aspects of country life until his premature death in 1887. It will show that cultural understanding, no less than social knowledge, was contested; and the nature of the rural community defined this debate no less than in the case of investigators such as Francis Heath. The period was remarkable for efforts to get to know the labourer and communicate the non-material aspects of his condition to urban readers. The literary inheritance of these investigators was important: Thomas Hardy was maturing into one of the leading novelists of the day, and the literary and impressionistic approach to the rural poor was becoming more common in the 1880s. A lot had been learnt about the material condition of the labourer in the 1870s, and by this time new information was being sought, information whose reliability was to a large degree dependent upon the intensity of the investigator's personal contact with the investigated. This chapter, then, will consider how well-placed particular kinds of investigator were to achieve and convey a deeper understanding of the lives of the rural poor. It will be made clear that the views of a particular individual reflected, to some extent at least, the position he held within the society he described, and the relationship he enjoyed with those whose condition and outlook he was investigating. The chapter will go on to show that the old stereotype of the agricultural labourer retained its force; but was increasingly challenged by many who claimed that they had the power of social sympathy.

In the 1880s new concerns about rural labouring life came to the fore. The issues of gang labour and rural trade unionism seemed less urgent: F. E. Green characterised the 1880s as 'The Aftermath of Thistles', the relative calm after the storms of the 1870s.<sup>1</sup> By 1880 it was felt that plenty was known, partly thanks to the efforts of the special correspondents and other commentators in the 1870s, about the agricultural labourer and rural social relations. Commenting on the publication of Richard Jefferies's two-volume study of rural life, *Hodge and His Masters*, in 1880, one reviewer complained that '[t]he

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<sup>1</sup> F. E. Green, *A History of the English Agricultural Labourer 1870-1920* (1920), part IV.



theme is old, the matter is well worn, the subject common to us all, and for a few facts more or less, if they be not romantically conveyed, most of us care nothing.’<sup>2</sup> In the same year Francis Heath asked:

Does the subject of “peasant life”, in this year of grace, 1880, possess any interest for English readers? After the burning lights, which have been brought to bear upon the condition of the tiller of the soil in this country, have been turned away from him and directed to other objects, and he has once more become, so to speak, lost from sight amongst the shadows in which he was before immersed, is it possible to obtain either instruction or amusement from the narrative of an eye-witness who will endeavour, simply and straightforwardly, to record his impressions ... of the peasant life of today?<sup>3</sup>

This was just eight years after Arch’s union had attracted the attention of the urban world to the plight of the rural labourer. Certainly agricultural unionism was in decline by 1880; it was generally agreed that wages had increased (though much more needed to be done to improve the wage of the labourer *vis-à-vis* his urban counterpart, and much of the increase was lost as the agricultural depression bit harder), and attention was beginning to focus once more on the urban - especially the metropolitan - poor.

This focus became more intense in the mid-1880s, when the issue of Andrew Mearns’s pamphlet on East End housing, *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London* (1883), sparked off a rush of similar publications describing the filth and squalor of London slums. In 1886 the Trafalgar Square riots, among other things, helped to prompt Charles Booth’s survey of *Life and Labour of the People in London*. Gareth Stedman Jones has analysed the fears among middle-class opinion-formers in the 1880s of racial degeneration among city-dwellers.<sup>4</sup> In all this urban turmoil, it was easy to forget the problems of rural life; indeed, images of the countryside could be invoked as a contrast to the squalor and social dislocation of the towns. The rush of pamphlets which showed how filthy conditions affected urban populations seemed to obscure the often equally appalling conditions in villages. Commenting in 1884 on the ‘stories of squalor, besotted brutality, and degradation’ brought to light by the publication of *The Bitter Cry*

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<sup>2</sup> *Athenaeum*, no. 2737, 10/4/1880, p. 463.

<sup>3</sup> F. G. Heath, *Peasant Life in the West of England* (1880), pp. 219-20.

<sup>4</sup> Gareth Stedman Jones, *Outcast London: A Study in the Relationship Between Classes in Victorian Society* (Oxford, 1971), esp. chs. 6, 16.

and other sensationalist pamphlets on the London housing problem, Augustus Jessopp pointed out that rural England had its 'abominable rookeries' just like London.<sup>5</sup> He regretted the lack of attention paid to the plight of the rural poor, 'hid away as they are in the quiet little corners where the current is not felt, and hardly an eddy of the rushing tide stirs'.<sup>6</sup>

The rural world had its share of the political limelight in the 1880s, however, and the social commentary of the decade reflected the political scene. The main issues were now the franchise, which was awarded to agricultural labourers by the reform act of 1884 and first exercised in the general election of 1885; allotments and smallholdings, which gained particular significance with the publication of Joseph Chamberlain's 'Unauthorised Programme' prior to the 1885 election, and which spawned the famous cliché 'Three Acres and a Cow'; and parish councils, which were hotly debated in the 1880s and were finally created by Act of Parliament in 1894. Such issues, which involved a great deal more than simply the material conditions of the agricultural labourers, helped to stimulate a more cultural approach to understanding their lives. It was not sufficient to know the value of their wages and the state of their homes, but also what they thought about their conditions. This approach was not new to the 1880s, but there can be little doubt that the current issues in rural politics and society helped to prompt social investigation of a more cultural and less economic character. The developing interest in the old folklore and superstitions of the country people, now dying under the destructive influence of urbanism and modernity, also had its implications for the chronicler of the poor man's life: as will be shown, the extraction of this kind of information was one of the most delicate tasks the investigator could undertake. Social commentators in this period repeatedly stressed their personal credentials as authorities on rural labouring life, and were developing a consciousness of the potential difficulties of their own social position *vis-à-vis* the people they were observing. The period saw a growing awareness of a need for sympathetic communication with the rural poor. In the year in which the franchise was extended to agricultural labourers, Toynbee Hall, the most famous of the university settlements, was established, in an attempt to build social bridges between the worlds of Oxford and the East End of London; and as Standish

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<sup>5</sup> Augustus Jessopp, *Arcady: For Better for Worse* (popular edition, 1887 [1st. ed. 1887]), pp. xi-xii.

<sup>6</sup> Jessopp, *Arcady*, p. 139.



Meacham has shown, the graduates who took up residence there were acutely conscious of the obstacles which stood in the way of effective communication with the London poor.<sup>7</sup> Similar concerns prevailed among investigators in rural districts. For these reasons, the period saw an increase in the role of the resident investigator. Like Miss Mitford forty years earlier, the investigators discussed in this chapter could claim 'the merit of ... that local and personal familiarity, which only a long residence in one neighbourhood could have enabled her to attain'.<sup>8</sup>

For example, in the mid-1880's *Longman's Magazine* published a series of five articles on the agricultural labourers of different parts of the British Isles, each by someone considered expert in the conditions of their own particular area.<sup>9</sup> The series opened in 1883 with an article by Justin McCarthy on 'The Irish Peasantry', and also featured James Purves on the Lothian region of Scotland, Beriah Gwynfe Evans on South Wales, Thomas Hardy on Dorset and Richard Jefferies on Wiltshire. The varied backgrounds of the commentators invited to contribute to this series is interesting: Purves was an Edinburgh solicitor; Evans a schoolmaster, journalist and playwright; Hardy a well-known and respected novelist; Jefferies a nature-writer and journalist; and McCarthy a novelist, journalist (responsible for much of the editorial material in the *Daily News*) and historian as well as a Member of Parliament.<sup>10</sup> None of these writers was a special correspondent like Archibald Forbes or Francis Heath. All five stressed their experience of their own area, and the advantages of a longer-term association with the agricultural classes than could be achieved by a travelling reporter. They were particularly well placed to describe some of the customs of rural areas, the superstitions of the labourers they knew, and the various habits of their particular home territory. Purves could identify the aspirations of the Lothian hinds, and their personal attachment

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<sup>7</sup> Standish Meacham, *Toynbee Hall and Social Reform 1880-1914: The Search for Community* (New Haven, Connecticut, 1987), esp. ch. 2.

<sup>8</sup> Mary Russell Mitford, *Our Village: Sketches of Rural Character and Scenery* (2 vols., 1863 [1st. ed. 1824-32]), vol. I, p. v.

<sup>9</sup> Justin McCarthy, 'The Irish Peasantry', *Longman's Magazine*, vol. I (Feb. 1883), pp. 392-408; James Purves, 'The Lothian Hinds', *Longman's Magazine*, vol. I (April 1883), pp. 645-62; Thomas Hardy, 'The Dorsetshire Labourer', *Longman's Magazine*, vol. II (July 1883), pp. 252-69; Richard Jefferies, 'The Wiltshire Labourer', *Longman's Magazine*, vol. III (1883), pp. 52-65; Beriah Gwynfe Evans, 'The Peasantry of South Wales', *Longman's Magazine*, vol. VI (July 1885), pp. 286-302.

<sup>10</sup> See Joseph Hatton, *Journalistic London, Being a Series of Sketches of Famous Pens and Portraits of the Day* (1882), pp. 62-3.



to their cows,<sup>11</sup> Evans described the Welsh labourer's fondness for his native language,<sup>12</sup> and Hardy understood the details of labourers' remuneration and their attitudes to their work.<sup>13</sup> Many such intricacies of rural life would not be appreciated by the investigators whose understanding of the lives of the labourers was necessarily curtailed by their fleeting visits.

While these varied commentators were explaining country life to the readers of *Longman's Magazine*, readers of the *Nineteenth Century*, well known, like *Longman's*, for its 'social conscience',<sup>14</sup> were being informed by the articles of Augustus Jessopp. Jessopp (1823-1914) came to authorship rather late in life. His *Arcady: For Better For Worse* was first published as an occasional series of articles in the *Nineteenth Century* in the 1880's, and in book form in 1887. It was the result of his experience as the rector of Scarning in Norfolk. He took over this living in 1879, at the age of 56, and held it for the next 32 years. Prior to this, he had spent 20 years as headmaster of King Edward VI School in Norwich; and his curacy had been in rural Cambridgeshire. It should be added that Jessopp had a great many other interests: in his time he was as well-known for his historical essays as for his views on rural life; and his antiquarian spirit prompted him to inquire enthusiastically into the social history of his parish as well as its contemporary social life and conditions. John Fraser has called *Arcady* 'by far the most sociologically valuable work on the subject [of rural labouring life] before 1901'.<sup>15</sup> The reviewer in the *Spectator* - from a distinctly urban perspective - called it a 'delightful' volume, and 'doubt[ed] if such an account of English village life, its bad and good sides, its specialities, its humours, and the odd, gnarled characters it produces, ever has been published'.<sup>16</sup> Jessopp's other nineteenth-century book on rural life, *The Trials of a Country Parson*, while not solely concerned with labouring life, caused a little controversy on its publication in 1890. Jessopp was an admirer of Gladstone,<sup>17</sup> and while he found the labourers' agitation of the 1870s rather distasteful, he sympathised

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<sup>11</sup> Purves, 'Lothian Hinds', pp. 648-9.

<sup>12</sup> Evans, 'Peasantry of South Wales', p. 287.

<sup>13</sup> Hardy, 'Dorsetshire Labourer', pp. 265-8.

<sup>14</sup> Michael Goodwin (ed.), *Nineteenth-Century Opinion: An Anthology of Extracts from the First Fifty Volumes of The Nineteenth Century 1877-1901* (Harmondsworth, 1951), pp. 19-82.

<sup>15</sup> John Fraser, 'George Sturt ("George Bourne") and Rural Labouring Life', PhD thesis, University of Minnesota (1961), p. 114.

<sup>16</sup> *Spectator*, vol. LX, no. 3071 (7/5/1887), p. 624.

<sup>17</sup> See Jessopp to Gladstone, 28/10/1884, in British Library Add. Mss. 44487, ff. 343-4.



with the plight of the rural poor and admired their generally moderate behaviour in a period of social conflict.<sup>18</sup>

Another respected commentator on rural life in this period was Richard Jefferies, who has been mentioned in connection with the agitation of 1872. The position of Jefferies as one of the central figures of late-Victorian rural social investigation seems at first hard to justify, as the reader's mind, alighting on the name, may conjure up a variety of received notions about him which bear more relation to what some of his more vocal admirers have had to say about him than to what he actually wrote. He may be remembered for the triumph of late-nineteenth-century nature-spiritualism, *The Story of My Heart*, which Walter Besant praised quite excessively in his *Eulogy* of Jefferies, and which is now rarely read. Alternatively he is known for being, as Philip Drew has put it, 'the man who wrote one good book for boys [*Bevis: The Story of a Boy*] and a lot of bad books about birds'.<sup>19</sup> If we look beyond Jefferies's reams of nature-writing, however, it will be remembered that he produced a wealth of literature on the condition of agriculture and rural Wiltshire (and other counties') life. Drew called Jefferies 'an economist and a realist'<sup>20</sup> who used the medium of the artist to convey concrete information about rural society. The best example of this is his two-volume *Hodge and His Masters*, which Drew has called 'an invaluable work for the social historian'.<sup>21</sup> This book consists of a series of more or less fictionalised sketches, forming a kind of ideal-type analysis of multifarious aspects of country life, and appeared originally in the *Standard* in 1880. Henry Williamson, of *Tarka the Otter* fame, thought the book contained 'the reality of almost the entire world of mid-Victorian country life in England'.<sup>22</sup> In a preface to a new edition of *Hodge* in the 1940s, Williamson reckoned that less than a thousand copies of the book had been sold in the seven decades since its publication,<sup>23</sup> but it should be remembered that the daily readership of the *Standard* was some 180,000 when Jefferies was writing,<sup>24</sup> which suggests that his portraits reached a

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<sup>18</sup> Jessopp, *Arcady*, pp. x-xi.

<sup>19</sup> Philip Drew, 'Richard Jefferies and the English Countryside', *Victorian Studies*, vol. XI (Dec. 1967), p. 181.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*, p. 186.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*, p. 185.

<sup>22</sup> Richard Jefferies, *A Classic of English Farming: Hodge and His Masters* (edited with a introduction by Henry Williamson, 1946), p. 7.

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>24</sup> Samuel J. Looker & Crichton Porteus, *Richard Jefferies, Man of the Fields: A Biography and Letters*

wide urban (especially metropolitan) audience and played a significant role - along with his other work, which appeared in such journals as *Fraser's*, *Longman's* and the *New Quarterly* - in shaping urban perceptions of rural life. Certainly Karen Sayer is in no doubt about this: she argues that Jefferies, '[u]sing his own experiences as a farmer's son ... wrote in London for a predominantly urban readership and effectively developed *the* dominant descriptive mode of writing on the countryside.'<sup>25</sup> Contemporaries respected Jefferies's judgement: Thomas Keibel called *Hodge and his Masters* 'a fairly complete account of the peasantry of the southern counties',<sup>26</sup> for example. Much of Jefferies's writing dates from the 1870s, and he died in 1887. However, his proper place in is this chapter, as he fits more neatly into the tradition of the resident investigator than that of the travelling reporter, and approached his work with cultural as much as economic considerations.

The travelling reporter, however sympathetic with the labouring people he was investigating, had only a limited opportunity to build social bridges with them. The resident was able to look deeper into rural labouring life than, say, Francis Heath. While Heath had sought to reveal the conditions of the south-western labouring classes, and bring to light the material difficulties behind the labourers' grievances, Augustus Jessopp described the social relations within his parish and the ways in which they affected its life. Heath was bringing to light factual information about rural life, while Jessopp, as he explained later, attempted in *Arcady* 'to give a faithful picture of the habits and ways of thinking, the superstitions, prejudices and grounds for discontent, the grievances and the trials, of the country folk among whom [his] lot was cast'.<sup>27</sup> Such a picture could only be drawn after a long residence in one place, during which efforts were made to communicate with all classes of the rural community. Heath, as we have seen, made no mention of any difficulties in communicating with the classes he met: one reason for this was that he was only rarely interested in such questions as the superstitions of the rural working classes. It is no accident that much of his information about the superstitions and folklore of the south-western 'peasantry' in 1880 came from a correspondent: the

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(1965), p. 136.

<sup>25</sup> Karen Sayer, *Women of the Fields: Representations of Rural Women in the Nineteenth Century* (Manchester, 1995), p. 149. Original emphasis.

<sup>26</sup> Thomas Keibel, *The Old and the New English Country Life* (1891), pp. 162-3.

<sup>27</sup> Augustus Jessopp, *The Trials of a Country Parson* (1890), p. v.



curate of Heywood in Wiltshire.<sup>28</sup>

Furthermore, it could be argued that the widespread personal survey of agricultural conditions would often miss important information simply by virtue of the investigator not staying in one place for long enough. This could work on both a long and a short cycle. Heath relied, for example, on correspondents for his information on labourers' clothing, particularly Sunday clothes;<sup>29</sup> and, to take an example from an annual cycle, on none of his tours does he appear to have seen a hiring fair, an event of particular significance both in the lives of the participants themselves and to investigators such as Thomas Kebbel, who regarded it as a particularly immoral feature of rural life, and devoted much thought to proposals for its removal.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, the annual migration of the Dorset labourers, memorably described by Thomas Hardy,<sup>31</sup> could be seen only on April 6th, and early in the morning at that. The very fact of all Heath's tours of inquiry being made in the summer could give him a somewhat misleading impression of the condition and lifestyle of the south-western labourers. Another personal tourist, George Millin of the *Daily News*, was aware of the disadvantages attached to such a survey, especially as his tour of 1891 took place at harvest time, 'when the people have a little more money in their pockets than at other times of the year'.<sup>32</sup> On the question of the habits of the labourers, in this case drinking, he admitted that 'there may be more of the evil of it than meets the casual eye or the chance inquiry'.<sup>33</sup>

Jessopp, however, laboured under no such disadvantage: he was in his parish all the year round, except for brief visits to London to lecture at Toynbee Hall and elsewhere, and was well acquainted with the habits of the labourers. He was aware that the investigative journalist from London might have difficulty in communicating with them; and believed that the main qualification for writing about them was long residence in a village, which was the best way to guard against uninformed theorising and

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<sup>28</sup> Heath, *Peasant Life*, part III, ch. 12.

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*, part IV, ch. 8, esp. pp. 297-302.

<sup>30</sup> Thomas Kebbel, *The Agricultural Labourer: A Short Summary of his Position* (1870), 118-28; 227-8.

<sup>31</sup> Hardy, 'Dorsetshire Labourer', pp. 259-63.

<sup>32</sup> [G. F. Millin], *Life in Our Villages, by the Special Correspondent of the Daily News, being a Series of Letters Written to that Paper in the Autumn of 1891* (1891), p. 151.

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*, p. 62.

prejudice: 'Six years of going in and out among the peasantry in Arcady [he wrote in 1886]; six years of vigilant observation, of somewhat intrusive questioning, of that subtle sympathy which comes of friendly feeling or honest desire to be in touch with one's neighbours ... six years have been enough to scatter my cut and dried theories to the winds.'<sup>34</sup> This quotation is taken slightly out of context, as in this particular instance Jessopp was referring to small farmers rather than labourers, but the principle holds. It was certainly much more difficult, in his eyes, for a travelling investigator to penetrate the home life or the inner feelings of the rural poor. On the subject of rural religion, lore and superstition, he noted that he, as a resident of the parish, was in a privileged position: 'the people are a great deal too wary to open out to "our own correspondent" if he should come down on a voyage of discovery. Idle curiosity they are quite shrewd enough to detect and to deal with in their own way.'<sup>35</sup> He was able to give an amusing example: 'Old Huggins', a Scarning rustic, who was talkative enough with Jessopp himself, pretended to be deaf when the vicar took a journalist into his cottage.<sup>36</sup> The outsider could easily fall foul of the villagers' suspicions of officialdom; and the investigator who was known to be unofficial would excite less suspicion.

The parson, however, through whom so much information about rural life was channelled to townsmen, was also in an official position; and had his own particular place within the social structure of his village or parish. Jessopp's emphasis of his personal contact with the rural poor raises the question of the ability of a country parson to come to really intimate terms with his labouring parishioners. His work contains evidence of class tensions in Scarning; and it is clear that some people at least would not have the slightest interest in communicating with the vicar. It is not hard to imagine a villager toning down the contents of an interesting or bawdy story for the parson's ears, or telling untruths in order to obtain charity. Jessopp himself was forced to admit that while he may have enjoyed 'daily intercourse' with his parishioners 'on the footing of a mere friendly neighbour',<sup>37</sup> a certain 'isolation' in his position was 'only what any one must expect who is brought into relations more or less intimate with a class socially or

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<sup>34</sup> Jessopp, *Arcady*, pp. 190-1.

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*, p. 83.

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.*, p. 83.

<sup>37</sup> Jessopp, *Trials*, p. x.



intellectually below or above his own'.<sup>38</sup> (The same isolation dogged the life of the village schoolmaster, another frequently-used source of information in rural social investigations.)<sup>39</sup> As parsons were used as informants in other, more widespread surveys of rural life, as well as producing books like *Arcady*, it is important to consider their social position if their contributions to the literature of social investigation are to be fully understood.

If we are to accept their descriptions and assessments of labouring life, it is necessary to show that the social distance between the country clergymen and their labouring parishioners was not insurmountable. Not all country parsons were the same: some were austere and unworldly as a point of principle, while others, as Brian Heeney has pointed out, 'forged links with their people', examples being Canon Girdlestone and Charles Kingsley.<sup>40</sup> Jessopp fell into the latter category: much of his information on labouring life came from cottage visits; and he reminded his public in 1914 that 'a long chat in the lowly cottages of the aged poor' could lead to the hearing of 'most instructive reminiscences of the daily life and social habits, and ways of thinking and religious sentiment'.<sup>41</sup> However, sympathetic as he may be, a social gulf must exist between the parson and his flock. Jessopp reluctantly admitted that '[c]ertainly this is inherent in the office and function of the country parson, that he is not *quite* in touch with any one in his parish if he be a really earnest and conscientious parson.'<sup>42</sup> (This, as Jessopp recognised, included the farmers and landowners, and thus it could be argued that the parson was in a unique position: able to give a reasonably balanced and unbiased account of village life, without the disadvantages attached to being a non-resident.) A vicar's work would be read, however, with some scepticism by agricultural trade unionists and those of a Liberal, Radical or Socialist political outlook, who assumed that the parson sympathised socially and politically with the farming and landowning interests. For such investigators, the Nonconformist minister, more closely in touch than the parson with the labouring population, was a more appropriate source of information on labouring life.

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<sup>38</sup> *ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 56ff.

<sup>40</sup> Brian Heeney, 'On Being a Mid-Victorian Clergyman', *Journal of Religious History*, vol. 7, no. 3 (June 1973), p. 213.

<sup>41</sup> Augustus Jessopp, *England's Peasantry, and Other Essays* (1914), p. 135.

<sup>42</sup> Jessopp, *Trials*, p. 38.

Few examples exist of social intercourse between parsons and parishioners which can be analysed; but an incident related by Jessopp in *Arcady* gives a useful insight into the processes of interaction between himself and those about whom he was writing, and into some of the problems which the resident investigator might encounter. Jessopp gave an account of a conversation with a group of labourers in a field at elevenses time. One of these labourers was 'Surly Bob', whose '*confrères*' looked slyly at him when the parson joined them, for Bob has a name to keep up for blunt rudeness to all who accost him'.<sup>43</sup> In due course 'Surly Bob' was rude to the parson. It is doubtful how far Jessopp really understood Bob's 'habits and ways of thinking'; and the apparent collaboration of Bob's '*confrères*' in his rudeness to him suggests that some of his parishioners at least did not take him especially seriously. Having said this, however, in this case Jessopp was talking to a *group* of labourers; and, being under a hedge with them, was in a sense on *their* territory, and associating with them on *their* terms. Both these factors may have encouraged the labourers to be more openly uncooperative with the parson than usual in this particular case; but the incident suggests that the labourers were alert to Jessopp's investigative spirit, and may have frustrated it in other, more subtle ways at different times and in different places.

In his articles on 'Arcady' for the *Nineteenth Century* Jessopp made no mention of one of the most controversial features of his ministry: the Scarning school controversy of 1883-4, which occurred during the period in which he was writing. The Charity Commissioners, empowered by the Endowed School Act of 1869, tried to introduce a 1d. fee in the free school in Scarning, a fee to which Jessopp objected but was eventually forced to support. Against this the labourers revolted, setting up a school of their own in the local Primitive Methodist chapel, assisted by subscriptions from outside the parish. The labourers even threw stones through Jessopp's window: this does not suggest a body of people with whom the parson was always on friendly terms.<sup>44</sup> Jessopp insisted, however, that he enjoyed a degree of intimacy with his parishioners: remembering his time as curate of Papworth St. Agnes in Cambridgeshire, he remarked that he was often

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<sup>43</sup> Jessopp, *Arcady*, pp. 105-6.

<sup>44</sup> The story of the Scarning school controversy is told in L. Marion Springall, *Labouring Life in Norfolk Villages 1834-1914* (1936), p. 114.



called upon to help settle disputes between villagers. It was striking that the young curate was respected and liked by the local people because they knew him to be in straitened circumstances like themselves.<sup>45</sup> It was important to sympathise with the poor: as Jessopp explained in 1914, 'there is no knowing any men or class of men whom we do not love and sympathise with'.<sup>46</sup>

Jessopp's personal quest for cultural understanding, which he saw as a result of his sympathy with the poor man's plight, engaged him in the pursuance of an approach to his subjects which was in a sense as methodologically sophisticated as that of the 'informant' investigations whose primary aim was the obtaining of social knowledge. The 1880s was a decade in which district visitors, workhouse visitors and philanthropic and other investigators, especially those associated with the Charity Organisation Society, were beginning to develop an awareness of the difficulties of penetrating the working-class home and communicating with the poor. The developing social conscience which affected a whole generation of middle-class metropolitan and Oxbridge intellectuals, had its counterpart in a rural context. The refinement of techniques of district visiting reflected a growing consciousness of the potentially awkward relationship the middle-class visitor was likely to have with the poor under his or her care. Jessopp was writing for the *Nineteenth Century*, and although his work on rural life took on a different dimension from that publication's urban-dominated social-conscience writing, it provided a rural perspective on many of the district-visiting methods that were being discussed in its pages at the time. Thus Jessopp illustrated the need for the impartial observer to avoid judgmentalism when encountering some of the practices of the poor, which could be 'very shocking to a sensitive person'.<sup>47</sup> The country parson and his family were probably the nearest equivalent in rural areas to the charitable tradition which was a primarily urban phenomenon. In this context the socially involved parsons of the 1880s were the heirs of Charles Kingsley and Frederick Denison Maurice; but they also fitted into the intellectual and social milieu of their own age.

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<sup>45</sup> Jessopp, *Arcady*, p. 5.

<sup>46</sup> Jessopp, *England's Peasantry*, p. 43.

<sup>47</sup> Jessopp, *Arcady*, p. 47.

Similarly, Richard Jefferies, for all his flight-of-fancy nature writing, was in touch with the political issues of country life, as his high-profile involvement in the debates of 1872 testifies, and as would only be expected from one employed in his early days as a journalist with the *North Wilts Herald*. Many of Jefferies's articles in the periodicals of the day dealt with such issues as technological advances in farming, agricultural trade unionism, rural education, the coming of the franchise, parish councils and smallholdings and allotments. When Jefferies's article 'After the County Franchise' appeared in *Longman's Magazine* in February 1884, Charles Longman, the editor, excused the entry of what might seem to be overtly political subjects into his publication by emphasising the importance of the franchise to rural social relations, and reminding his subscribers that Jefferies was 'a writer whose close acquaintance with the country is well known'.<sup>48</sup> Jefferies was responding in his social commentary to contemporary concerns. Other examples are his famous essay on 'One of the New Voters', which described 'Roger the reaper', a degraded, drunken harvester, representative of the newly enfranchised class; and 'Village Organisation', which argued for the establishment of village local authorities as part of a strategy for social inclusion. Even his interest in folklore, which he shared with Jessopp and many others, reflected the contemporary concern to collect and preserve the cultural productions of a rural society which was becoming swamped by the influences of urbanism.

Jefferies, as the son of a small farmer, tended to sympathise politically with the farming interest rather than with the labourers - a choice which had to be made when he was coming to prominence. Walter Besant, his first biographer, asserted that Jefferies 'made his way to the fields through the farmers first and the labourers next'.<sup>49</sup> Jefferies took an optimistic view of the material conditions of the labourers in his part of the country - Wiltshire, a relatively low-wage county - but was often dismissive of the intellectual prowess of the younger generation of agricultural workers. He was not averse to relating amusing stories which told against the intelligence of the rustic.<sup>50</sup> He

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<sup>48</sup> Richard Jefferies, 'After the County Franchise' in *Longman's Magazine*, vol. III (Feb. 1884), p. 362n1; see also Richard Jefferies, *The Hills and the Vale* (with an introduction by Edward Thomas, 1909), pp. xix-xx, 224-46.

<sup>49</sup> Walter Besant, *The Eulogy of Richard Jefferies* (1888), p. 109.

<sup>50</sup> Richard Jefferies, *Field and Hedgerow, being the Last Essays of Richard Jefferies, Collected by his Widow* (1900 [1st. ed. 1889]), pp. 84-5; *Round About a Great Estate* (1894 [1st. ed. 1880]), pp. v-vi.



realised, however, that a rich layer of superstition and folklore lay beneath the surface of the labourers' lives, at least the older labourers, and much of his time was spent trying to discover these long-buried superstitions.

Jefferies was aware of the difficulties encountered in the investigation of a rural community by an outsider. He gives an interesting example of the problem, in one of his country books in which human life does not actually feature very much. In the last chapter of *Red Deer*, he described several Exmoor superstitions<sup>51</sup> - in which even the well-to-do of the village believed - but his conclusion was pessimistic:

Not one word of superstition, or ancient tradition, or curious folk-lore, can a stranger extract. The past seems dead, and they are not to be distinguished from the people of other districts close to the populous centres of industry. But the fact is that this silence is not change: it is a reticence purposely adhered to. By mutual consent they steadfastly refrain from speaking in their own tongue and of their own views to strangers not of the countryside. They speak to strangers in the voice of the nineteenth century, the voice of newspaper, book, and current ideas. They reserve for themselves their own ancient tongue and ancient ideas, their traditions, and belief in the occult.<sup>52</sup>

It is notable that Jefferies identified this reticence in a book which was the result of a tour to a part of the country with which he was unfamiliar. He was a stranger himself on Exmoor. Most of his books deal with the people of 'Jefferies Land', the area around Liddington Hill in Wiltshire where he was born; and when he wrote about other parts of the country, as in *Nature Near London* or his essays on Sussex, he had usually lived in those areas at some point and had first-hand experience of them. In *Wild Life in a Southern County*, based on the area he knew best, having detailed some of the superstitions current in an isolated hamlet, he came to a similar conclusion: 'Altogether, the vitality of superstition in the country is very much greater than is commonly suspected. It is now confined, as it were, to the inner life of the people: no one talks of such things openly, but only to their friends, and thus a stranger might remark on the total extinction of the belief in the supernatural. But much really remains.'<sup>53</sup> It took someone who knew an area - and a class - well to describe its 'inner life' with authority.

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<sup>51</sup> Richard Jefferies, *Red Deer* (1900 [1st. ed. 1884]), pp. 237-41.

<sup>52</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 242-3.

<sup>53</sup> Richard Jefferies, *Wild Life in a Southern County* (1889 [1st. ed. 1879]), p. 90.



Not only this: Jefferies also emphasised that mere residence in a village did not necessarily qualify the investigator to comment authoritatively on the mindset of the local poor: access to information, such as he claimed to have achieved through his intimacy with the labourers in his village, had to be deliberately sought out.<sup>54</sup>

In his attempts to overcome the reserve and suspicion he found among the labourers, Jefferies adopted another strategy: the clandestine investigation. This was popular in an urban context among tramps and other groups who were outside the mainstream of society, and remained an ongoing tradition among a certain group of social investigators.<sup>55</sup> Before writing *Hodge and His Masters*, Jefferies visited a dozen agricultural counties, and stopped at public houses to learn what men were thinking about. One of his admirers described his approach in 1892:

As he had perfect command of the broad Wiltshire dialect, and a close acquaintance with the details of country life, it was easy for him, with a change of dress, to be taken for some kind of superior labourer himself, and so hear and gather the intimate opinions of these men. What seems to have impressed his mind was the gusto with which they would dwell on the coming day when it would fall to their lot to plough up this and the other gentleman's 'bloody park'. ... The incident shows how futile it is to hope to gain any just idea of the rustic's thoughts by means of formal interrogation. Often the awkward clown who scratches his head, and, before a questioner, seems the picture of stupidity, is glib enough among his own cronies.<sup>56</sup>

This was a problem identified repeatedly by investigators of rural and urban life; and the knowledge that Jefferies used these techniques is a strong argument in favour of classifying him as a social investigator. He seems at least to have understood the difficulties of winning the confidence of the rural population; and he shared Jessopp's belief that an intensive knowledge of the poor was required to comment on them authoritatively, and that they would not agree uncritically to be investigated.

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<sup>54</sup> Jefferies, *Great Estate*, pp. 80-1. Jefferies considered himself fortunate to be on good terms with the Luckett family, local farmers, and remarked that '[i]t would be possible for any one to dwell a long time in the midst of a village, and yet never hear anything of this kind and obtain no idea whatever of the curious mixture of the grotesque, the ignorance and yet cleverness, which go to make up hamlet life. But so many labourers and labouring women were continually in and out of the kitchen at Luckett's Place that I had an opportunity of gathering these items [i.e. dialect and stories] from Mrs. Luckett and Cicely.'

<sup>55</sup> The classic example is James Greenwood, *The Amateur Casual, or A Night in the Workhouse* (1866), reprinted in Peter Keating, *Into Unknown England 1866-1913: Selections from the Social Explorers* (Manchester, 1976).

<sup>56</sup> P. Anderson Graham, *The Rural Exodus: The Problem of the Village and the Town* (1892), pp. 84-5.



For Jefferies, one reason for the need of a clandestine approach was the bitterness of the class divisions encountered in rural society. *Hodge and His Masters* is full of little incidents which illustrate a seething resentment of the lifestyle of the better-off among the labourers.<sup>57</sup> Elsewhere, Jefferies admitted that a group of fruit-pickers in Kent once gave him a nasty look, probably because they were working and he was idle.<sup>58</sup> In one short story he told the story of a rick-burner, and concluded that such arson resulted from an 'unsparing vendetta' waged against farmers by labourers with a 'dynamite disposition'.<sup>59</sup> His evocation of the social schism, informed by his experiences of social breakdown in the countryside of the early 1870s, illustrates the urgency of the problem as he perceived it:

Never was the distinction so sharp between the poor - the sullen poor, who stand scornful and desperate at the street corners - and the well-to-do. It is not confined to the millionaire. The contrast is with every black coat. Those who only see the drawing-room side of society, those who move, too, in the well-oiled atmosphere of commercial offices, are quite ignorant of the savage animosity which watches them to and fro the office or the drawing-room from the street corner.<sup>60</sup>

The sullenness of the labouring population was a real barrier to their investigation, and Jefferies regretted the breakdown of social communication, which caused the rural poor to build a wall of self-defence between them and their social superiors. In *Hodge and His Masters*, he described the differences in lifestyle between the farmer and labourer. Farmers and their families had come to see manual work as ungentle, whereas previously it had been a bond between rich and poor. By 1880, for men and especially for women from farming families, 'the touch of the plough ... [was] contamination itself'.<sup>61</sup> Jefferies explained the consequence of this: 'the former general goodwill and acquaintanceship is no more ... there is a distinct social barrier between the man and the woman who labours and the one who does not'.<sup>62</sup> These trends within rural society clearly had implications for those who wanted to reach a proper understanding of rural

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<sup>57</sup> See for example Richard Jefferies, *Hodge and His Masters* (2 vols., 1880), vol. I, pp. 154, 334, vol. II, pp. 254-5.

<sup>58</sup> Richard Jefferies, *The Open Air* (1893 [1st. ed. 1885]), p. 27.

<sup>59</sup> Richard Jefferies, *The Life of the Fields* (1899 [1st. ed. 1884]), p. 18.

<sup>60</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 19-20.

<sup>61</sup> Jefferies, *Hodge and His Masters*, vol. I, p. 229.

<sup>62</sup> *ibid.*, vol. I, pp. 229-30.

labouring life. As the experiences of the special correspondents of the 1870s show, the information to be gained about the labourers from themselves and from their employers could differ widely. Thus the bitterness and resentment among labourers, and the process of economic and social segregation which appeared to be taking place, both contributed to a growing sense of urgency in the social investigators' project of communicating with the labourers across the barriers of class.

Whether Jefferies succeeded in this project is questionable. While some commentators have praised his efforts to document labouring life, his attitudes towards the labourers were often contested. Many contemporaries criticised him from a literary standpoint. Walter Besant, for example, while he admired the uniquely detailed descriptions of country life to be found in Jefferies's books,<sup>63</sup> argued that his experience of different grades of life was actually very limited: thus his novels turned out to be merely 'ill-starred attempts to paint manners which he never saw, a society to which he never belonged, and the life of a people concerning whom he knew nothing'.<sup>64</sup> Another commentator thought that human nature was 'a sealed book' to Jefferies.<sup>65</sup> The naturalist H. S. Salt, another admirer of Jefferies, thought that while his agricultural articles contained many valuable facts,<sup>66</sup> they suffered from a stilted understanding of the human dimension: 'men and animals are alike mere figures in his landscapes'.<sup>67</sup> This is perhaps a little unfair: Jefferies was capable of sympathy with the labourers on occasions. In his essay on 'One of the New Voters', he revealed an ability to empathise with 'Roger' and refused to condemn some of his less endearing characteristics outright.<sup>68</sup> However, Salt's criticisms reflect the concerns of many contemporaries about Jefferies's output. Indeed, Jefferies himself described his work as 'human natural history',<sup>69</sup> perhaps viewing the people of the countryside as one section of the fauna which he described elsewhere. This was a remnant of the approach of earlier years when the labourer, as one commentator remarked, was normally portrayed as just that - part of

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<sup>63</sup> Besant, *Eulogy*, p. 228.

<sup>64</sup> *ibid.*, p. 161.

<sup>65</sup> P. Anderson Graham, *Nature in Books: Some Studies in Biography* (1891), p. 20.

<sup>66</sup> H. S. Salt, *Richard Jefferies: A Study* (1894), p. 110.

<sup>67</sup> *ibid.*, p. 111.

<sup>68</sup> Jefferies, *Open Air*, pp. 94-111.

<sup>69</sup> *ibid.*, p. 97.



the animal kingdom - or if not, then as 'a foil to wealth and refinement'.<sup>70</sup>

Jefferies, consciously or not, played an important role in the reinforcement of certain stereotypes of the agricultural labourer, particularly the character of Hodge, and it will be valuable to take some examples of his view of the labourer in order to show how what one contemporary called his 'dandy-naturalist'<sup>71</sup> approach led him to portray the labourer in a way which did little to dispel his long-standing reputation for unintelligence. In 1875, for example, Jefferies portrayed a typical village in which the young men, who should have been playing cricket, making use of reading rooms, organising village games and going on trips away (at the age when they had a small amount of disposable income),<sup>72</sup> were living an empty and 'desultory' life:

The very conception of a public feeling never occurs to [the labourer]; it is all desultory. A little desultory work - except in harvest, labourer's [*sic*] work can never be called downright *work* - a little desultory talk, a little desultory rambling about, a good deal of desultory drinking: these are the sum and total of it; no, add a little desultory smoking and purposeless mischief to make it complete.<sup>73</sup>

The notion of a public life, Jefferies argued, was absent. In an essay on 'The Labourer's Daily Life', he was quite explicit about the absence of rational entertainment to brighten the labourer's existence: the reading rooms were frequented by the skilled workmen and tradesmen of the villages, there were no fête days as could be found abroad, and the labourer did not even enjoy getting drunk. There was 'absolutely no poetry, no colour' in his life.<sup>74</sup> For Jefferies, the agricultural labourer's lack of interest in the natural world around him was a potent illustration of the emptiness of his mind. In his essay on Roger, the new voter, he described the varied wildlife to be found stirring at dawn in the harvest field, but went on sadly:

Roger did not interest himself in these things, in the wasps that left the gate as he approached ... in the bright poppies brushing against his drab unpolished boots, in the hue of the wheat or the white convulvulus; they were nothing to him ... His life was work without skill or thought, the work of the horse, of the crane that lifts

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<sup>70</sup> Graham, *Nature in Books*, p. 20.

<sup>71</sup> Quoted in Jefferies, *Classic of English Farming*, p. 8.

<sup>72</sup> Richard Jefferies, 'Village Organisation', in *Hills and Vale*, esp. pp. 183-7. (The article originally appeared in the *New Quarterly Magazine*, vol. V (Oct. 1875), pp. 1-35.)

<sup>73</sup> *ibid.*, p. 167.

<sup>74</sup> Richard Jefferies, *The Toilers of the Field* (1907 [1st. ed. 1892]), p. 97.

stones and timber. His food was rough, his drink rougher, his lodging dry planks. His books were - none; his picture-gallery a coloured print at the alehouse ... Of thought he thought nothing; of hope his idea was a shilling more wages; of any future for himself of comfort such as even a good cottage can give - of any future whatever - he had no more conception than the horse in the shafts of the wagon ... why should he note the colour of the butterfly, the bright light of the sun, the hue of the wheat? This loveliness gave him no cheese for breakfast; of beauty in itself, he had no idea.<sup>75</sup>

Elsewhere, even while paying tribute to the racial hardihood and reliability of the labourer, Jefferies wrote that '[h]e notes no the beauty of the beech above him, nor the sun, nor the sky...'<sup>76</sup> Hodge had even grown insensible to the weather, and exhibited a 'corresponding dulness' on moral and social matters.<sup>77</sup> Jefferies contrasted life in rural Wiltshire with life among the employees of the Great Western Railway in Swindon, whom he found to be generally intelligent, well-travelled, well-read and disinclined to drunkenness and immorality. Even amongst this huge workforce, there was a perceptible *esprit de corps*, and the cream of them, intellectually speaking, were 'full of social life, or, rather, of an interest in the problems of social existence'.<sup>78</sup> He concluded that these workers were 'probably higher in their intellectual life than a large proportion of the so-called middle classes'.<sup>79</sup> The difference between urban and rural life was stark, and the remedy, for Jefferies, was an attempt to make village life more interesting and inclusive, to encourage the labourers love the countryside once again, and participate in the organic community which their ancestors had enjoyed, unknown and unimagined by the new breed of Hodges.

It should be pointed out that Jefferies's own view of the labourer seems to have changed over his lifetime: this was certainly the opinion of his first biographer, who thought he mellowed with age and began to take a more sympathetic attitude to the labourers.<sup>80</sup> There were certainly tensions within his own perceptions of the rural poor. The vivid descriptions of Hodge cited above can be contrasted with his insistence in his novel *Amaryllis at the Fair*: 'The inhabitants of the City of London conceitedly imagine

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<sup>75</sup> Jefferies, *Open Air*, pp. 100-1.

<sup>76</sup> Jefferies, *Hodge and His Masters*, vol. II, p. 115.

<sup>77</sup> Jefferies, *Hills and Vale*, pp. 95-6.

<sup>78</sup> *ibid.*, p. 129.

<sup>79</sup> *ibid.*, p. 130.

<sup>80</sup> Besant, *Eulogy*, p. 228.



that no one can be sharp-witted outside the sound of Bow Bells - country people are stupid. My opinion is that clumsy John Duck, who took about half an hour to write his name, was equal to most of them.'<sup>81</sup> This novel was not published until the year of Jefferies's death, however; and it was his less complimentary representations of labouring life that many of his contemporaries seized upon.

The main defect of Hodge's existence, as defined by perhaps the most influential social observer of the countryside in the 1880s, was the absence of any opportunity or inclination to turn his mind to the finer things of life; the main reason for this being that his mental faculties were less exercised than those of his ancestors. The problem, however, was twofold: on the one hand, the horizons of the labourer were generally very limited - he did not participate in any wider regional or national life - and on the other, he appeared to have no appreciation or understanding of the potential joys of the country life in which he *did* participate. The first problem was a long-standing feature of rural existence, whereas the second seemed to be a more recent development, partly because the influence of urban social and cultural patterns had destroyed much of the colour of village life. Even rural speech had been tainted by urbanism: Jessopp noted that the younger villagers in Scarning were afflicted with the 'townsman's gabble': 'it is as if their sentences are made by machinery'.<sup>82</sup> Jefferies noted a similar trend in the songs sung by labouring men and women, which were the same as might be heard sung by London street-arabs. His conclusions on rural working-class culture were bleak: 'These people have no myths; no heroes. They look back on no Heroic Age, no Achilles, no Agamemnon, and no Homer. The past is vacant. They have not even a "Wacht am Rhein" or "Marseillaise" to chant in chorus with quickened step and flashing eye.'<sup>83</sup> While remnants of the old traditions and folklore survived among the older members of rural society, the new breed of labourers were distant from them.

The material poverty uncovered in rural England in the 1870s had, by the following decade, been replaced as the focus of concern by a spiritual poverty: a lack of colour and opportunity in the labourer's life. In part, this reflected the kind of

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<sup>81</sup> Richard Jefferies, *Amaryllis at the Fair* (Stroud, 1992 [1st. ed. 1887]), p. 38.

<sup>82</sup> Jessopp, *Arcady*, pp. 36, 50.

<sup>83</sup> Jefferies, *Hodge and His Masters*, vol. II, p. 204.

investigator we are considering: parsons would naturally be interested in the spiritual aspects of village life, and a nature-lover like Jefferies would be inclined to regret the lack of interest in the organic life of the countryside which was a characteristic of the younger generation of labourers. Jessopp, like Jefferies, lamented the apparent emptiness of village life. Francis Heath had touched on the scant 'amusements' of the south-western labourers,<sup>84</sup> but Jessopp was more forceful in explaining the absence of rational pleasures in the countryside and the stagnation of life on the land. As he explained in 1881, the improvements in the labourer's condition since 1872 were most welcome; but the deeper questions had not been addressed:

The truth is that you have increased the labourer's daily wages, but that is absolutely all that you have done for him. He asks for a decent home, for a chance of *bettering* himself, for the *possibility* of a future which may raise him to the rank of a small proprietor; for *some* prospect of trying his luck with a cow or a horse and cart; for *some* innocent recreation and amusement when his day's work is done; for *some* tiny playground for his children in the summer evenings; for *some* object of ambition. ... The very beer is so bad that it has ceased to tempt him to debauch.<sup>85</sup>

Again, such a conception of village life was likely to arise from a longer association with it than was permitted to the roving reporter, though such a reporter could readily guess at this state of affairs. In general, the difficulty as social observers saw it in the 1880s was that, while the labourer's standard of *living* - that is, his income, conditions of labour, and cottage - had generally increased since the middle of the century, his standard of *life* - his general happiness, his educational attainments, and his sense of independence - had remained low or even declined. By this time a problem of leisure was already growing up in the village. There was nothing to do: most labourers with families could not even afford to drink in the public house. The youth of the villages had suffered the effects of growing up in a place where there were no obtainable - and barely any conceivable - diversions. Jessopp's picture of young village men lounging around listlessly expresses well the emptiness of village life as he perceived it:

In Arcady one never hears people laugh ... You may see half-a-dozen hulking young men literally sprawling in the ditch smoking their pipes, and sunning themselves on their stomachs in the summer evenings, doing the only thing they

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<sup>84</sup> Heath, *Peasant Life*, part IV, ch. 13.

<sup>85</sup> Jessopp, *Arcady*, p. 27.



have any power of doing - nothing. Do you wonder if these young fellows get tired of it, and vaguely find it dull?<sup>86</sup>

These men could well have had a small margin of income to spend on amusements; but it seems not to have occurred to them to do so. By 1914, Jessopp was arguing that, while 'England's peasantry' were undoubtedly better fed, better educated, better housed and less overworked than their counterparts a century before, their ancestors nevertheless 'enjoyed their lives much more than their descendants [and] had incomparably more laughter, more amusement, more real delight in the labour of their hands,' which were the true 'constituents of happiness'.<sup>87</sup>

Jessopp was not the only country parson to identify this poverty of village life. Charles Stubbs, a Christian Socialist heavily influenced by Kingsley and Maurice,<sup>88</sup> who held a number of town and country livings, took a similar perspective, and carried the impression of stagnation one stage further, by directly relating the labourer's poverty to his landlessness. As this was one of the central features of rural politics in the mid-1880s, and remained in the forefront until the outbreak of war in 1914, it should be explored further. The occupation of land, for Stubbs, served a dual purpose. Firstly, it encouraged thrift. Thrift, he thought, should be developed through local philanthropic effort, through the creation of penny banks, clothing and sick clubs and so on, but the best incentive for the agricultural labourer to save money was the cultivation of land. Stubbs practised what he preached: at the end of 1873, he divided 22 acres of his glebe in Granborough, Buckinghamshire, into half-acre allotments, and let them out to his parishioners.<sup>89</sup> Secondly, and more importantly, the occupation of land 'fire[d] the imagination of the agricultural labourer',<sup>90</sup> and gave him a stake in the soil and in society. The smallholding inculcated virtues of 'growth, parental love, filial obedience, household thrift, cleanliness, modesty, chastity, self-respect, piety and simplicity of heart',<sup>91</sup> and plugged the holes in the labourer's life. Similarly, the franchise was a

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<sup>86</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 112-13. Original emphases.

<sup>87</sup> Jessopp, *England's Peasantry*, pp. 40-1. See also pp. 150-1.

<sup>88</sup> See Charles William Stubbs, *Charles Kingsley and the Christian Social Movement* (1899).

<sup>89</sup> Charles William Stubbs, *The Land and the Labourers: Facts and Experiments in Cottage Farming and Co-Operative Agriculture* (1893), pp. 13-21.

<sup>90</sup> Charles William Stubbs, *The Mythe of Life: Four Sermons, with an Introduction on the Social Mission of the Church* (1880), p. 19; *The Land and the Labourers*, p. 29.

<sup>91</sup> Stubbs, *The Land and the Labourers*, pp. 27-8.

benefit to the labourer, 'the first step in raising him from the condition of an eating, drinking, and toiling *animal* to the true dignity of a working *man*'. Stubbs, from his long experience, thought that '[t]he absence of real pleasure from the life of the village labourer is one of the saddest experiences of the country parish priest',<sup>92</sup> and found the lack of stimulation in village social life depressing. He organised winter lectures, attended by 50 to 100 of his parishioners; and started a Young Men's Guild Night School, held in the vicarage laundry, at which essays on such morally uplifting subjects as 'What is my Ideal in Life' and 'A List of all the Books I know' were read.<sup>93</sup> The agenda to which Stubbs, Jessopp and Jefferies were working sought to describe and to alleviate the unquantifiable problem of social stagnation, rather than simply the measurable economic manifestations of poverty.

Such involvement by parsons in the social life of their communities reflected another aspect of the 'poverty' of rural life, which was intimately linked to the monotony of a rustic existence. The decline of the organic social relations within the rural community was, for many clerical and other commentators, an important reason for the emptiness of the labourer's life. While it was important for the labourer, through education, the franchise and the occupation of land, to achieve a measure of personal independence, the social involvement of the village elites was just as central a feature of the village life these people wished to recreate. Stubbs partly blamed the disinterestedness of the clergy for the creation of '[a] class of men, the stolid helplessness of whose ignorance has become proverbial',<sup>94</sup> and Jessopp thought it a mistake on the part of the clergy to have acquiesced in the decline of fairs, wakes, maypoles and other pagan indulgences. (Even the barbaric practice of cock-fighting had given the labourers something in which to take an interest.)<sup>95</sup> Stubbs, taking the matter a stage further, argued that a great social opportunity was afforded by the Church of England in that it placed an educated man in every part of the country, however remote.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Stubbs, *Mythe of Life*, p. 31.

<sup>93</sup> Charles William Stubbs, *The Church in the Villages: Principles and Ideal, an Address to the Church Council and Wardens of the United Parishes of Stokenham, Chivelstone, and Sherford* (Dartmouth, 1887), p. 39.

<sup>94</sup> Charles William Stubbs, *Village Politics: Addresses and Sermons on the Labour Question* (1878), p. 174.

<sup>95</sup> Jessopp, *Arcady*, pp. 230-2.

<sup>96</sup> Stubbs, *The Church in the Villages*, p. 11.



In this respect the social role of the clergy was akin to that of the university settlements in the large towns. Stubbs appears to have recognised this: one of his inspirations was Edward Denison, who lived among the London poor until his untimely death in 1869.<sup>97</sup> The re-creation of the old village community, to replace the degraded, urbanised and monotonous existence of the young Hodges, through the achievement of a more genuine social empathy, was the ultimate social aim of these conscientious parsons.

However, in the 1880s the stereotype of Hodge still held its own, and even those who were careful to avoid it, such as Jessopp, portrayed village life in such a way as to suggest that Hodge was alive and well. This was partly unavoidable: labouring life certainly *was* dull, certainly compared with the literate and educated lives of the parsons themselves, and also compared with the towns with their shorter working hours and varied recreational opportunities. It might well be argued, though, that despite all the attempts of writers like Jessopp and Jefferies not to judge the poor man's life by their own somewhat elevated standards, their moral outlook and position within rural society conditioned their perceptions of labouring life to the extent that they represented its character unjustly. As members of local elites, these men wrote their impressions of labouring life from a particular social and moral standpoint. The labourers themselves would not agree that the public house - the one source of entertainment available in even the dullest village - was an unsuitable place of recreation; and what may have seemed to an outside observer like an uninspiring gathering of half-drunken labourers may have been interesting to the participants. The resident investigator, coming from a class with its own cultural preconceptions, was culturally removed from the labouring classes, and could quite easily be accused of misrepresenting working-class life.

The attitudes of prominent resident investigators of the 1880s were sometimes contested on these grounds. In particular, the character of Hodge was challenged by a range of spokesmen for the agricultural labourer, in contrast to the more uncritical acceptance of the stereotype which might have been normal twenty years earlier. Reactions to the rustic archetype took two forms: firstly, indignation at the condescension towards the labourer, and secondly, indignation at the inability of social

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<sup>97</sup> Stubbs, *The Church in the Villages*, pp. 30-2. See *Letters and Other Writings of the Late Edward Denison*, ed. by Sir Baldwyn Leighton, Bart. (2nd. ed., 1872).

commentators to understand the individuality of the labourer through a failure to communicate with him, and a failure to think such a communication worthwhile or even possible. Both these criticisms took the arguments for an intensive approach to social investigation a stage further than Jessopp and Jefferies had done. A good example comes from the reaction a remark by Jessopp in *The Trials of a Country Parson*, in which he expressed despair that new preachers just down from 'Camford' tended to pitch their sermons far too high for Hodge to appreciate: 'Talk of college dons being thrown away upon a handful of bumpkins!'<sup>98</sup> This infuriated one anonymous cleric:

It must be remembered too that those whom the author speaks of as "a handful of bumpkins" have souls, they have their trials and sorrows. The term "bumpkin" is a familiar one; it may be a "racy" one, it certainly is not a "clever" one. On the contrary, when applied to CHRIST'S poor by a clergyman it is little less than contemptible, and not the language which a Pastor ought to use.<sup>99</sup>

The same criticism could be applied to the terms Hodge and Molly; or to the epithets used in Wales by Beriah Gwynfe Evans, 'John Jones' and 'Jane Davies'.<sup>100</sup> Jessopp's anonymous critic, however, went further, and argued that too many country parsons were patronising to their flock, which was the one thing the country poor did not like: 'We have no right to take liberties with the poor. If we look upon them merely in the light of "a handful of bumpkins," no wonder they resent it.'<sup>101</sup> The criticism of Jessopp was rather unfair - he saw his parishioners as more than mere 'bumpkins', especially the older ones whom he used as a primary source for his oral history - but the fact that it was made at all illustrates the developing consciousness among many observers of the poor that a careful and unpatronising approach was required if a genuine impression was to be gained of the labourers' outlook.

The second objection was best expressed by Thomas Hardy. Hardy, the most successful rural novelist of the period, had himself come under criticism for crediting the agricultural labourer with too much intelligence. The *Athenaeum*, reviewing *The Hand of Ethelberta* in 1875, had remarked that Hardy 'does not seem to appreciate the

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<sup>98</sup> Jessopp, *Trials*, p. 93.

<sup>99</sup> Anon., *Other Views on The Trials of a Country Parson* ([1891]), pp. 19-20.

<sup>100</sup> Evans, 'Peasantry of South Wales', e.g. pp. 287, 295, 302.

<sup>101</sup> Anon., *Other Views*, p. 31.



exceeding scantiness of ideas in the brain, and words in the mouth, of a modern rustic', and suggested that the labourer's vocabulary was confined to less than 200 words.<sup>102</sup> Hardy's suggestion to those who believed in Hodge, however, was this: they should go to Dorset ('where Hodge in his most unmitigated form is supposed to reside'),<sup>103</sup> seek out a specimen of the labouring classes, and take up residence in his house. He suggested an approach that might best be characterised as social anthropology:

For the nonce the very sitting down would seem an undignified performance, and at first, the ideas, the modes, and the surroundings generally, would be puzzling - even impenetrable; or if in a measure unpenetrable, would seem to have but little meaning. But living on there for a few days the sojourner would become conscious of a new aspect in the life around him. He would find that, without any objective change whatever, variety had taken the place of monotony; that the man who had brought him home - the typical Hodge, as he conjectured - was somehow not typical of anyone but himself ... Six months pass, and our gentleman leaves the cottage, bidding his friends good-bye with genuine regret. The great change in his perception is that Hodge, the dull, unvarying, joyless one, has ceased to exist for him. He has become disintegrated into a number of dissimilar fellow-creatures, men of many minds ... Dick the carter, Bob the shepherd, and Sam the ploughman, are, it is true, alike in the narrowness of their means and their general open-air life, but they cannot be rolled together again into such a Hodge as he dreamt of, by any possible enchantment.<sup>104</sup>

Such an investigator would thus obtain an intimate experience of the home life of the poor, which would add considerably to his understanding of rural labouring life. He would find, like the country parson and publisher Charles Kegan Paul, remembering his Oxfordshire curacies, that the rural poor 'are not stolid and stupid, as is so often assumed. What they lack is book-learning, but for one who can talk their language and understand their thoughts, there is much to repay the attempt to know them better.'<sup>105</sup> James Purves, like Hardy, suggested that half a year was the appropriate length of time to spend among the rustics: 'there is poetry and to spare in the Lothian hinds ... There are old folklore, old mythology, and superstitious beliefs lying thickly about that would reward any man for six months life among them.'<sup>106</sup> One of Francis Heath's correspondents in 1880, a Devonian with fifty years of experience among the labourers,

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<sup>102</sup> Quoted in Edmund Blunden, *Thomas Hardy* (1967 [1st. ed. 1942]), p. 40.

<sup>103</sup> Hardy, 'Dorsetshire Labourer', p. 252.

<sup>104</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 253-4.

<sup>105</sup> C. Kegan Paul, *Memories* (1971 [1st. ed. 1899]), pp. 187-8.

<sup>106</sup> Purves, 'The Lothian Hinds', p. 650.



believed that '[a] great mistake is ... commonly made in representing the peasant as a poor, ignorant soul who hardly knows his right hand from his left.'<sup>107</sup> Flora Thompson, author of *Lark Rise to Candleford*, a trilogy of reminiscences about country life in the 1890s, remarked of her own Oxfordshire village that '[i]f a stranger had gone there looking for the conventional Hodge, he would not have found him.'<sup>108</sup> However, her descriptions of the grinding poverty of 'Lark Rise' suggest why an observer who did not come into close contact with the labouring families might imagine them all to be the same: 'their poverty was like a hampering drag upon them'; '[t]heir favourite virtue was endurance.'<sup>109</sup> From the outside, such a life could seem empty and devoid of colour; but Thompson, like Hardy, knew labouring life from the inside. The challenge for the middle-class social explorer, in Hardy's view, was, therefore, to see labouring life as an insider would see it: to penetrate the uninspiring exterior of the agricultural labourer and learn something of what lay beneath.

The widespread interest in the condition and disposition of the agricultural labourer had come about as a result of the agitation of the early 1870s. John Fraser has noted that it peaked in the 1870s and 1880s; but that even by 1900 nothing had really shaken the stereotype of the rural labourer.<sup>110</sup> There had, for example, been little written on their interests - except drinking - and moral values. However, the stereotype of Hodge had been challenged, notably by Hardy: in *Jude the Obscure* he described the career of a highly intelligent artisan from a labouring background whose intelligence and ambition were frustrated by the prejudices of the urban middle classes. This reversed the common notion that well-meaning middle-class reformers were continually frustrated by the lack of ambition and intelligence on the part of the rural labourers. Yet there can be no doubt that the notion of Hodge remained powerful and influential. In contrast with the farmers, than whom Jefferies thought 'there is no class of the community less uniform',<sup>111</sup> the labourers appeared to correspond to a particular formula. Portraits of labourers were still frequently uncomplimentary; though no doubt pleasing to the sophisticated and patronising urban reader. A rather more pleasant view of rural

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<sup>107</sup> Heath, *Peasant Life*, p. 375.

<sup>108</sup> Flora Thompson, *Lark Rise to Candleford* (Harmondsworth, 1973 [1st. ed. 1945]), p. 50.

<sup>109</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 31, 50.

<sup>110</sup> Fraser, 'George Sturt', pp. 121-2.

<sup>111</sup> Jefferies, *Hodge and His Masters*, vol. I, p. v.



existence might be found in more romantic books on rural life, particularly Jefferies's own *Gamekeeper at Home* and *Amateur Poacher*, which showed the peasant and the farmer as repositories of naturalists' folklore and quaint superstitions. However, this feature was representative of a way of life which seemed to be dying out. In any case, the idealisation of the rustic did not reflect an achievement of empathy any more than did the reduction to an unflattering stereotype. The newer agricultural labourer - the younger Hodge - would remain a source of concern. The young labourers had no interest in village sport, religion, or local or national politics - even the labourers' agitation passed most of the poorest south-western labourers by. Indeed, in 1880 the ageing Canon Girdlestone - as sympathetic an observer as there was - declared that the Devon labourer did not have a 'life', but rather a mere 'existence or vegetation'.<sup>112</sup>

This perception was one which, for all that it reflected a sympathetic appreciation of the difficulties under which the poor man laboured, bore the unmistakeable stamp of one who moved in a different social milieu from those he observed, and who applied certain standards to the assessment of labouring life that would not have occurred to those he was describing. The Hodge stereotype rebounded on the practices of social investigators in that it discouraged the development of the respondent approach. Having said this, however, the concern of the period was to understand the labourer, to discover, as Jessopp put it, his 'habits and mode of life'; and to this end the 'survey' approach - from the socially elevated vantage point - was inappropriate. The efforts of commentators such as Jessopp and Jefferies represent an important advance in the project of communicating with the poor, and should be viewed as an important stage in the transition from the informant to the respondent modes of inquiry. The fact that the judgements and approaches of these men were challenged by others is evidence that the methodology of intensive, anthropological investigation was a contested area; and, if contested, it must have had at least some significance to contemporaries.

The widespread survey of material conditions - especially the tour of inquiry by an intrepid special correspondent - and the more intensive cultural study of a single area, were both used in this period. The gathering of social knowledge was still perceived as

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<sup>112</sup> Quoted in Heath, *Peasant Life*, p. 183.

important, but more was required. The perception of a deficit of cultural understanding, inspired by a growing consciousness of the decline of 'organic' social relations in rural England, prompted a more intensive form of investigation. The intensive approach could be carried a stage further by insisting on a closer communication with the labouring classes themselves. To understand the labourer fully, and achieve a rounded and balanced picture of his life, a deeper knowledge of individuals was required, allied to a rejection of the reductive approaches which led to meaningless statistical aggregations and unjust and condescending stereotypical representations. The approach of investigators such as Jessopp and Jefferies owed more to the anthropologist and the novelist than to the official investigator or special correspondent, and involved obtaining an understanding of the meanings of labouring life rather than simply reporting its conditions. This reflected a wider concern for class-communication in an age when class politics were beginning to intensify in urban Britain. How to penetrate the minds of the agricultural labourers - and the working classes in general - would become an increasingly vexatious question in the years ahead.



## **Chapter 5: 'The passion for inquiry': the 1890s**

If the burning lights had been turned away from the English 'peasant' in the 1880s, they shone with redoubled brightness in the following decade. An eclectic mix of information was assiduously gathered on all aspects of rural life, and presented to readers in various forms, official and unofficial. So strong was the investigative impetus that Russell Garnier, a conservative historian of the British 'peasantry', wondered in 1895 'whether this passion for inquiry into class habits and class abuses may not become extravagant'.<sup>1</sup> This chapter examines various strands of social investigation in the 1890s: firstly, Charles Booth's rural inquiry, which illustrates some of the particular preconceptions attached to the investigation of rural life, and differed markedly from his better-known urban survey; secondly, the Royal Commission on Labour, and some of the conflicts to which its activities gave rise; and thirdly, the ongoing tradition of the special correspondent. Lastly it will reiterate the importance of the cultural understanding of the rural poor, and show how both economic and cultural preoccupations could inform an inquiry, through an examination of the investigation of social conditions in rural Warwickshire by Joseph Ashby and Bolton King. Investigations of rural housing, another significant area of inquiry in the 1890s, will be examined in chapter 9.

Rural politics in the late 1880s and the 1890s were dominated by two themes: depression and depopulation. Depression dominated the minds of farmers and landlords alike; and various official inquiries were established to investigate the 'depressed state of the agricultural interest' and agricultural problems more generally. The steady revival of agricultural fortunes during the 1890s contrasted with a deepening dissatisfaction among the labouring classes with life on the land. The reports of the census of 1891 provided stark evidence of the numerical decrease of the rural population, and prompted another wave of special correspondents from the national newspapers, mostly in the south of England, but some venturing to the more prosperous northern counties. The reports on the agricultural labourer collected by the Royal Commission on Labour added to the mass of evidence of the 'rural exodus'.

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<sup>1</sup> Russell M. Garnier, *Annals of the British Peasantry* (1895), p. 407.

Depopulation seemed to threaten both urban and rural communities. There remained a strong conception of the countryside as the repository of English hardihood, which was, as Gareth Stedman Jones has shown, supposedly attenuated by a couple of generations of town life. Rural poverty, as unveiled by the investigators of the 1870s, played its part in this process, in driving the labourers from the land to seek higher wages in the towns. The dockers' union, whose strike in London in 1889 was further evidence of the growing strength of organised labour in the ranks of the unskilled, certainly realised this. Thus they attempted to mobilise agricultural labourers' unions, hoping to keep on the land those whose competition would otherwise further depress wages in the metropolitan labour market. The countryside was similarly affected. The best workers migrated from the land, and a 'residuum' of less efficient labour remained behind, in turn threatening the future of the rural population.

Rural issues thus took a central place in national political questions; and in the 1890s this place was more secure than it had been two decades earlier. Organised labour and, in particular, the participation of agricultural labourers in the political process, ensured a share of the limelight. In the 1870s, agricultural trade unionism had been in its infancy and disputes were still often localised and lacked an institutional political framework. The granting of the franchise to agricultural labourers in 1884 marked an important turning-point; and the creation of county councils in 1888 and rural district and parish councils in 1894 represented a further institutionalisation of rural politics. Agricultural trade unions now looked to the machinery of politics; and attempted to organise the election of sympathisers to the new local government bodies. Furthermore, in this period there were three general elections in eight years - 1892, 1895 and 1900 - in all of which agricultural labourers participated. The land question, in both Ireland and mainland Britain, was an important theme of these elections, especially in 1892 and 1895; and the raising of the subject aroused great passions in both Liberal and Unionist circles. Linked to the problem of depopulation, land came to achieve an importance in British politics which was to be maintained until the culmination of the issue in the early 1910s.

These issues prompted a different approach to social investigation from that



adopted in the 1880s. Marion Springall, a Norfolk historian writing in the 1930s, explained of the 1890s that '[a]s the agricultural depression deepened, the economic rather than the social side of the problem came uppermost in men's minds. Village politics grew more concerned with the land and less with the Church.'<sup>2</sup> While social matters had dominated the investigations of the preceding decade, there now arose a new concern to document the economic conditions of the rural poor. However, as Garnier remarked, the class dimension remained central. The conflicting methods of investigation used in the period reflected the contests between informant and respondent modes of inquiry, and prompted further consideration of the question of how best to gain access to information about the rural community. In the 1890s reputation of two inquiries in particular - the Royal Commission on Labour and Charles Booth's surveys - was established.

The royal commission was already a well-established system of inquiry; and the use of assistant commissioners to investigate the condition of agriculture and the rural population was also a long-standing approach. The official type of survey was the source of most information used both in policy-making and by historians of rural life. The Labour Commissioners enjoyed a reputation for impartiality and rigour: however, this chapter will show that their methods were not necessarily much more reliable than those of the special correspondents. The independent investigator was more likely to adopt elements of the respondent method of inquiry, being less constrained by official notions of reliable sources of information about the rural community. The commissioner with official backing had more resources at his disposal, and was able to consult a wider range of informants, but the official status he enjoyed could also be a disadvantage. As Thomas Kebbel remarked in 1870, '[m]any things can be ascertained in the course of careless conversation which are not so readily discovered to an official inquirer.'<sup>3</sup> Certainly the reputation accorded to the official investigator ignored the potential one-sidedness of the evidence he obtained. The reputation of investigations like that of the Royal Commission on Labour, however, was for fair and accurate inquiry; and within the investigative culture of the 1890s they held a leading position.

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<sup>2</sup> L. Marion Springall, *Labouring Life in Norfolk Villages 1834-1914* (1936), p. 115.

<sup>3</sup> T. E. Kebbel, *The Agricultural Labourer: A Short Summary of His Position* (1870), p. 24.



Another crucial development was the publication, from 1887 onwards, of Charles Booth's seventeen-volume survey of *Life and Labour of the People in London*. The importance of this study has been reiterated by historians and sociologists,<sup>4</sup> but it was not made in isolation: it should be seen in the context of a more general awakening of middle-class interest in the condition of the urban and rural poor. In 1892 Arthur Acland commented that '[p]ublic opinion has been awakened by the sad and impressive pictures of the life of the poor, presented in such works as [Booth's], and by the spread of knowledge concerning the grievous hardships of village life in many parts of the country'.<sup>5</sup> Not only had awareness of social problems increased; the methods of studying them had advanced. Booth's London survey appeared to set new standards for the scientific investigation of social problems. As this chapter will show, however, when Booth turned his attention to the investigation of rural life, many of the traditional assumptions about rural society remained with him and shaped his mode of inquiry.

It is to Booth's inquiry that we will turn first, because, although it bore little direct relation to the problem of depopulation, it reflected a conception of country life which, to a greater or lesser extent, touched all aspects of investigative activity in the countryside in this period. In the early 1890s, leading up to his appointment as a member of the Royal Commission on the Aged Poor, Booth carried out a study of old-age pauperism and poverty. Like his London survey, it was a team effort. He installed a small staff in an office at the headquarters of the Royal Statistical Society.<sup>6</sup> Collaboration was unavoidable: Booth had many other commitments, and for much of the period was out of the country recovering from illness. His attention was never fully given over to this investigation, and he was glad when its completion gave him time to return to his work on the Industry series of *Life and Labour*.<sup>7</sup> Booth's role in this inquiry, it would appear, was twofold: to write up the results - which he published as *The Aged Poor in England and Wales* in 1894, while he was serving on the Royal

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<sup>4</sup> See especially T. S. & M. B. Simey, *Charles Booth: Social Scientist* (Oxford, 1960); Rosemary O'Day & David Englander, *Mr. Charles Booth's Inquiry: Life and Labour of the People in London Reconsidered* (1993); David Englander & Rosemary O'Day (eds.), *Retrieved Riches: Social Investigation in Britain 1840-1914* (Aldershot, 1995).

<sup>5</sup> Introduction to J. A. Spender, *The State and Pensions in Old Age* (1892), p. xvii.

<sup>6</sup> [Mary Booth], *Charles Booth: A Memoir* (1918), pp. 141-54.

<sup>7</sup> Booth to Alfred Marshall, 25/5/1894, in ULL MS797 I/1352.



Commission on the Aged Poor - and to supply the funds.<sup>8</sup> He also appears to have been able to gain access to certain important sources of evidence. The study grew out of a controversial paper presented by Booth to the Statistical Society in 1891, in which he advocated the provision of old-age pensions.<sup>9</sup> The survey was overseen by Arthur Acland, whom Booth credited with its suggestion and inception;<sup>10</sup> and Booth was ably assisted by the Liberal journalist J. A. Spender, twice a resident of Toynbee Hall and a protégé of Acland's at Balliol,<sup>11</sup> whose book on *The State and Pensions in Old Age*, published in Swan Sonnenschein's 'Social Science' series in 1892, was largely a progress report on the Booth investigation.<sup>12</sup>

The investigation was divided into two parts: a general survey of the condition of the aged poor in urban and rural districts, and a special study of the rural aspects of the problem. The general survey used information 'supplied chiefly, though not exclusively' by the clergy.<sup>13</sup> The informants were asked to fill in a questionnaire, in order that the information received might be standardised and tabulated. Replies were received from 360 of the 648 poor law unions in England and Wales. The coverage was weakest in large towns, where the clergy had a less intimate knowledge of the circumstances of their aged parishioners, and this shortfall was partly made up by information supplied by members of the Charity Organisation Society (COS).<sup>14</sup> The reports were reprinted in full, and summarised by Booth; and most of the report's conclusions were based on these summaries.

The second study was carried out by Booth and Spender with the assistance of Miss Mary C. Tabor of Boston in Lincolnshire and Miss H. G. Pearce. Tabor and Pearce began the investigation by visiting about fourteen villages in different parts of

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<sup>8</sup> J. A. Spender remembered that Booth 'subscribed handsomely to the expenses'. (J. A. Spender, *Men and Things* (1937), p. 63.)

<sup>9</sup> Charles Booth, 'Enumeration and Classification of Paupers, and State Pensions for the Aged', *JRSS*, vol. LIV (1891), pp. 600-43.

<sup>10</sup> Charles Booth, *The Aged Poor in England and Wales* (1894), p. 335.

<sup>11</sup> Acland gathered a small group of investigators around him known as the 'Inner Ring', which as well as Spender included Michael Sadler and Cosmo Lang, later Archbishop of Canterbury. See Anne Acland, *A Devon Family: The Story of the Aclands* (1981), p. 120.

<sup>12</sup> The book also described pension provision in Germany, France, Denmark and Italy in some detail.

<sup>13</sup> Booth, *Aged Poor*, p. 106.

<sup>14</sup> Booth also specifically thanked Henry Marton of Birmingham and Frederick Scott of Manchester, who was an active member of the Manchester Statistical Society and carried out a poverty survey (prompted by Booth's work on London) in Manchester in 1889. (Booth, *Aged Poor*, p. 106).



the country. This was followed by a consultation with the bishop in each Church of England diocese, through whom the incumbents of various rural parishes were contacted. The clergy who assisted with this survey had far more detailed work to do than did those who helped with the first; and their role is comparable to that of the School Board Visitors who provided the essential information on individual households for the Poverty series of *Life and Labour*. The clergy were asked to provide, as far as possible, answers to a series of questions, reprinted in Appendix I, for every old person in their parish. Altogether returns were received from 262 parishes representing 231 different unions, and data obtained for 9125 people. Of particular interest, as the questions make clear, and unsurprisingly given that the object of the study was to investigate the case for old-age pensions, was the old people's means of financial support. Booth dealt with the information statistically, as had been clearly envisaged in the framing of the questionnaire. The statistical summary of the returns, however, was supplemented by the presentation of detailed returns from ten parishes, two in Northamptonshire, two in Hampshire, one each in Northumberland, Leicestershire, Worcestershire, Lincolnshire and Cambridgeshire, and one from 'the Eastern Counties'. The details of the individual cases, as supplied by the vicars, were printed, although the anonymity of individuals and villages was preserved.

The involvement of the clergy is illustrative of an important difference between the investigation of town and country as Booth envisaged it. Spender's interim report on the progress of the inquiry dealt largely with urban conditions. The investigators had access to the records kept by the Tower Hamlets Pension Committee, which provided weekly pensions to the 'deserving' poor of Whitechapel and Stepney. These cases, which had themselves been investigated by members of the COS, were supplemented by others derived from COS records. Such information was not readily available for rural districts, and Spender's report contains only brief descriptions of rural cases, communicated by unidentified correspondents. The absence of COS investigators as a source of information about rural life reinforce the points made in earlier chapters about the importance of the country parson as a conduit for social knowledge. Booth himself repeatedly emphasised the neighbourliness of rural life, which obviated the need for



large-scale organised charity.<sup>15</sup> The COS did not organise in the countryside, and could therefore not be drawn upon as a source of information in studies of rural life. The country parson's role was thus made more important in the absence of alternative informants.

There was a second feature, however, which set the country parson apart from his urban counterpart. The COS could deal with only a limited number of cases; whereas, in theory at least, the country parson could know all the cases of old-age poverty and pauperism in his parish in detail and depth, and supply a reliable and rounded picture of the social conditions in his district. As Booth argued, it was easier to obtain the sort of 'intensive' knowledge he required in the country than in the town:

There is a natural and very broad distinction between urban and rural districts in regard to the conditions of life in old age, and in seeking to understand the facts, different methods of inquiry come into play. In small country parishes everyone is known by reputation as well as by sight, and the old especially are familiar figures, whose lives, as seen by those who dwell among them, involve comparatively few unknown quantities.<sup>16</sup>

Booth's remarks were reminiscent of those of a very different commentator, Miss Mitford, who called her village 'a small neighbourhood ... of cottages and cottage-like houses ... with inhabitants whose faces are as familiar to us as the flowers in our garden ... where we know every one, are known to every one, interested in every one, and authorized to hope that every one feels an interest in us'.<sup>17</sup> Booth's conception of social relations in the countryside probably overstated the sense of community within most villages, but it stresses the more manageable scale of the rural community as far as the investigator was concerned. Similarly, Charles Stubbs noted the difference in size between his Sheffield parish of 20,000 or more and his rural Buckinghamshire parish of 350;<sup>18</sup> and another commentator remarked that in twenty years living in London he had never once received a pastoral visit from the clergyman, and contrasted this with the

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<sup>15</sup> Booth, *Aged Poor*, pp. 47, 329, 357.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*, p. 335.

<sup>17</sup> Mary Russell Mitford, *Our Village: Sketches of Rustic Character and Scenery* (2 vols., 1863 [1st. ed. 1839-42]), p. 1.

<sup>18</sup> Charles William Stubbs, *The Mythe of Life: Four Sermons, with an Introduction on the Social Mission of the Church* (1880), p. 5.

social involvement of country parsons.<sup>19</sup> How far the parson would really have had access to information such as the sources of income of the aged poor is highly questionable: the poor had an interest in minimising their apparent income, in order to maximise their chances of receiving charitable relief, with which the parson was usually concerned. The problem was redoubled if the parson was also a poor law guardian, as the investigated individuals and families clearly had an interest in declaring as little as possible of the financial and other assistance they received. Some of the correspondents in the general investigation recognised this: the informant from St. Albans, for example, noted that '[c]hildren, &c., contribute more than is supposed - but amount will be concealed as long as Guardians help destitute only.'<sup>20</sup> In a rural union, one correspondent remarked that it was hard to tell how much the aged had saved: '[t]hose who have saved money are reticent about it, lest charity should be affected.'<sup>21</sup>

The parson, however, was seen as a reliable witness, and one able to make moral judgements on the poor in his midst as well as to detail their financial circumstances. The methods adopted in this investigation were akin to the 'wholesale' methods of the *Life and Labour* survey as characterised by Beatrice Webb. She argued that, while each individual came to the interview with his own biases and prejudices, the consultation of a large group would enable these biases to be cancelled out.<sup>22</sup> The same principle could be applied to the questionnaire process adopted in the rural investigation. However, whereas in the London survey the groups consulted formed a relatively wide cross-section of middle-class opinion, the rural sample was almost wholly confined to the clergy. Therefore, while Booth was justified in pointing to the consistency of opinion among his informants once the inevitable biases were discounted,<sup>23</sup> the informants themselves were drawn from a narrow social group, and necessarily reflected the general outlook of that group.

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<sup>19</sup> A. N. Cooper, *Our Villages: Another View: A Reply to the Special Commissioner of the 'Daily News'* (1891), p. 19.

<sup>20</sup> Booth, *Aged Poor*, p. 167.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*, p. 161.

<sup>22</sup> Beatrice Webb, *My Apprenticeship* (Harmondsworth, 1971 [1st. ed. 1926]), pp. 236-40, esp. p. 240 for her opinion that bias among interviewees and interviewers was cancelled out by this process; Sidney & Beatrice Webb, *Methods of Social Study* (1932), pp. 207-8.

<sup>23</sup> Booth, *Aged Poor*, p. 107.



David Englander has argued that Booth's metropolitan informant base was far more socially eclectic than historians who are acquainted only with the printed volumes of *Life and Labour* tend to think;<sup>24</sup> but in investigating rural areas Booth took a consciously elitist approach, appropriate to the 'survey' in the sense of a 'view from above'. In a letter to Herbert Samuel, who was contemplating undertaking an investigation in Oxfordshire in 1891, Booth advised him to consult local elites rather than the investigated population itself: 'I think it safest to consult existing local authorities such as schoolmasters, rate collectors, postmasters, relieving officers, the clergy (Church and Dissent), and the doctors, and only to supplement and enliven the information from such sources with what the inquirer himself sees and hears from the people themselves.'<sup>25</sup> For all the sympathy which such investigators had with the working classes, particularly given their Liberal political standpoint, they still adopted the conventional procedures of social inquiry.

While the survey of the aged poor was in preparation, Booth was also involved in an investigation of family budgets for the Economic Club. This organisation deserves more attention than historians have given it,<sup>26</sup> serving as it did as a talking-shop for many of the leading figures associated with social investigation, from all sides of the political spectrum. At one Economic Club debate attended by Mary Booth, the speakers included Charles Loch and J. A. Spender;<sup>27</sup> and the committee who organised the budget investigation consisted of Charles Booth, Ernest Aves (one of Booth's chief collaborators on the London survey) and Henry Higgs, who had written an article on 'workmen's budgets' for the Royal Statistical Society's journal.<sup>28</sup> Booth's involvement with this inquiry may have been a result of criticisms of his poverty surveys for *Life and Labour*: in the discussion which followed the presentation of his pilot survey of Tower Hamlets to the Statistical Society, Leone Levi, the society's president, suggested that the

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<sup>24</sup> David Englander, 'Comparisons and Contrasts: Henry Mayhew and Charles Booth as Social Investigators', in Englander & O'Day, *Retrieved Riches*, pp. 105-42.

<sup>25</sup> Booth to Samuel, 10/11/1891, Samuel papers, House of Lords Record Office, A/155 I/10. The letter is also quoted in Gertrude Himmelfarb, *Poverty and Compassion: The Moral Imagination of the Late Victorians* (New York, 1991), p. 98n.

<sup>26</sup> There is no reference to it, for example, in Englander & O'Day's collection *Retrieved Riches*, which deals in some depth with the investigative community of late-Victorian England.

<sup>27</sup> Mary Booth to Charles Booth, [mid-June 1891], ULL MS797 I/3470. Henry Higgs was also present.

<sup>28</sup> Henry Higgs, 'Workmen's Budgets', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, vol. LIV (1893), pp. 255-85.



inclusion of a certain amount of budgetary analysis would improve the overall impression given by the study.<sup>29</sup> The inquiry consciously followed the methods of Le Play,<sup>30</sup> and was deliberately ‘*intensive*’ in form.<sup>31</sup> Twenty-eight budgets were analysed, appended by ‘monographs’ in the Le Play tradition, eight coming from London, nine from provincial towns and eleven from rural districts. Four of these rural budgets came from one village, ‘Whitestone’ in Leicestershire, and the predominance of the mining industry in this village suggests that it may well have been Coalville, near the Booths’ home at Gracedieu Manor. The collector of the budgets may have been Mary Booth. (Internal evidence suggests that they were collected by a woman.) The overrepresentation of rural districts in the Economic Club budgets reflects Booth’s belief that a different form of investigation was appropriate in rural areas from that which he used in the urban.

The Royal Commission on Labour, the most exhaustive inquiry into the condition of the working classes (urban and rural) in the 1890s, drew a similar distinction. The Commission was appointed in 1891, ‘to inquire into the questions affecting the relations between employer and employed, the combination of employers and employed, and the conditions of labour, which have been raised during the recent trade disputes’.<sup>32</sup> This remit was somewhat out of date as far as agriculture was concerned: the upsurge of trade unionism in the countryside had come two decades earlier, and although the National Union enjoyed a modest revival in the late 1880s and early 1890s, it could not realistically be argued that labour combination *per se* was a threat to the unity of agricultural communities. Labour relations in the countryside were investigated by the Commission, but depopulation, and its effects on the labour supply, was the dominating concern behind its activities. It was felt that ‘the condition of agriculture, the diminution of employment on the land, the migration of labourers from rural districts, and their competition with other classes of labour, had exercised an

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<sup>29</sup> Charles Booth, ‘The Inhabitants of Tower Hamlets (School Board Division), Their Condition and Occupations’, *JRSS*, vol. L (1887), p. 394. This point was made in D. J. Oddy, ‘Working-Class Diets in Late Nineteenth-Century Britain’, *Economic History Review*, 2nd. series, vol. XXIII (1970), p. 315.

<sup>30</sup> Economic Club, *Family Budgets, being the Income and Expenses of Twenty-Eight British Households 1891-1894* (1896), p. 5.

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*, p. 11; original emphasis.

<sup>32</sup> *Fifth and Final Report of the Royal Commission on Labour, Part I: The Report*, PP 1894, C. 7421 (hereinafter *RCL Report*), p. 3.



important influence on the labour question generally',<sup>33</sup> and thus a more general investigation of rural districts was deemed appropriate, unlike the simple questioning of witnesses which was considered sufficient for every other industry. The Commission thus recognised the interlinkage of urban and rural questions, but still thought a special inquiry, using different methods, was necessary in order to penetrate the hidden rural world.

Karen Sayer has remarked of the separate inquiry that '[t]he countryside required special investigation, as if it was a foreign land.'<sup>34</sup> Certainly the rural investigations were more exploratory in nature than the main inquiry. The special inquiry was carried out through the use of assistant commissioners, in the tradition of agricultural investigation which stretched back as least as far as the Poor Law Commission of the 1830s. The Royal Commission on the Employment of Children, Young Persons and Women in Agriculture of 1867 was the model for the structure of the Labour Commission's survey. A senior assistant commissioner, W. C. Little, was appointed, and twelve commissioners were sent round to various districts to undertake intensive inquiries. The discussion in this chapter will focus almost entirely on the six who investigated English conditions, but Scotland, Ireland and Wales were also included. The assistant commissioners were instructed to investigate and report under eight headings: the labour supply; conditions of engagement; wages and earnings; cottages; gardens and allotments; benefit societies; trade union activity (if any); the 'General Relations between Employers and Employed'; and 'The General Condition of the Agricultural Labourer'.<sup>35</sup> These headings reflected the current issues in rural politics and society; and most could in one way or another be related to the central problem of depopulation.

The structure of the inquiries made by each commissioner were very similar. Each was allocated a number of counties; and in each county a Poor Law Union was selected. In England, as Little pointed out in his final report, they attempted to select

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<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>34</sup> Karen Sayer, *Women of the Fields: Representations of Rural Women in the Nineteenth Century* (Manchester, 1995), p. 137.

<sup>35</sup> *RCL Report*, p. 199. See also the assistant commissioners' reports. Note that Cecil Chapman used an additional category, the 'Character of Labourers'. See below, p. 123.

‘distinctly agricultural’ Unions, and agriculture predominated in 33 of the 38 investigated.<sup>36</sup> The concentration on one Union in each county, he argued, allowed ‘greater exactness than would be possible in any general survey’.<sup>37</sup> Remarking on the Scottish investigation, he recognised that some of the variations in conditions may have been obscured by its more extensive scope (given the absence of Poor Law Unions).<sup>38</sup> The variety of agricultural conditions across the country - even within England alone - was such that a widespread investigation, taking particular areas in depth, was the only realistic way of gaining a reasonably accurate picture of conditions.

The assistant commissioners themselves, like those of 1867, were mostly barristers. Sayer has argued that each ‘belonged to that imperial world of mastering the facts, the literal and mental accumulation of data, which mirrored the collection of zoological specimens and which schoolboys across the land had to emulate’.<sup>39</sup> Little himself called them ‘able, conscientious, and impartial’:<sup>40</sup> impartiality was the watchword of the investigative culture. The most notable name among the six was Arthur Wilson Fox, who was born in 1861, called to the bar in 1886, active in the Royal Statistical Society and later carried out investigations into the wages and earnings of agricultural labourers for the Board of Trade,<sup>41</sup> where he was Comptroller-General of the Commercial, Labour and Statistical Departments from 1906 until his death in 1909. The other assistant commissioners were the noted agricultural expert William E. Bear; Cecil Chapman, who had previously been an assistant commissioner for the Markets and Fairs Commission (1887-8), and represented Chelsea on the London County Council as a Conservative in the later 1890s; Roger Richards; Aubrey Spencer, a noted expert on agricultural and land law; and Edward Wilkinson.

The methods adopted for the investigation of each Union were broadly similar. One or two notable officials, often the chairmen of the Board of Guardians, were contacted in each district, and these would put the commissioner in touch with other

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<sup>36</sup> *RCL Report*, p. 203.

<sup>37</sup> *ibid.*, p. 199.

<sup>38</sup> *ibid.*, p. 204.

<sup>39</sup> Sayer, *Women of the Fields*, p. 137.

<sup>40</sup> *RCL Report*, p. 199.

<sup>41</sup> See below, pp. 246-52.



authorities: clergymen, farmers, landowners, and so on. These would be interviewed or asked to supply written evidence. In addition, the commissioners were instructed to hold public meetings of labourers in order to hear their side of the question. All the commissioners, with the exception of William Bear, held such meetings, although their usefulness was varied. Wilson Fox's inquiry at Thingoe in Suffolk was fairly representative. He sent a copy of the Notes of Inquiry to the 43 Poor Law Guardians in the Union, of whom 15 (10 of them farmers) sent replies, attended meetings of the Board of Guardians, twice went the market at Bury St. Edmunds to meet farmers and visited the farmers' club at Ixworth and a number of large farms. He stayed with the chairman of the Board of Guardians, Mr. R. Burrell of Westley, a farmer of over 1000 acres, Mr. U. Johnson, deputy chairman of Suffolk County Council, who farmed over 1500 acres, and Mr. J. Jillings of Little Saxham, a farmer of 700 acres. In addition, he staged nine public meetings, entry to which he tried to restrict to labourers; and held a public inquiry in the Guildhall at Bury. He visited labourers' cottages in the company of Mr. Deeks, the sanitary inspector; and took additional information at times from 'landowners, land agents, clergymen, school-masters, relieving officers, doctors, workhouse officials, labourers, and members of the Eastern Counties Federation'.<sup>42</sup> This appears to be quite a wide base of informants, and it covered every class of rural society. The structure, however, was markedly pyramidal. Wilson Fox accessed the Thingoe Union, initially at least, through its elites, especially its officials; and this pattern was repeated by the other investigators in the areas they visited.

The broad spread of the witness profile of the Commission as a whole was also pointed out in the final report: the secretary, Geoffrey Drage, pointed out that of the 583 witnesses examined by the Commission, 350 were representatives of the employed, 163 representatives of employers and 70 'miscellaneous'.<sup>43</sup> Almost two thirds, then, were representative of the labouring classes. (What these figures do not give, however, is the duration of each examination, or the importance attached to the evidence: they are only a very rough guide.) The informant structure of the assistant commissioners is difficult

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<sup>42</sup> *Royal Commission on Labour: Assistant Commissioners' Reports on the Agricultural Labourer, Vol. I: England*, PP 1893-4, C. 6894 (hereinafter *Assistant Commissioners' Reports*) III, p. 33.

<sup>43</sup> *Fifth and Final Report of the Royal Commission on Labour, Part II: Secretary's Report on the Work of the Office: Summaries of Evidence (with Index); and Appendices*, PP 1894, C. 7421 (I), p. 10.

to analyse with any certainty. All emphasised the variety of informants used, and all were careful to enter into some communication with the labouring classes. The rural inquiries were less formally structured, and no direct comparison is possible. The only one for which we can adduce similar information is Wilson Fox's in Swaffham, Norfolk. In an appendix he quoted and attributed the evidence he had used in his report (*not* all the information he actually obtained). Table 1 shows the sources of information used on each subject covered in the inquiry. Many sources were quoted several times during the course of the report, and thus the figure of 101 pieces of employers' evidence does not mean that 101 different employers were cited. Much of the evidence from labourers was taken at public meetings, although some came from individuals. The figures, then, are only a very rough guide to the kind of authority Wilson Fox respected in his investigations. (It should be added that on the subjects of piece-work and allotments some unattributed evidence appears in the appendix, and I have excluded this from the table.)

In spite of these qualifications, however, the results of this calculation are striking. The table shows that almost three times as many pieces of evidence were taken from the employing classes as from the employed. Particularly striking figures are those for earnings - 13 employers and no labourers - for trade unions and labour relations - between them 25 employers and six labourers - and the general condition of the labourer - 9 employers and no labourers. As earlier chapters have shown, the agricultural labourer's earnings were a highly contested subject of investigation; and trade unions were a subject on which consulting the labourers themselves would seem to have been desirable, if not essential. More understandable, perhaps, is the concentration on employers' evidence in the matters of the numbers employed and the depression; but the absence of any testimony on the efficiency of labour from the labourers' point of view is perplexing: other commissioners found, understandably, divergences in the evidence taken on this subject.

Other assistant commissioners may not have been quite so markedly biased towards the evidence of the employers as Wilson Fox. Cecil Chapman, in particular, regularly pointed to the discrepancies between the information supplied by the different



Table 1: Sources of information used by Arthur Wilson Fox in his report on Swaffham, Norfolk, for the Royal Commission on Labour.

Subject	Evidence from employers	Evidence from labourers	Evidence from miscellaneous sources
Numbers employed <sup>44</sup>	17	2	-
Efficiency of labour	16	-	-
Piece-work	4	5	-
Women and gangs	5	10	1 <sup>45</sup>
Earnings	13	-	-
Cottage supply	-	5	-
Cottage building	4	-	-
Allotments	2	5	-
Trade unions	8	1	-
Labour relations	17	5	1 <sup>46</sup>
General condition of labourer	9	-	1 <sup>47</sup>
Depression	4	-	-
Length of service	2	-	-
Labourers' budgets	-	3 <sup>48</sup>	-
Total	101	36	3

(Source: *Royal Commission on Labour: Assistant Commissioners' Reports on the Agricultural Labourer, Vol. I: England*, PP 1893-4, C. 6894-III, pp. 85-95.)

<sup>44</sup> This includes the section on ‘Numbers employed per 100 acres’.

<sup>45</sup> A Medical Officer of Health.

<sup>46</sup> A clergyman.

<sup>47</sup> A solicitor.

<sup>48</sup> I have inferred this from the fact that three budgets are included in the appendix. It could well be, however, that these budgets were supplied by Poor Law Guardians, clergymen or other moral authorities.

classes of rural society. In his summary report he noted the conflicting opinions of employers and employees on the subject of piece-work: the 'masters', for example, told him that it had '[v]ery much gone off. Men are not up to it, as the young men have gone away.' The 'men' retorted: 'Price so bad, and soil so heavy, that men can hardly earn day pay at it.'<sup>49</sup> In the Wantage Union (Oxfordshire): 'In the opinion of the labourers their condition is worse than it used to be, but in the opinion of a majority of the masters it is better.'<sup>50</sup> On the subject of labour relations in the Truro Union, farmers and labourers agreed that cordiality had diminished, but ascribed this trend to different causes, the workers lambasting the pride and haughtiness of the farmers, who were 'all for hunting and meets', and the farmers arguing that the labourers no longer cared about their work. The farmers here were 'unanimous in their opinion that great improvements have taken place ... they speak in exaggerated language of the comforts and luxury of the men's existence, which the men themselves resented with a good deal of feeling'.<sup>51</sup> Clearly the investigator who relied on the testimony of one of these two classes of rural society - be it labourers or farmers - would come out with a potentially distorted view of developments that were taking place.

Because of this, the assistant commissioners often relied heavily on the evidence of medical officers of health, clergymen, relieving officers and sanitary inspectors. As William Bear repeatedly pointed out, such men, unlike farmers and labourers, were 'disinterested' and 'impartial' witnesses.<sup>52</sup> Being partially separated from the economic relationships governing the contests over social knowledge which were played out in the rural investigative arena, these men were, supposedly, able to present a more detached view of the labourer's condition. Someone like Augustus Jessopp would have more authority to comment on the 'General Condition' of the labourer than a representative of the farming class such as Clare Sewell Read, a trade unionist like Joseph Arch, or a labourers' meeting. Thus Roger Richards was impressed with the evidence of Canon William Bury, chairman of the Board of Guardians and vicar of Harlestone in the

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<sup>49</sup> *Assistant Commissioners' Reports*, II, p. 26.

<sup>50</sup> *ibid.*, II, p. 69.

<sup>51</sup> *ibid.*, II, p. 114.

<sup>52</sup> *ibid.*, I, pp. 18, 55, 63. Note that many relieving officers would themselves have been employers of labour.



Brixworth Union.<sup>53</sup> Cecil Chapman, going beyond the instructions he was given, included a section in his reports under the heading 'Character of Labourers', and this moral analysis was based largely on the words of clerical informants (as well as farmers).<sup>54</sup> At Wigton in Cumberland, Arthur Wilson Fox examined four informants on the subject of the labourer's 'standard of morality': Mr. Moore and Mr. Beeton, relieving officers, Mr. Holliday, a farmer, and the Board of Guardians collectively.<sup>55</sup> At Woburn in Bedfordshire and Thakeham in Sussex, William Bear asked clergymen and similar authorities about the 'moral condition of the people'.<sup>56</sup> Thus even where the investigation was not carried out through an examination of farmers, it was operational on the labourers in that the moral and political agenda of the inquiry was set by the settled rural hierarchy.

This point can be extended further. Even where labourers were consulted directly, as at public meetings, they were being asked to comment on their own condition, but to an agenda shaped by the inquiry that was being carried out. The labouring class was, explicitly, the subject of inquiry: although the remit of the Commission as a whole was to investigate the labour question in all its aspects, in the countryside the reports were on 'the agricultural labourer'. This point is illustrated very clearly by Roger Richards's investigation of Nantwich in Cheshire, the procedure of which, drawn up by Richards in consultation with the Mayor of Crewe and the clerk to the local Board of Guardians, was put to a public meeting of farmers for approval before inquiries began.<sup>57</sup> It is not surprising, given the spirit in which the commissioners operated, that a residual mistrust of labourers' evidence is to be discerned. At Woburn, William Bear was told by a group of labourers that the land was 'labour-starved', but he could find no other evidence of this;<sup>58</sup> the labourers at a public meeting in Nantwich, who challenged the evidence of a farmers' meeting which suggested that labour was more inefficient than in former times, were found on further questioning to be incapable of performing certain old agricultural tasks (such as hedging and roofing);<sup>59</sup> and Aubrey

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<sup>53</sup> *Assistant Commissioners' Reports*, IV, pp. 20, 37.

<sup>54</sup> *ibid.*, II, pp. 126, 150-1.

<sup>55</sup> *ibid.*, III, p. 158.

<sup>56</sup> *ibid.*, I, pp. 25, 64.

<sup>57</sup> *ibid.*, IV, p. 95.

<sup>58</sup> *ibid.*, I, p. 18.

<sup>59</sup> *ibid.*, IV, 96.

Spencer remarked that, in the Pershore Union (Worcestershire) at any rate, the evidence taken at public meetings of labourers was 'of a rather one-sided nature, and not wholly reliable'.<sup>60</sup> We shall go on to examine the public meetings in more detail below. Here, however, it is sufficient to note that the labourers, as the subject of this investigation, were not in a position to dictate the terms of the inquiry, even when gathered in groups, supposedly a position of strength.

There were also practical difficulties with the taking of labourers' evidence. On the one hand, they were sometimes suspicious of the investigator's intentions.<sup>61</sup> On the other hand, they were often physically inaccessible. The assistant commissioners who were at work during the harvest period of 1892 pointed out that it was difficult to meet with labourers, who were often at work in the fields from dawn to dusk.<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, unlike farmers, labourers had few pre-existing organisations which were able to present their views collectively: hence the perceived need for public meetings. William Bear attempted to use the two working men's clubs in St. Neot's, Cambridgeshire, as a forum for the gathering of information 'from the horse's mouth', but found that very few agricultural labourers were members.<sup>63</sup> Similarly, at Basingstoke in Hampshire, he failed in his attempts to set up public meetings under the auspices of the Basing Working Men's Club, which had only one member engaged in agriculture.<sup>64</sup>

On the question of agricultural earnings in particular, the assistant commissioners were aware of the potential for conflicting information to be supplied. Like Thomas Kebbel, most despaired of obtaining an accurate assessment of a labourer's annual earnings. All were agreed, however, that piece-work and other non-basic wage income formed an important part of the labourer's earnings. They also understood the importance of perquisites in the wage structure, and this impinged on both their methodological and ideological approaches to investigating rural life. In his final report, W. C. Little pointed out that, to an extent, the variety in the payment of 'extras' across the country cancelled out the variations in cash wages. Thus in the

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<sup>60</sup> *ibid.*, V, p. 91.

<sup>61</sup> *ibid.*, II, pp. 91, 123.

<sup>62</sup> *ibid.*, I, p. 55.

<sup>63</sup> *ibid.*, I, p. 35.

<sup>64</sup> *ibid.*, I, p. 75.



highest-wage districts earnings were 11.4% in excess of wages, and in the lowest-wage Unions 33.4%; and in one Union, Pewsey in Wiltshire, they exceeded regular cash wages by 47.6%.<sup>65</sup> These excesses were made up by a variety of different payments and perquisites. Cecil Chapman, for example, found that on Mr. Bowen-Jones's farm at Ensdon in the Atcham Union of Shropshire, ordinary labourers received four different 'allowances' in addition to their wages: straw, haulage of coal and wood, free milk once or twice a week, and a 'Christmas gift'. Waggoners on this farm received seven different kinds of 'extras', and horsemen and shepherds nine.<sup>66</sup> None of these lists included potato-ground or free beer, which were also often given. Nevertheless, the labourer also often lost earnings by not working a full week. Edward Wilkinson despaired that the amount of earnings lost through 'lost time' was 'a quantity which entirely baffles calculation, as, except in so far as it may depend on weather, and not on illness or choice, no two men will lose the same amount of time, even on the same farm'.<sup>67</sup>

The assistant commissioners penetrated this investigative minefield in a number of ways, but they were approaching the subject from an unavoidably elitist perspective. They accepted the common notion that relations between employer and employed were deteriorating, and given the ideological significance of the allowance system within the discourse of rural paternalism, their analyses often presented a partly unintentional defence of the practice of payment by perquisite. Thus Cecil Chapman, citing the case of a Crediton labourer who took home a cash wage of 12s. a week, and also received a cottage valued at 1s., 30 yards of potato-ground, three pints of cider a day, straw for a pig and haulage of fuel, remarked that perquisites like these 'bind [the labourers] more closely still to their employers', and that labourers were increasingly disaffected with the system.<sup>68</sup> Relating the question directly to depopulation, Roger Richards remarked that a possible advantage of substituting these perquisites with a cash payment was that the labourer would be less aggrieved when comparing his condition with that of his urban counterpart, who was at present on a substantially higher money wage: 'Like the rest of

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<sup>65</sup> *RCL Report*, p. 207.

<sup>66</sup> *Assistant Commissioners' Reports*, II, p. 130.

<sup>67</sup> *ibid.*, VI, p. 19.

<sup>68</sup> *ibid.*, II, p. 21.

mankind, he is most impressed by what is obvious, and the most obvious thing to his mind is the hard cash difference.’<sup>69</sup> This remark can be read as a defence of the allowance system and an optimistic assessment of the economic position of the labourer in comparison to the urban worker. Certainly other assistant commissioners believed the system should remain: Wilson Fox thought that the consequence of the substitution of cash payments for perquisites was that the labourers were worse fed than formerly;<sup>70</sup> and W. C. Little, commenting on conditions in Scotland, asserted: ‘With regard to milk, which is a very usual allowance in kind, the substitution of money for that article would probably result in depriving the labourer’s family of any opportunity of obtaining it.’<sup>71</sup> Edward Wilkinson called the free or cheap cottage, milk, beer, and so on, ‘little helps’;<sup>72</sup> these judgements reflect the conception of rural social relations advanced by Richard Jefferies and other defenders of the old paternalist order.

This lingering paternalism was the source of a continued idealisation of rural life on the part even of these hard-headed investigators; and it is clear that their inquiries were carried on within a discourse on country life that still owed much to the literary tradition, epitomised by Miss Mitford, which also influenced Charles Booth’s ideas about rural communities. They regretted the decline of traditional economic relationships between farmer and labourer, W. C. Little pointing out that ‘[t]he bond ... has become a commercial one, or to quote an expression used by Canon Bury, “merely a cash *nexus*.”’<sup>73</sup> However, much optimism remained. In his summary report, William Bear argued that country people were better-off than townsmen, because poverty in the towns was caused largely by drink - not so in the countryside - and in villages people who were poor ‘find kind helpers among the well-to-do people who know them’.<sup>74</sup> Wilson Fox, though he admitted that the labourer had his difficulties, thought that the life ‘has some advantages over a town one, and among these may be mentioned lower rents, gardens, allotments, fresher air, purer food and the friendships that exist in a village community’.<sup>75</sup> The labourer, it was thought, did not appreciate the advantages

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<sup>69</sup> *ibid.*, IV, p. 50.

<sup>70</sup> *ibid.*, III, p. 16.

<sup>71</sup> *RCL Report*, pp. 229-30.

<sup>72</sup> *Assistant Commissioners’ Reports*, VI, p. 19.

<sup>73</sup> *RCL Report*, pp. 215-16; see also *Assistant Commissioners’ Reports*, IV, p. 20.

<sup>74</sup> *Assistant Commissioners’ Reports*, I, pp. 12-13.

<sup>75</sup> *ibid.*, III, p. 71.



he had: here again is an example of the Commission's inquiries acting on the labourer socially 'from above'.

There is evidence that this approach or attitude on the part of the assistant commissioners was challenged from other sectors of the investigative culture. In 1894, for example, a conference of Labourers' Union delegates protested against what they saw as the too favourable portraits of rural life drawn in the Labour Commission's reports.<sup>76</sup> A striking example of disagreement with the commissioners' findings can be found in the special reports of the English Land Restoration League, a very different group of investigators. This body, founded as the Land Reform Union in 1883, devoted to the teachings of Henry George and the single-taxers, carried out investigations each year from 1891 to 1897 in various counties. The League was a campaigning political body, so the investigations were closely linked to their land campaigns. The League sent red vans out into the countryside to hold political meetings in the interest of land reform, and to obtain information about village life. As explained in the special report for 1892, the objectives were threefold: to educate the labourers in the cause of 'Land Restoration', to promote trade unions in the countryside, and 'to collect accurate information as to the social condition of the villages'.<sup>77</sup> The League saw the red vans as links which worked in two directions: firstly, to send speakers out from London to spread the gospel of land reform, and secondly, to bring information back from the countryside for the benefit of urban readers. As it was explained in the first year of the League's operations, '[i]t was felt from the first that a large part of the usefulness of the campaign would consist in the collection of information at first hand about the social condition of the agricultural villages, and in the diffusion of the information so gained among the town workers'.<sup>78</sup> (This still gives the impression that the rural, in a sense, was viewed as a kind of foreign country, alien to both middle and working classes in the towns.) Thus a Daily Report Form was prepared each day for the gathering of information of subjects relevant to land reformers. Naturally, information about the

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<sup>76</sup> English Land Restoration League (hereinafter E. L. R. L.), *Special Report 1893*, p. 7; *Special Report 1894*, p. 18.

<sup>77</sup> E. L. R. L., *Special Report 1892*, p. 3. The Land Nationalisation Society embarked on a similar, but smaller-scale, campaign using yellow vans. There is a brief account of these campaigns in Roy Douglas, *Land, People and Politics: A History of the Land Question in the United Kingdom 1878-1952* (1976), pp. 106-8.

<sup>78</sup> E. L. R. L., *Special Report 1891*, p. 9.

labourers' access to land was high on their list of priorities. The Report Form is reprinted in Appendix II, and it will be seen that the first questions dealt with allotments, and information was also sought on the labourers' wages and rents, and on local landowning patterns. Meetings were held, where possible, on village greens. The location of these meetings contrasts with those held by the assistant commissioners, which were generally in village schoolrooms. The schoolroom was the territory of the village elite, into which the labourers were drawn in order to supply information within a structure dictated to them by an outside investigator; the green was public space, and also in a sense symbolic of the common land whose demise the land reformers regretted.

The red van meetings were themselves often a scene of conflict. The League's special reports constantly emphasised this feature of their activity. Their right to use village greens for meetings was challenged;<sup>79</sup> and at Aylesbury in May 1896 a van was physically attacked.<sup>80</sup> In 1892, Lord Bateman, as Lord-Lieutenant of Herefordshire, stopped the red vans holding a meeting on a public highway, and, as landlord at Shobdon in Herefordshire, he prevented them from using the local public house.<sup>81</sup> The regular revelations of shocking conditions in villages were reported by Frederick Verinder and others in the *Church Reformer*, a Christian Socialist journal; and these reports were used as evidence by historians of the agricultural labourer in later periods.<sup>82</sup> The investigators complained of the condition of 'slavery' in which the labourers lived;<sup>83</sup> and blamed depopulation - which was their complaint no less than the assistant commissioners' - on the 'Survival of Serfdom'.<sup>84</sup> The tyranny of the closed village was criticised, although the *Church Reformer* was happy to publish an account of a speech by Arthur Wilson Fox at a Christian Social Union meeting in March 1894, in which he asserted that the 'conditions of life' for labourers were better in the closed than in the open village.<sup>85</sup>

In terms of investigative methodology, however, the most interesting episode in

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<sup>79</sup> E. L. R. L., *Special Report 1893*, p. 10.

<sup>80</sup> E. L. R. L., *Special Report 1896*, pp. 5-6.

<sup>81</sup> *Church Reformer*, vol. XI, no. 7 (July 1892), p. 161.

<sup>82</sup> See for example F. E. Green, *A History of the English Agricultural Labourer* (1920), part V.

<sup>83</sup> *Church Reformer*, vol. XI, no. 2 (Feb. 1892), p. 41. Original emphasis.

<sup>84</sup> E. L. R. L., *Special Report 1891*, p. 13. Original emphasis.

<sup>85</sup> *Church Reformer*, vol. XIII, no. 3 (March 1894), pp. 62-3.



the history of the red van campaigns was one which occurred in 1894. In that year a red van visited Alderminster in Worcestershire, the scene of a public meeting held by assistant commissioner Roger Richards in 1892. Richards claimed that his meeting 'was entirely composed of labourers, who were invited by the schoolmaster ... [and were] evidently on excellent terms with Mr. Stokes, Mr. West's agent, who came in during the evening'.<sup>86</sup> Richards valued the agricultural labourers' weekly earnings, including 14s. cash, a cheap cottage and piece work, at 19s. 7d. When the red van visited, the lecturer explained:

At our meeting last night I read out this description to the audience, and the men, as well as the vicar, who was present, and with whom I had a long conversation afterwards, characterised the report as misleading and inaccurate. I ascertained that the meeting, which the Commissioner says was "composed entirely of labourers," consisted of about 30 working men, the schoolmaster, the landlord's agent, and the vicar. I was also informed that none of the labourers present answered any of the questions put by the Commissioner. A small employer of labour told me that he and a gardener were the only two men who answered. As for himself, the Commissioner asked him what were the average weekly wages of labourers, and he replied "from 10s. to 12s.," whereupon the agent at once interposed and said: "That is not fair; there is So-and-so receiving 14s., a week." It would appear from the Commissioner's Report that, in spite of the fact that the meeting was "composed entirely of labourers," he was much more ready to take the word of the agent than the testimony of the working man.<sup>87</sup>

The contests were identifiable even at the level of the public meeting: no two investigators would ever agree on the details of a case like this. The assistant commissioner, charged with the responsibility of making an accurate report to the government, could retort to an attack like the League's by contrasting the political campaigning role of the red van lecturer with the purely information-gathering functions of the official investigation. He would have good grounds for doing so - there can be no doubt that it suited the political interests of the English Land Restoration League and other land reformers to paint as gloomy a picture of labouring life on the land as possible - but it seems clear from this example that the official investigator like Richards was politically or socially conditioned to trust the word of a respectable man such as Mr. West's agent rather than the account of a man lower down the social scale. In this sense the tradition of the informant investigation was very hard to break down.

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<sup>86</sup> *Assistant Commissioners' Reports*, IV, p. 31; quoted in E. L. R. L., *Special Report 1894*, p. 18.

<sup>87</sup> E. L. R. L., *Special Report 1894*, p. 18.



The question remains, was this easier for the unofficial investigator? We shall now turn to the band of special correspondents who, like their predecessors in the 1870s, wandered around rural England reporting on aspects of the life they found there, providing ample evidence of the conflicting approaches to social inquiry. Like the assistant commissioners and their predecessors such as Francis Heath in the 1870s, these men were operating within a tradition of exploration, reporting on the country for the benefit of the town. They had fewer resources at their disposal than the assistant commissioners; but their inquiries exhibit many of the tensions within rural society at large and the processes of investigation in particular which also emerge from a reading of the commissioners' reports. They were more independent than Wilson Fox *et al*, in the sense of having no official duty to fulfil, but they were employed by particular organs of the press, and were naturally subject to political constraints of their own. This section will examine three special correspondents: George Millin, Arthur Cooper and Anderson Graham. None of these names is particularly well known, but their work was significant. Their output was read by a large group of people, spanning the strata of literate society, and was thus central to the shaping of urban middle-class perceptions of rural life. Its character was shaped by the questions the investigator chose to ask and by the informant structure he chose to adopt. The special correspondent was still an explorer: one who had to choose who should be his guide. This decision was becoming increasingly political.

George Francis Millin, like Archibald Forbes before him, was the special correspondent of the *Daily News*. He undertook a two-month tour of East Anglia and the Home Counties, starting in August 1891. The articles were reprinted as *Life in Our Villages*, which was dedicated to Gladstone. Millin's reports were widely circulated: the *Daily News* had a large readership, and the book went through three editions in 1891. The reports were reprinted in the Liberal press, and cited by leading Liberal politicians;<sup>88</sup> and, like Forbes's reports, attracted much correspondence to the columns of the *Daily News*.<sup>89</sup> Like Heath, Millin described the pleasant outward appearance of many cottages,

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<sup>88</sup> Cooper, *Our Villages*, p. 5.

<sup>89</sup> [G. F. Millin], *Life in Our Villages, by the Special Commissioner of the Daily News, being a Series of Letters Written to that Paper in the Autumn of 1891* (3rd. ed., 1891 [1st. ed. 1891]), pp. 113-15, 163-92;



which contrasted with their poverty-stricken interiors. Ixworth in Suffolk, for example, 'strikes the stranger as a pleasant and prosperous village...Tory guardians and Tory parsons, being of a caste altogether separate from the cottagers, would never have found out that anything was wrong in it.'<sup>90</sup> The pleasant impression given by such cottages could make one wonder why the inmates were so keen to migrate to the towns. Millin had explored London's slums,<sup>91</sup> and reinforces the point that the problems, and hence the investigation, of urban and rural life were linked in this period, overwhelmingly by the problems of rural depopulation.

Millin, like Canon Girdlestone, found that labourers gave a very different account of their wages from that given by the farmers. In an Oxfordshire village, he was inclined to take the word of labourers who said they earned 9s. per week, rather than that of the parson who thought they were getting rather more, and who rather unsympathetically suggested that if they did not like it, they could always go somewhere else.<sup>92</sup> At Stisted, near Braintree in Essex, he talked to a group of labourers in a field. These men supposedly earned 11s. per week, but they pointed out that they did not work when it was raining, and lost money accordingly. One man said he often took home only 5s. or 6s. in a week.<sup>93</sup> Millin seems to have found it quite easy to converse with such men at work, who were no doubt glad of the chance to rest on their spade-handles for a few minutes and talk to someone who actually wanted to hear their opinions. At Thurston in Suffolk a gang of men by a road 'talked quite freely to me, and several of the men very sensibly and intelligently'.<sup>94</sup> Millin suggested that the investigator should 'stroll down the village and gossip with the people ... but you can get some valuable side-lights on village life, and most of the folks have something valuable to say'.<sup>95</sup> This interaction with village 'gossip' was representative of a basic faith in the respondent method of inquiry, one which was not generally shared by, for example, the Labour Commission's investigators.

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see also Liz Bellamy & Tom Williamson (eds.), *Life in the Victorian Village: The Daily News Survey of 1891* (Firle, Sussex, forthcoming).

<sup>90</sup> Millin, *Life in Our Villages*, p. 44.

<sup>91</sup> [Millin, G. F.], *The Social Horizon* (1892), p. 46.

<sup>92</sup> Millin, *Life in Our Villages*, pp. 119-23.

<sup>93</sup> *ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>94</sup> *ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>95</sup> *ibid.*, p. 73.

Where Millin did not take his information from labourers, he often consulted the local Dissenting minister. Some correspondents of the *Daily News* were critical of this approach, but Millin explained that the Dissenters he had met tended to show more interest in and sympathy with the labouring classes than did village clergymen.<sup>96</sup> At Steventon near Didcot, he fell in with a Radical shoemaker, a Wesleyan preacher, who 'had been fighting the poor man's battle ... he thoroughly understands the people, and is in active sympathy with them, and the consequence is that they trust him and talk over their troubles with him. I found that everybody knew him, and he knew everybody, and all their circumstances.'<sup>97</sup> Rather than taking a farmer for a guide, then, Millin, where he was not travelling alone, sought out those who were likely to be sympathetic towards the labourers' grievances. He believed in the reformability of the labourers, and expressed an understanding of their failings, which he thought could be blamed on their poverty.<sup>98</sup> The investigator's role, for Millin, was to empathise with the labouring population, and to understand rather than condemn outright the immoral practices indulged in by the labourers. Millin professed to be appalled by the conditions he found in some areas of the south of England. His comments reflect Girdlestone's: 'They don't live. It was a lingering death, the people said.'<sup>99</sup>

This view of rural England was challenged by Arthur Cooper, the special correspondent of the *News*, whose own tour was undertaken in direct response to Millin's. He sought to show that village life was by no means as wretched as Millin had made out; and in choosing the high-wage county of Yorkshire his scene of operations he could hardly have picked a greater contrast to Millin's hunting-ground of south-central England and East Anglia. Cooper intended to show that the squire and parson were in fact socially involved, and contributed much to the quality of the life of the labouring classes. In doing this, he naturally criticised Millin's choice of informants, and characterised him as an investigator who was not familiar with the realities of country life. Though a newspaper man himself, Cooper disapproved of the unsystematic

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<sup>96</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 116-24.

<sup>97</sup> *ibid.*, p. 118.

<sup>98</sup> *ibid.*, p. 161.

<sup>99</sup> *ibid.*, p. 119.



approach of the special correspondent:

The *Daily News* Commissioner does not pretend to be deep in his subject. He is the rough-and-ready writer, journeying from village to village, using his eyes, looking into accounts, picking up gossip from farmers, labourers, and old women, all of which he duly chronicles in a pleasant, chatty style. When Arthur Young wrote his famous travels, he was a farmer and employer of labour, looking with an experienced eye on other farmers and their labourers. The *Daily News* writer never pretended to be anything but the Londoner on the jaunt. This may go far to account for the false impression the commissioner has received. We do not set ourselves to prove that parson or squire are more than men; we only differ from the assertion that the labourers are always in the right and the gentry always in the wrong.<sup>100</sup>

Cooper advanced a strong defence of the role of the parson, arguing that, though the dullness of village life was undeniable, almost all relief of the monotony came through his efforts.<sup>101</sup> While Millin had castigated the demoralising effects of the 'model' village, which destroyed the independence of the labourer and subjected him to the tyranny of parson and squire,<sup>102</sup> Cooper looked to the 'awakened responsibility' of village elites as a means of solving the admitted problems of village life.<sup>103</sup> While Millin had dedicated his book to Gladstone, Cooper dedicated the reprint of his articles to Lady Legard of Ganton in Yorkshire, 'the model lady of a model village'. Cooper's awareness of the history of rural exploration going back at least to Arthur Young is evidence of a consciousness among special correspondents of their investigative role and their place in the inheritance of an investigative tradition. The most trustworthy authorities on rural life were men like Young or James Caird, who had a wealth of experience in positions of responsibility.

This view, however, was not shared by everyone; and a good example of a special correspondent whose approach lay somewhere between the two paradigms was Peter Anderson Graham, a Northumbrian journalist who later edited *Country Life*. Graham was a special correspondent for a number of newspapers. The *Spectator* called him '[a] most unusually able and temperate contributor,'<sup>104</sup> and he was thought able and

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<sup>100</sup> Cooper, *Our Villages*, pp. 5-6.

<sup>101</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 11-15.

<sup>102</sup> Millin, *Life in Our Villages*, pp. 106-13.

<sup>103</sup> Cooper, *Our Villages*, p. 21.

<sup>104</sup> Quoted in *St. James's Gazette*, 5/12/1891, p. 12.

temperate enough to be cited in J. A. Spender's book on old-age pensions.<sup>105</sup> Graham undertook an extensive investigation of the problem of depopulation in 1891-2, which resulted in a series of articles in the *St. James's Gazette* and Edinburgh's *National Observer*, and a book, *The Rural Exodus*. In 1899, he explored agricultural cooperation for the *Morning Post*, at the same time complaining that the 'rural exodus' had accelerated since his last inquiry.<sup>106</sup>

Graham realised that a great deal of misinformation about agricultural conditions was in circulation, and thus thought first-hand information necessary if the truth about labourers' wages was to be discovered. In January 1892 he pointed to the spread of a very sad story in the Radical press, in which it was claimed that certain labourers in the Midlands were earning 12s. per week. This story was sent to an M.P., who in turn sent it to the Royal Commission on Labour. The story, however, was clearly written on hearsay, as when the local landowner sent his agents to check the figures with his tenants, it was found that the man earned 16-21s. per week. Thus Graham concluded that reliable sources of information were essential if 'heart-rending but utterly unfounded descriptions of rural wretchedness' were to be avoided: 'the only reliable authorities in regard to rent or wages are those who pay and those who receive them'.<sup>107</sup> There were, however, other sources of information available in village communities, and Graham recognised that different kinds of investigator would be attracted to different informants. He contrasted the activities of the Radical and the Tory. George Millin was a typical Radical, who would tend to ask the labourers what their income was, and may check with the Dissenting minister.<sup>108</sup> The Tory, on the other hand, would consider the squires, farmers and parsons the most reliable sources of information, and as Graham put it 'all three of them are inclined to take an exaggerated view of Hodge's income' by ascribing too high a value to payments in kind and perquisites. The labourer, on the other hand, 'exaggerates his toil, and minimises the reward of it'.<sup>109</sup> The impartial investigator had to see through the misinformation, and extract that which was true.

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<sup>105</sup> Spender, *State and Pensions*, p. 21.

<sup>106</sup> P. Anderson Graham, *The Revival of English Agriculture* (1899), pp. 14-15.

<sup>107</sup> *St. James's Gazette*, 5/1/1892, p. 5.

<sup>108</sup> P. Anderson Graham, *The Rural Exodus: The Problem of the Village and the Town* (1892), pp. 41-2, 106-8.

<sup>109</sup> *ibid.*, p. 108.



Graham, however, believed that some sources were more reliable than others; and like Millin he was attracted to Nonconformist opinion. The clergyman and the minister, he thought, lived in different spheres: the clergyman was probably a product of Oxbridge, and his friends were more likely to be found among the gentry than among the labouring population. By contrast, cottagers felt that the minister was 'just like one of ourselves'.<sup>110</sup> As a source for the outlook of the labourers, then, the minister might well be more reliable than a socially aloof parson or another member of the village elite who was not really in sympathy with them. This attitude represented something of a democratisation of the informant method of inquiry; and Graham allied this with an enthusiastic adoption of the respondent approach, in the tradition of the Radical correspondent.

This was important for Graham because one of the most important features of his work was his attempt to empathise with the agricultural labourer; and in this sense at least cultural understanding was one of his preoccupations. In investigating depopulation, it was crucial to understand why the labourers wanted to leave the land, especially in areas such as Graham's native Northumberland, where higher wages provided a financial incentive to remain. Thus in 1899 he made it clear that the subject of the rural exodus was one on which it was essential to consult the labourers themselves.<sup>111</sup> This was not all, however. Graham went on to claim that an outsider was more likely to be able to empathise with the labouring classes - not perfectly, perhaps, but better than the local notables: 'Let a great landlord, a squire, or a parson, be ever so sympathetic, he is one in a million if he can really enter into the mind and look through the eyes of his labouring neighbours. I mean to cast no slight on them by saying this; he is an exceptional man of any class who can see from the point of view of another.'<sup>112</sup> Graham realised that it was not sufficient simply to discover and assess the material condition of the labourer, although he certainly had his opinion on how best to do this. The problem of depopulation was too complex for such explanations, and while statistics may have been interesting and valuable, they were not enough to explain the problem:

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<sup>110</sup> *ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>111</sup> *ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>112</sup> *ibid.*, p. 15.

‘Many influences are at work that cannot be expressed in figures, and that is why I have devoted so much space to an attempt to realise the atmosphere in which the peasant lives. The talk he hears at the public house is, in determining his conduct, as important a factor as the condition of his cottage or the rent of his allotment.’<sup>113</sup> Thus Graham paid particular attention to the class-resentment engendered by education and the spread of democracy to the villages, and to the social attractions of town life.<sup>114</sup>

These considerations also led him to adopt a more intensive approach in certain areas. Regarding his *Morning Post* commission on cooperative agriculture, he noted: ‘It would have been a gigantic task for one man to go over all England, and describe every farm where these principles were being successfully applied; but we thought it would be of interest to take a few here and there.’<sup>115</sup> In 1891-2, similarly, Graham took an intensive approach to the inquiry, looking at individual villages and farms in various counties: an approach similar to that of the Labour Commission, albeit on a more modest scale. He looked at Cheshire,<sup>116</sup> Anglesey, a district with which he claimed some familiarity,<sup>117</sup> and Lincolnshire.<sup>118</sup> More importantly, however, he conducted an intensive study of a semi-depopulated Northumberland village, going through it cottage by cottage. He admitted that this task would have been impossible ‘had I not possessed, firstly, a tolerably full and accurate idea of the older state of things, and, secondly and crucially, a personal acquaintance with the most reliable veterans’.<sup>119</sup> This may have been the same village used as a case study in *The Rural Exodus*, a village ‘I have visited annually for many years past, and in which there is not an inhabitant with whom I am not on familiar speaking terms’.<sup>120</sup>

For all Graham’s self-proclaimed intimacy with the agricultural labourer, however, the special correspondent’s evidence can be challenged. Like the reporters of the 1870s, these men could find themselves in an awkward position *vis-à-vis* the

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<sup>113</sup> *ibid.*, p. vi.

<sup>114</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 50, 60-80, etc.

<sup>115</sup> Graham, *Revival*, pp. 12-13.

<sup>116</sup> *St. James’s Gazette*, 14/12/1891, pp. 4-5.

<sup>117</sup> *St. James’s Gazette*, 6/2/1892, pp. 5-6; Graham, *Exodus*, part II, ch. 2.

<sup>118</sup> Graham, *Exodus*, pp. 137ff.

<sup>119</sup> *St. James’s Gazette*, 11/11/1891, p. 4.

<sup>120</sup> Graham, *Exodus*, pp. 190-1.



population they were investigating. There are some sobering examples of reactions to the investigating passion of the 1890s. Denham Jordan, a nature-writer and story-teller who published under the *nom-de-plume* of 'A Son of the Marshes', provides some. Jordan was born into a Kentish marshland family, the son of a skilled worker (the parallels with *Great Expectations* are striking), and grew up in close communion with the fishermen of the marshes.<sup>121</sup> He remarked that, in roadside inns where he was staying on his considerable travels through the south-east of England, he had overheard conversations among the natives, who referred to him as the 'furrin feller' and reassured each other that he was not there 'tu mek inquiries'.<sup>122</sup> The 'peculiarities and strong prejudices' of the isolated country-dwellers made effective inquiry difficult.<sup>123</sup> Jordan furnished one particular example of this himself. As a skilled worker, living by this time in the woodlands of Surrey (one of the more easily accessible counties for the London-based investigator), Jordan was friendly with the woodmen, a friendship which took a long time to develop.<sup>124</sup> He had little sympathy for the fleeting investigator:

Those who come into the country for a few weeks or months, as the case may be, to write on rural matters, go away little wiser than they came. If there is one thing these people dislike more than another, it is being questioned; and if the course is persisted in, strangers get told a good deal, but little that is useful. To one rash individual who tried to interview me I gave valuable information, which if published would outdo Baron Munchausen. Brain-suckers are out in force just now, and our villages and rural population get too much written about.<sup>125</sup>

These lines express the 'passion for inquiry' from the other side of the equation: from the point of view of the subjects of inquiry. They cast doubt on the evidence even of men like Anderson Graham who appear to have penetrated the world of the labourers more effectively than most; and supported the insistence of those like Thomas Hardy that a more intensive knowledge of rural working-class life was necessary before accurate judgements could be passed on it.

The conventional preoccupations of the investigator of working-class life were

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<sup>121</sup> [Denham Jordan], *Annals of a Fishing Village, Drawn from the Notes of 'A Son of the Marshes'* (ed. by J. A. Owen, 1892 [1st. ed. 1891]), pp. 18-33, 78.

<sup>122</sup> [Denham Jordan], *Drift from Longshore* (ed. by J. A. Owen, 1898), p. 183.

<sup>123</sup> *ibid.*, p. 184.

<sup>124</sup> [Denham Jordan], *With the Woodlanders and By the Tide* (ed. by J. A. Owen, 1893), pp. 4-7.

<sup>125</sup> *ibid.*, p. 30.

beginning to be challenged, especially in light of the work of Richard Jefferies, Augustus Jessopp and Thomas Hardy among others. Thomas Kebbel, for example, who published an updated edition of *The Agricultural Labourer* in 1887, heavily reliant on the evidence of farmers, found himself criticised in the *Spectator* for a failure to empathise with the labouring population. Thus, for example, on the question of education, he seemed unaware of the labourers' bitter hatred of the compulsory school fee.<sup>126</sup> Kebbel's concentration on the morally injurious or beneficial influences on the labourers' lives was all very well, but missed the point: '[h]e deals with the statute-fair, the public-house, the poacher; with benefit societies, co-operative farms and stores. All these are variously important as incidental to the labourer's well-being; they are not of the essence of his daily life.'<sup>127</sup> Kebbel was acting in the 'survey' tradition. Four years later, in 1891, he attempted to answer these criticisms. Acknowledging the reviewer's comments,<sup>128</sup> he turned his attention to the problem of rural depopulation, 'striving to get behind mere appearances, and to penetrate to their inner motives'.<sup>129</sup> Having argued that the material position of the labourers had improved, he still had to answer the pressing question of why they were deserting the land. To understand this, Kebbel recognised, it was necessary 'to know what is passing in the minds of ... the peasantry ... what would keep the better ones at home, or stimulate the worse to greater exertions and to a more lively interest in the work they are called upon to perform, are questions not so easily answered'.<sup>130</sup> Kebbel thought the broadening horizons of the labourer, the increasing dullness of village life (particularly the death of the old festivals) and the opportunities of bettering oneself in the towns all played a part in the exodus.<sup>131</sup> But he had to admit that '[i]t is difficult to say exactly what thoughts are passing through their brains at this moment.'<sup>132</sup> This was an increasingly important aspect of the investigative project as it developed in the next twenty years.

An example of how the rigorous investigation required by the prevailing ethos of fact-gathering could be complemented by a more cultural approach is provided by the

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<sup>126</sup> *Spectator*, no. 3094 (15/10/1887), p. 1393.

<sup>127</sup> *ibid.*, p. 1394.

<sup>128</sup> T. E. Kebbel, *The Old and the New English Country Life* (1891), p. 165n1.

<sup>129</sup> *ibid.*, p. 165.

<sup>130</sup> *ibid.*, p. 176.

<sup>131</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 180-93.

<sup>132</sup> *ibid.*, p. 196.



study of 69 South Warwickshire parishes by Bolton King and Joseph Ashby. The inquiry is also interesting as an example of a partial reconciliation of the informant and respondent methods. The two articles resulting from this inquiry, which appeared in the *Economic Journal* in 1893,<sup>133</sup> were praised by Wilhelm Hasbach, the German historian, who thought that they '[were] more trustworthy as regards their facts and [went] deeper as regards their science than the majority of contemporary publications on the agricultural labour problem'.<sup>134</sup> (Hasbach based his account of the labourer in the early 1890s largely on these articles and the reports of the Labour Commission and the 1891 census.) Ashby and King's inquiry was prompted by rural depopulation, and dealt in detail with the statistics of population and other factors which were thought to be pertinent to the exodus. The central issue was that of allotments, reflecting their prominence in the rural politics of the 1880s and early 1890s, and the authors attempted to relate the allotment question to the depopulation problem, finding that allotments acted as a check on migration.<sup>135</sup>

Bolton King is an interesting figure, whose career spanned social investigation in both town and country. Another product of Balliol College and Toynbee Hall, King was Secretary of the Mansion House Committee on the Unemployed as well as a member of the committee of the Agricultural Banks Association (founded in 1893); and he conducted experiments in cooperative farming in the Midlands, which was where he met Ashby. He was one of the group of Oxford men who had fallen under the influence of Booth and Toynbee, and as a result became a member of the developing community of social investigators who did much to shape the way in which social problems were perceived in this period.<sup>136</sup> Ashby, by contrast, was brought up in a labouring family,

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<sup>133</sup> Joseph Ashby & Bolton King, 'Statistics of Some Midland Villages: I', *Economic Journal*, vol. III (1893), pp. 1-22; 'Statistics of Some Midland Villages: II', *Economic Journal*, vol. III (1893), pp. 193-204.

<sup>134</sup> Wilhelm Hasbach, *A History of the English Agricultural Labourer* (1908 [1st. German ed. 1894]), p. 322.

<sup>135</sup> Ashby & King, 'Statistics: II', pp. 198-9.

<sup>136</sup> King's links with Toynbee Hall and the Mansion House Committee illustrate the perceived links between the problems of urban and rural life. Like Booth, King believed that urban problems could have rural solutions, and he was particularly attracted by the idea of the labour colony. Under his secretaryship, the Mansion House Committee carried out an experiment in 1893 and 1894 in which large groups of unemployed men from Tower Hamlets were removed to a rural colony, put to work, and 'quietly and intelligently observed' by the Committee. (J. A. Hobson (ed.), *Co-operative Labour upon the Land (and Other Papers): The Report of a Conference upon 'Land Co-operation and the Unemployed' Held at Holborn Town Hall in October 1894* (1895), p. 71.)



and had begun his working days 'as a crow-scarer'.<sup>137</sup> He became a surveyor and a freelance journalist, working for local newspapers such as the *Leamington Gazette* and *Warwick Advertiser*. Growing up in the heartland of the National Agricultural Labourers' Union, Ashby was politicised in his youth by attending strikers' meetings and reading books such as Henry George's *Progress and Poverty*. The two men were acutely conscious of a need for impartial investigation of social conditions and the procurement of facts, to 'make ill-informed talk an anachronism'.<sup>138</sup> Their belief in the importance of social inclusiveness within the village community was, however, as important in making them true products of their age; and, like Augustus Jessopp and Charles Stubbs, they advocated the practical social involvement of village elites.<sup>139</sup> As such they were a part of the trend towards a twin philosophy of social knowledge and cultural understanding which was fostered by Toynbee Hall and Charles Booth.

The different worlds in which the two men moved gave them access to a greater variety of information than either could hope to have on his own. As Ashby's daughter remembered years later, from her father's reminiscences, Ashby did the village visiting while King used his network of contacts to good effect:

There were some formal, easily tapped sources of information - registrars, secretaries of Friendly Societies and other associations, the County Constabulary, agents of Assurance Companies. Mr. King paved the way for him to useful clergymen and magistrates; he had his own access to Methodists, and branches of the Union. But some of the facts must be drawn from minds in which they had never been formulated. To go always among fluent folk would be to miss much ... over tea with slices of bread and home-made lard and black pepper a woman who had never made a note of what she spent would tell [Ashby] precisely what had become of her weekly ten shillings for several weeks back ... he knew how to find the gathering places of the talkers - not always the public-house - where he would be provided with sound and full information, delivered by some, corroborated and modified by others.<sup>140</sup>

Ashby's links with the local community and his relatively humble social origins helped him to gain access to reserves of information which King alone may not have reached.

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<sup>137</sup> M. K. Ashby, *Joseph Ashby of Tysoe 1859-1919: A Study of English Village Life* (Cambridge, 1961), p. 24.

<sup>138</sup> *ibid.*, p. 145.

<sup>139</sup> *ibid.*, p. 165, in which Ashby's daughter argues that 'class, of all a man's relationships, was for them the most superficial ... their work was an appeal to humanity, not ammunition for a fight.'

<sup>140</sup> Ashby, *Joseph Ashby*, pp. 148-9.



Socially King came from a world far removed from that of the village. Ashby's Methodist connections were particularly important: the combination of Church and Dissenting informants gave the investigation a more balanced make-up than Booth's. In one respect at least, Ashby was in a position perhaps unique among social investigators: he had his own allotment, the balance sheets of which were used in the investigation.<sup>141</sup>

The reports of this investigation are a valuable example of three things: the preoccupations among investigators of rural life at this period; the informant structure of an investigation in the early 1890s at a time in which the sources of social knowledge were being hotly contested; and the developing consciousness of the need to root social diagnosis in objective and unbiased facts. As published in the *Economic Journal*, the investigation is a good example of the dispassionate transmission of economic and statistical information. As far as cultural understanding was concerned, the reports convey little. This was a deliberate strategy. There are not even any anecdotes to enliven the otherwise dull statistical abstractions. Ashby and King presented what they twice called 'careful inquiries',<sup>142</sup> and Ashby's more impressionistic gatherings from the work were relegated to articles in the local Warwickshire press.<sup>143</sup> The inquiries were informed by a deep understanding of labouring life, but Ashby and King employed a functional separation between knowledge and understanding, or between facts and impressions, in the presentation of their findings.

The links of both Charles Booth and Bolton King with Toynbee Hall, however, emphasise the point that the quests for social knowledge and cultural understanding were inextricably linked. The purpose behind Booth's gathering of facts was to provide a basis for the solution of particular social problems. The investigative ethos of Toynbee Hall and the other university settlements was somewhat different: their purpose was to promote a mutual understanding between their residents and the local communities they served. They were designed as aspects of social reform in themselves, but also as a means of learning about the working-class population. The settlement ideal also had its rural element. At a conference on 'Land, Cooperation and

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<sup>141</sup> Ashby & King, 'Statistics: I', p. 14.

<sup>142</sup> *ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>143</sup> Ashby, *Joseph Ashby*, pp. 149-51.

the Unemployed' at Holborn Town Hall in October 1894, to which Bolton King also contributed, T. Locke Worthington, praising the university settlements in London, suggested that similar ventures be undertaken in rural areas.<sup>144</sup> As well as making rural life more interesting for working-class people and thus helping to prevent the exodus of the most intelligent labourers to the towns - Worthington particularly wanted these settlements to 'organise and improve the educational advantages of the town in the country districts, not forgetting, above all things, the recreative needs'<sup>145</sup> - such efforts would bring middle and working classes and country and town together, and advance the cause of cultural understanding.

Depopulation and the land question, then, prompted a remarkable diversity of investigations of rural labouring life: official and unofficial, economic and cultural, widespread and intensive, and 'scientific' and impressionistic. The remainder of this chapter will draw the various threads together and arrive at an assessment of where social investigation in the countryside stood at the close of the nineteenth century. As well as forming a conclusion to the present chapter, this will serve as a prologue to the following chapters, which are all concerned with the period after 1900. It is difficult to identify any general trends from such a variety of source material. However, certain themes emerge; and illustrate trends among investigators which were given more voice in the Edwardian years.

Through the involvement of Charles Booth and other leading triggers of the 'passion for inquiry', rural social investigators often found themselves, in the 1890s, positioned within a new social-scientific framework. Although the pensions inquiry broke less new ground as an investigation than did *Life and Labour*, it involved important members of the new generation of progressive Liberals such as Acland and Spender. An investigative community was forming, and rural England had its part to play in the story. The work of many commentators on rural life, including Spender but also other, less identifiably 'social-scientific', investigators such as Anderson Graham, was published in series such as Methuen's 'Social Questions of Today' and Swan

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<sup>144</sup> T. Locke Worthington, 'Proposal for Rural University Settlements' in Hobson, *Cooperative Labour*, pp. 111-16.

<sup>145</sup> *ibid.*, p. 115.



Sonnenschein's 'Social Science'. The work of King and Ashby, published in the new organ, the *Economic Journal* (established in 1891), represented something of a scientisation of the problems of rural life. The generation respected unbiased and accurate knowledge. In a retrospective essay written in the 1930s J. A. Spender remembered that 'we grovelled in the concrete ... wanted to know the facts';<sup>146</sup> and this was no less true in rural theatres of investigation than in the towns. Thus all the investigators considered in this chapter had their place in the substantial project of obtaining and transmitting information about rural labouring life to an urban population.

One of the noteworthy features of the group of investigators treated in this chapter was their awareness of their inheritance of a long-standing tradition. Investigators frequently harked back to Arthur Young and James Caird: Arthur Cooper, for example, cited Young as a worthy model for the agricultural investigator.<sup>147</sup> Booth himself was aware of Frederic Eden's *State of the Poor*.<sup>148</sup> The historical approach was usually especially important to investigators of rural life, and the Booth-Spender investigation was complemented by historical research by Gilbert Slater on the enclosure movement.<sup>149</sup> An interesting example of an investigator of the period positioning of himself within the tradition is supplied by Spender's letter to Booth which is reprinted in full as Appendix III. Spender traced the outline of a proposed book on the rural poor, which he intended to begin with four chapters containing a 'concise ... history of the English Village & the various enquiries bearing upon it, drawn chiefly from Arthur Young, Eden, Cobbett, the Poor Law Commission, the Women & Children Enquiry, the Richmond Commission, with something about the census returns & the rural exodus question'.<sup>150</sup> Spender told Booth that he was 'particularly impressed with the importance of the last thirty years of the last century if one wishes to understand certain aspects of village life as it is now, & the causes which have led to the so-called rural exodus'.<sup>151</sup> The 1890s, then, was a period in which traditional approaches to the investigation of rural life mingled with new concerns.

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<sup>146</sup> Spender, *Men and Things*, p. 61.

<sup>147</sup> See above, p. 133.

<sup>148</sup> Booth, *Aged Poor*, p. 328n.

<sup>149</sup> Gilbert Slater, *The English Peasantry and the Enclosure of the Common Fields* (1907).

<sup>150</sup> Spender to Booth, 16/9/1894, in ULL MS797 I/6045.

<sup>151</sup> *ibid.*

The third feature to emerge is that the village seemed an appropriate theatre for intensive investigation. The impracticality of the widespread investigation was recognised by the assistant commissioners of the Royal Commission on Labour, who concentrated on particular selected Poor Law Unions. There was also a positive advantage to intensive inquiry. The argument, put forward by Booth, that the small scale of rural communities made possible the detailed knowledge of entire village populations by members of local elites, especially parsons, was persuasive. For Booth, this made possible an informant-based investigation of the personal circumstances of the aged poor in the villages. The evidence of the clerical informants might be challenged on class grounds - the Radical or Socialist would point to the clergyman's intimate links with the landowning classes and his collusion in the 'tyranny' of village life<sup>152</sup> - but the fact remained that the rural population presented a face very different from that of its urban counterpart, and that it had to be accessed in a different way. The city was the home of the crowd; in the countryside the individual was not swamped by the mass. The individual could become lost in statistical aggregations; and a deeper, more intensive contact between investigator and investigated could reveal aspects of the labourer's lived experience that were not reducible to generalisations.

More generally, the period saw a developing interest in the intimate investigation of the poor, illustrated by the activities of many special correspondents who, influenced by developments in the preceding decade, took a more cultural approach to social inquiry. This interest in working-class opinion even spread to hard-headed traditionalists such as Thomas Keibel. Although this was a period in which rigour of method, as reflected in Booth's work, was a respected feature of many social investigations, including Ashby and King's, there was a parallel trend towards a more impressionistic and cultural method, within which the goal was to achieve an understanding of the outlook and disposition of the poor. For J. A. Spender, bridging the social gap was an important counterpart to 'grovelling in the concrete': thus, remembering his settlement work, he remarked that 'we did make a great many friends among working-people, and they on their side taught us a good many things which it

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<sup>152</sup> See for example Millin, *Life in Our Villages*, pp. 122-3.



was useful to know'.<sup>153</sup> The achievement of friendship with the poor was a developing theme of the period. The main theme, however, was still the continuing contestability of social knowledge, which was given a new political dimension in the 1890s, as the problem of depopulation came to dominate debates on rural society. The passions aroused by the politics of the land, of central importance to the concerns about depopulation, intensified the political aspects of special-correspondent journalism, and rebounded on other investigations. The activities of the Royal Commission on Labour gave a focus to debates on investigative methodology, and represented the biggest and most impressive example of the 'passion for inquiry' generated by the economic and social problems of the countryside. As subsequent chapters will show, the investigating passion became even more extravagant in the years that followed.

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<sup>153</sup> Spender, *Men and Things*, p. 62.

## **Chapter 6: 'Of Supreme Importance to all Interested in Agriculture': Rider Haggard's survey of rural England, 1901-2**

It can be argued that the developing 'passion for inquiry' in the 1890s led to the creation of a broadly-based group of social investigators. Alternatively, by emphasising the continuing conflicts that shaped the investigative process, it can be argued that several competing schools of rural investigation were coalescing in mutual opposition. Whichever approach is adopted, however, neither really holds a place for Rider Haggard. This chapter focuses on Haggard's agricultural tour of 1901-2, perhaps the most impressive unofficial investigation of rural life - in terms of scale and scope, at least - of the entire period. Not since James Caird had such an independent investigator carried out such an inquiry. The very size of Haggard's venture, however, allied to questions of methodology and approach which this chapter will examine, means that it is difficult to place it in any of the traditions of investigation that this thesis has identified. This chapter will explore the preoccupations behind Haggard's inquiry, the methods adopted, and particularly Haggard's approach to investigating the labouring classes of the countryside. It will be seen that Haggard was not greatly influenced by the growing tendency in the 1890s to consult the labourers at first hand in his investigations, and that, while taking account of certain developing sociological techniques, his endeavour had more in common with his late-eighteenth-century and mid-Victorian predecessors as agricultural tourists - Arthur Young, Frederic Eden, William Marshall, William Cobbett and James Caird - than with any of his contemporaries. That this approach was by the turn of the century seen by many as old-fashioned and sociologically unsound will be illustrated by some of the responses to Haggard's inquiry, from other social investigators and the investigated population itself.

Haggard is best known for his African romances - *King Solomon's Mines*, *Allan Quatermain*, *She* and many others - but in the 1890s he took up the cause dearest to his heart, the state of English agriculture, and particularly the problem of rural depopulation, which, as has been shown in chapter 5, was the subject of a number of journalistic tours of inquiry in the 1890s. As Haggard explained in his autobiography, having gained a measure of success in one field, '[t]he desire haunted me to do something in my day



more practical than the mere writing of romance after romance'.<sup>1</sup> This interest culminated in his massive two-volume work *Rural England* (1902),<sup>2</sup> a record of journeys through the country in 1901 with a friend from his African days, Arthur Cochrane. The importance of the agricultural question - and particularly rural depopulation - to Haggard can scarcely be underestimated. Wendy Katz has gone so far as to suggest that Haggard's novels were written 'to support his other interests' - farming, gardening and agricultural research.<sup>3</sup> The Haggard family had abandoned trade for a Norfolk country seat at Bradenham Hall in the early nineteenth century, and Haggard's father spent most of his life acting out the role of a country squire.<sup>4</sup> Rider Haggard's approach to agriculture must be seen within the context of such an upbringing. Victoria Manthorpe, the historian of the family, has suggested that the possession of Bradenham Hall gave the Haggards a 'landscape of stability and self-definition';<sup>5</sup> and it was from this perspective that Haggard viewed the world. His ideas, as Alun Howkins has explained, were rural and 'anti-commercial'.<sup>6</sup> His father lost heavily on his land investments in the depression of the 1870s,<sup>7</sup> and the depopulation of the rural districts which followed in the 1890s appeared to threaten the stability of the paternal social order in the countryside. As Wendy Katz explains, '[i]n spite of the great agrarian upheaval, Haggard's love of the land remained with him throughout his life, for he saw the land as a source of strength and stability, and in this he was ... an apologist for a dying landowning class.'<sup>8</sup> This background coloured his approach to his agricultural researches. As this chapter will show, Haggard investigated rural life through the eyes of farmers and landowners, an approach which attracted some complaints from his correspondents.

This is not to say that he did not sympathise with the labouring classes of the countryside. In his autobiography he declared that while an imperialist and a Unionist,

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<sup>1</sup> H. Rider Haggard, *The Days of My Life: An Autobiography* (2 vols., 1926), vol. II, p. 131.

<sup>2</sup> H. Rider Haggard, *Rural England, Being an Account of Agricultural and Social Researches Carried Out in 1901 and 1902* (2 vols., 1902).

<sup>3</sup> Wendy R. Katz, *Rider Haggard and the Fiction of Empire: A Critical Study of British Imperial Fiction* (Cambridge, 1987), p. 14.

<sup>4</sup> Victoria Manthorpe, *Children of the Empire: The Victorian Haggards* (1996), pp. 27-8 and *passim*.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, p. 225.

<sup>6</sup> Alun Howkins, 'Rider Haggard and Rural England: An Essay in Literature and History', in Christopher Shaw & Malcolm Chase (eds.), *The Imagined Past: History and Nostalgia* (Manchester, 1989), p. 89.

<sup>7</sup> Manthorpe, *Children of the Empire*, p. 37.

<sup>8</sup> Katz, *Rider Haggard*, p. 7.



he was concerned about the conditions in which rural labourers lived.<sup>9</sup> As Katz puts it, '[h]e had strong feelings for the labouring poor, but he detested Radicalism.'<sup>10</sup> Manthorpe explains that Haggard 'managed to combine an agricultural socialism with an Imperialist conservatism, seeing always the advantage of the spread of English institutions and the potential for small-holding in the great open lands'.<sup>11</sup> This was a common preoccupation of the 'back to the land' movement, which translated this imperialist vision into a series of domestic labour colonisation and small holding schemes: the two Booths, Charles and William, both stressed the advantages of the labour colony as a solution to the problem of the urban unemployed. Haggard, investigating the other side of the same social coin, saw similar ventures as a means of keeping people on the land. He was sure that townsmen did not understand the needs of the countryside, and that the urban majority made the political system unresponsive to the needs of the rural community. He described his own candidature for parliament, as a Conservative in the general election of 1895, as having been 'in the agricultural interest'.<sup>12</sup> Haggard was also a practical farmer, running two small farms on his wife's family estate at Ditchingham in Norfolk, the story of which is told in *A Farmer's Year* (1899), which includes some of his thoughts on the crisis in agriculture.

In 1901, however, Haggard embarked on his most ambitious agricultural venture. He and Arthur Cochrane were commissioned by the *Daily Express* to investigate the condition of agriculture across England (and Scotland, though they never actually ventured that far),<sup>13</sup> particularly the problem of rural depopulation, for which reason the articles were entitled 'Back to the Land'. Haggard and Cochrane visited 24 counties and two Channel Islands, in approximately this order:<sup>14</sup> Wiltshire; Guernsey; Jersey; Sussex; Kent; Devon; Somerset; Dorset; Herefordshire; Worcestershire; Shropshire; Warwickshire; Gloucestershire; Essex; Hertfordshire; Cambridgeshire; Huntingdonshire; Oxfordshire; Northamptonshire; Lincolnshire; Leicestershire, Rutland and

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<sup>9</sup> Haggard, *Days of My Life*, vol. II, pp. 108-9.

<sup>10</sup> Katz, *Rider Haggard*, p. 14.

<sup>11</sup> Manthorpe, *Children of the Empire*, p. 195.

<sup>12</sup> H. Rider Haggard, *A Farmer's Year, Being His Commonplace Book for 1898* (1899), p. 157.

<sup>13</sup> *Daily Express*, 12/4/1901, p. 4.

<sup>14</sup> Some counties, namely Wiltshire, Herefordshire, Worcestershire, Warwickshire, Oxfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Huntingdonshire, were visited on two or more separate occasions.



Nottinghamshire;<sup>15</sup> Yorkshire; Suffolk; and finally Haggard's home county of Norfolk. Suffolk and Norfolk were not covered in the articles in the *Express*. The articles appeared, twice-weekly, between April and October 1901. In the autumn of the same year Haggard visited Hampshire, without Cochrane.<sup>16</sup> The articles also appeared in the *Yorkshire Post* under the title 'State and Outlook of the English Countryside'; in whole or in part in a number of local newspapers (the *Hereford Times*, the *Cambridge Chronicle* and the *Stamford Mercury*, for example); and, together with a great deal more material, were reprinted (with maps) as *Rural England*, in 1902. The Norfolk Record Office holds several packages of correspondence and notebooks relating to the inquiry, and much of this chapter is based on this archival material. The chapter will explore the methods Haggard used in the investigation, and some of the reactions to them; but first it is necessary to examine in more depth the problems of rural life which lay behind the inquiry, and Haggard's response to them.

Haggard was in no doubt as to the purpose and importance of the inquiry he was undertaking. From the start, rural depopulation was foremost in his mind. As he explained in the introductory letter to the *Daily Express*, he intended to stop at selected centres, and from each centre to inquire 'why each of them is prosperous or unprosperous; to describe in each the character of the country, of the farming and of the land; to ascertain, so far as I am able, the actual circumstances of the owner of the soil, the tiller of the soil, and the labourer on the soil; and the progress or otherwise of that rural depopulation which is so remarkable a feature of our time'.<sup>17</sup> By this time the Boer War had added a new urgency to the situation which had arisen in the 1880s. Reports of the widespread unfitness for military service of town-bred recruits drew attention to the savage conditions in the town, and prompted a whole series of concerns about 'national efficiency'.<sup>18</sup> The issue was seen as a potential national crisis, and Haggard viewed his task as one of national importance, whose ramifications extended beyond the confines of

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<sup>15</sup> These three counties were covered together in *Rural England*.

<sup>16</sup> Haggard's figure of 27 counties appears to include Jersey and Guernsey (Haggard, *Rural England*, vol. I, p. viii; Haggard, *Days of My Life*, vol. II, p. 142), as well as Hampshire. However, Middlesex and Bedfordshire were both visited briefly, which could bring the total up to 27 plus Jersey and Guernsey.

<sup>17</sup> *Daily Express*, 12/4/1901, p. 4.

<sup>18</sup> See for example G. R. Searle, *The Quest for National Efficiency: A Study in British Politics and Political Thought, 1899-1914* (Oxford, 1971); Bernard Semmel, *Imperialism and Social Reform: English Social-Imperial Thought 1895-1914* (1960); *Report of the Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration*, Parliamentary Papers 1904, cd. 2186.



the rural areas under investigation. The *Express* declared, at the outset of the inquiry, that Haggard was 'undertaking a task as truly patriotic as that of any soldier who goes out to fight for the flag'. and went on to announce the ultimate purpose:

We want to make the most of the generous soil of our country, to conserve the healthy breed of country lads and lasses who stimulate the flagging life of our town populations and furnish the very backbone of our colonisation. The good wishes of every patriotic Englishman must be with Mr. Rider Haggard in his attempt to tackle a great national problem, affecting not only a particular industry, but the very pith and marrow of our national existence.<sup>19</sup>

Haggard, in his own introductory article in the *Express*, lamented that '[t]he English land is being drained of its inhabitants, who, in ever-increasing numbers, flock day by day into London and the great trading cities, there, in obedience to the laws of Nature, to wither and deteriorate.'<sup>20</sup> He attributed the British military failures to 'the pitting of town-bred bodies and intelligences, both of officers and men, against country-bred bodies and intelligences'.<sup>21</sup> The imperial dimension of this problem was crucial to Haggard: he had seen imperial service in South Africa - as secretary to Sir Henry Bulwer, governor of Natal, in the 1870s - and by 1905 was strongly advocating a programme of Salvation-Army-style colonies of smallholders to populate the imperial wastelands.<sup>22</sup> There was no hope, he argued, for 'the scum and dregs of our city race', who were beyond redemption, and could be treated only with charity and the workhouse, but there may be hope for their children.<sup>23</sup> It is within this set of preoccupations that Haggard's survey must be viewed.

It is also important to understand the context of the publication of the survey. The *Daily Express* was a new newspaper, only just a year old when Haggard's articles were launched.<sup>24</sup> It was aimed at a mass market, and it must have been quite a coup to land the services of a popular novelist such as Haggard. The survey was linked closely

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<sup>19</sup> *Daily Express*, 17/4/1901, p. 4.

<sup>20</sup> *Daily Express*, 12/4/1901, p. 4.

<sup>21</sup> Haggard, *Rural England*, vol. II, p. 568.

<sup>22</sup> H. Rider Haggard, *The Poor and the Land, being a Report on the Salvation Army Colonies in the United States and at Hadleigh, England, with Scheme of National Land Settlement and an Introduction* (1905).

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*, p. xxv.

<sup>24</sup> The first issue appeared on 24/4/1900. See Stephen Koss, *The Rise and Fall of the Political Press in Britain* (2 vols., 1981), vol. II, p. 420.



to the fortunes and opinions of the newspaper. For most of their run, Haggard's articles appeared on page four, opposite the editorial matter entitled 'Matters of Moment', and were accompanied by much editorial comment. The publicity surrounding the venture appears to have attracted a number of readers to the paper: the files of correspondence at the Norfolk Record Office contain a number of letters from farmers who intended to take up a subscription to the *Express* for the duration of the series.<sup>25</sup> The importance of the survey went well beyond its involvement in the promotion of the *Express*, but this was a significant feature of it. The envelope in which the circulars advertising the tour were sent out were emblazoned with the slogan 'Of Supreme Importance to all Interested in Agriculture':<sup>26</sup> the *Express* was trying to attract a new readership among the farming class.

An understanding of the social and political context of the survey must be accompanied by an understanding of Haggard's approach to investigation itself. He was in many respects a unique figure; and therefore needs to be positioned very carefully *vis-à-vis* other social investigators, both his contemporaries and forebears. There are four particular groups to whom his relationship must be established: agricultural tourists, special correspondents, official investigators and the new sociologists such as Booth and Rowntree.

Haggard's own view of his role was as an heir of Arthur Young, to whom he most frequently referred, William Marshall, William Cobbett and James Caird. He even claimed, in his autobiography, that the idea of emulating Young had come to him, in classical fashion, in the bath.<sup>27</sup> Like these predecessors, he came from an agricultural background and toured extensively, taking a particular interest in agricultural experiments and techniques. The main difference between him and Caird was, as L. L. Price pointed out in a largely favourable review of *Rural England* in the *Economic Journal*, that he was dealing with a different problem; and that this prompted a difference in approach. Caird, touring in the middle of the nineteenth century, in the wake of the repeal of the Corn Laws, found that Free Trade was the central concern of

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<sup>25</sup> Norfolk Record Office (hereinafter NRO) MS4692/25.

<sup>26</sup> There is a surviving envelope in NRO MS4692/25 (Counties Unvisited).

<sup>27</sup> Haggard, *Days of My Life*, vol. II, pp. 134-5.

the farming community; Haggard, at the start of the twentieth, was primarily an investigator of depopulation. Price expressed the difference between the two men thus: Haggard was 'more interested in agriculturists than in agriculture', a fact which gave his work an 'attractive charm' denied to Caird.<sup>28</sup> It should be pointed out that *Rural England* was subtitled 'Agricultural and Social Researches Carried Out in the Years 1901 and 1902': the 'Agricultural', for Haggard, came before the 'Social'. However, as the tour was prompted by a social problem, it should be classified as a social investigation;<sup>29</sup> and in this respect, although working in the mould of the early-Victorian agricultural tourist, Haggard's late-Victorian concerns were reflected in the particular approach he adopted.

In a sense Young, Marshall, Cobbett<sup>30</sup> and Caird were 'special correspondents', and Haggard, writing for the *Daily Express*, could well be included in the same category. However, during the fifty years which separated the researches of Caird and Haggard, the role of the agricultural special correspondent had changed somewhat - as this thesis has shown. Haggard seems deliberately to have snubbed the inheritance of Francis Heath, Archibald Forbes, George Millin and Anderson Graham; a particularly noticeable omission given that Millin and Graham were, like him, mainly concerned with depopulation and its remedies. Haggard's political sympathies clearly played an important part in this rejection; and he preferred to use as authorities on agricultural questions men like Caird rather than 'our-own-correspondents', who engaged with unreliable village gossip rather than with the commercial facts of production.

More surprisingly, he also failed to acknowledge the Royal Commissions on Agriculture, whose able assistant-commissioners had preceded him in the assiduous investigation of agricultural matters. This omission is even more glaring if one considers that Arthur Wilson Fox, one of the most able and respected official investigators of rural matters, assisted Haggard in carrying out his inquiries. It might well be argued that

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<sup>28</sup> *Economic Journal*, vol. XIII, pp. 207-8.

<sup>29</sup> The 'industrial' features of the survey were, of course, agricultural: thus Haggard was interested in experimental farming and ventures such as the Rothamsted Experimental Station in Hertfordshire. However, these preoccupations should not be allowed to overshadow the social side of Haggard's researches.

<sup>30</sup> For a brief contrast between Haggard and Cobbett see W. J. Keith, 'The Land in Victorian Literature', in G. E. Mingay (ed.), *The Victorian Countryside* (2 vols., 1981), vol. I, p. 143.



Haggard was acting in the tradition of the official investigation: both in scale and approach, his 'Back to the Land' tour was akin to an official venture; and the *Express* praised it as 'the work of a Royal Commission undertaken by a single man'.<sup>31</sup> One point that was made, however, at the time of the survey was that it was likely to have more impact than an official inquiry, partly because of Haggard's public prominence and partly because of his authorial skills. A letter to the editors of the *Daily Express* from George Lambert, a member of the Royal Commission on Agriculture of 1897, shows what high hopes were held in some quarters for Haggard's survey:

A series of descriptions & conclusions arrived at by personal enquiry, and illuminated by Mr. Rider Haggard's graphic pen, on the agricultural conditions of our country cannot but do good. If for nothing else they will attract attention to a subject that is received with too much apathy by the country at large. The last Royal Commission on Agriculture offered many valuable suggestions, but as one of its members I am downhearted at the scant efforts made to carry them into effect.<sup>32</sup>

It was a long-standing complaint of commentators on rural life that 'blue books' made for dull reading and were unlikely to have a wide impact in their own right.<sup>33</sup> The agricultural press often carried articles which summarised the findings of official research. Haggard's own official investigation of Salvation Army colonies was published as *The Poor and the Land* in 1905: his literary skill and well-known name made a dull subject interesting.

The final investigative strand to which Haggard's researches must be related is the developing sociological tradition. Haggard's articles in the *Express* appeared in the same year as the publication of Seebohm Rowntree's first social survey of York; and he showed in *Rural England* that he was familiar with Rowntree's work, which he adduced as evidence of unenviable urban social conditions.<sup>34</sup> He did not directly refer to Charles Booth; however, it is inconceivable that he was not aware of Booth's London survey. Haggard's work was related to, while very different from, the work of these investigators. L. L. Price explained the main differences between Booth and Rowntree

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<sup>31</sup> *Daily Express*, 1/10/1901.

<sup>32</sup> Lambert to ed. of *Daily Express*, 15/4/1901, in NRO MS4692/25 (Devon).

<sup>33</sup> See for example, Herbert J. Little, 'Report on Agricultural Education', *Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society of England*, 2nd. ser., vol. XXI (1885), pp. 126-64, esp. p. 127.

<sup>34</sup> Haggard, *Rural England*, vol. II, p. 566.

on the one hand and Haggard on the other. Haggard took a less statistical approach, and therefore could not hope to achieve the mathematical exactness of Booth's and Rowntree's conclusions. Price argued, however, that

detailed exactitude is scarcely needed for Mr. Haggard's purpose. He does not, like Mr. Booth or Mr. Rowntree, aim at furnishing a precise numerical measure of the phenomena which he observes. He wishes rather to draw a picture which is broadly true; and, if it be proverbially questionable whether in the multitude of counsellors real wisdom can be found, we may at any rate allow that from a host of interviews a general notion of men's feelings can be drawn.<sup>35</sup>

The new sociological methods had an influence on the structure of Haggard's inquiry, however. In his introduction to *Rural England*, he explained the failings of earlier agricultural tourists, arguing that their different methods were all 'open to the objection that they are too liable to be coloured to the tint of the author's own mind'.<sup>36</sup> The interview method, by contrast, enabled Haggard 'to preserve, together with something of their personalities, the individual experiences of many witnesses' which may otherwise have been coloured in the presentation by opinions derived from Haggard himself.<sup>37</sup> He later claimed that his intention had been 'to arrive at the truth out of the mouths of many witnesses';<sup>38</sup> and this was not after all very different from the 'wholesale' methods adopted by Charles Booth in *Life and Labour*.

Where a potential informant could not or would not be interviewed, Haggard sent him a questionnaire, which was also sent out at the beginning of his tour to people thought likely to be able to supply information. The questionnaire had long been a tool in social research, especially the official inquiry; and it is a truism that the method can often tell us as much about those asking as those answering the questions. The simple questionnaire used in the 'Back to the Land' survey demonstrates quite clearly the importance of the depopulation question to Haggard. It is reprinted in Appendix IV (along with Arthur Cochrane's questionnaire seeking information for the maps in *Rural England*). It will be seen that questions 5, 7 and 10 were directly related to the rural exodus, and number 6 indirectly so. Questions 1, 2, 4 and 9 show that Haggard's

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<sup>35</sup> *Economic Journal*, vol. XIII (1903), pp. 206-7.

<sup>36</sup> Haggard, *Rural England*, vol. I, p. xi.

<sup>37</sup> *ibid.*, vol. I, p. xi.

<sup>38</sup> Haggard, *Days of My Life*, vol. II, p. 142.



concern was primarily with the farming interest. Question 3 is indicative of Haggard's background and his paternalistic approach to the labouring classes, and reflects the concerns expressed by many of his informants about the deterioration of relations between the agricultural classes.<sup>39</sup> Given that postal respondents were likely to come from a higher social class than most of those concerned with the land, this questionnaire illustrates Haggard's distance from the rural labouring classes: question 8 invited comments on the condition of the labourer, but few if any labourers were likely to be given the opportunity to comment on the condition of the landlord or farmer.

The interview method may at first glance seem to give the informant more leeway to introduce his own concerns into the inquiry. The method was, however, open to the objection that the interviewer may turn the conversation to his own purposes, and this was another point made by Price in his review.<sup>40</sup> Evidence of the preoccupations behind the investigation is to be found in Arthur Cochrane's notebooks, taken during Haggard's interviews. Eighteen notebooks survive in the Norfolk Record Office, reporting in as much detail as possible what each interviewee said.<sup>41</sup> Cochrane systematically indexed all the subjects treated in the 484 interviews.<sup>42</sup> Chart 1 shows the total number of allusions to the 35 topics. (See Appendix V for a list of the topics, with explanatory notes.) It clearly shows that the 'Labour/Exodus' category, with over a hundred more allusions than its nearest rival (547), was dominant in the investigation, particularly if it is added to the total for 'Remedy/Education' (131), which was directly related to the depopulation issue. Just over half way down the list come 'Wages' (198) and 'Cottages/Houses' (195), both potent issues in the context of the rural exodus. Likewise, 'Small Holdings' were mentioned 253 times, reflecting Haggard's interest in them as a potential remedy for depopulation. The prominence of 'Farms/Estate/District', 'Crops/Vegetables', 'Conditions/Views', 'Rents (farm demand)', 'Prospect/Position' and 'System' show the centrality of the farming and landowning interests to the investigation, and reflect the methods of fact-gathering and the social bias in the informant structure.

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<sup>39</sup> See for example Jones to Haggard, n.d. (entitled 'The Decline of the Agricultural Labourer'), in NRO MS4692/25 (Sussex); Haggard, *Rural England*, vol. I, pp. 124-5.

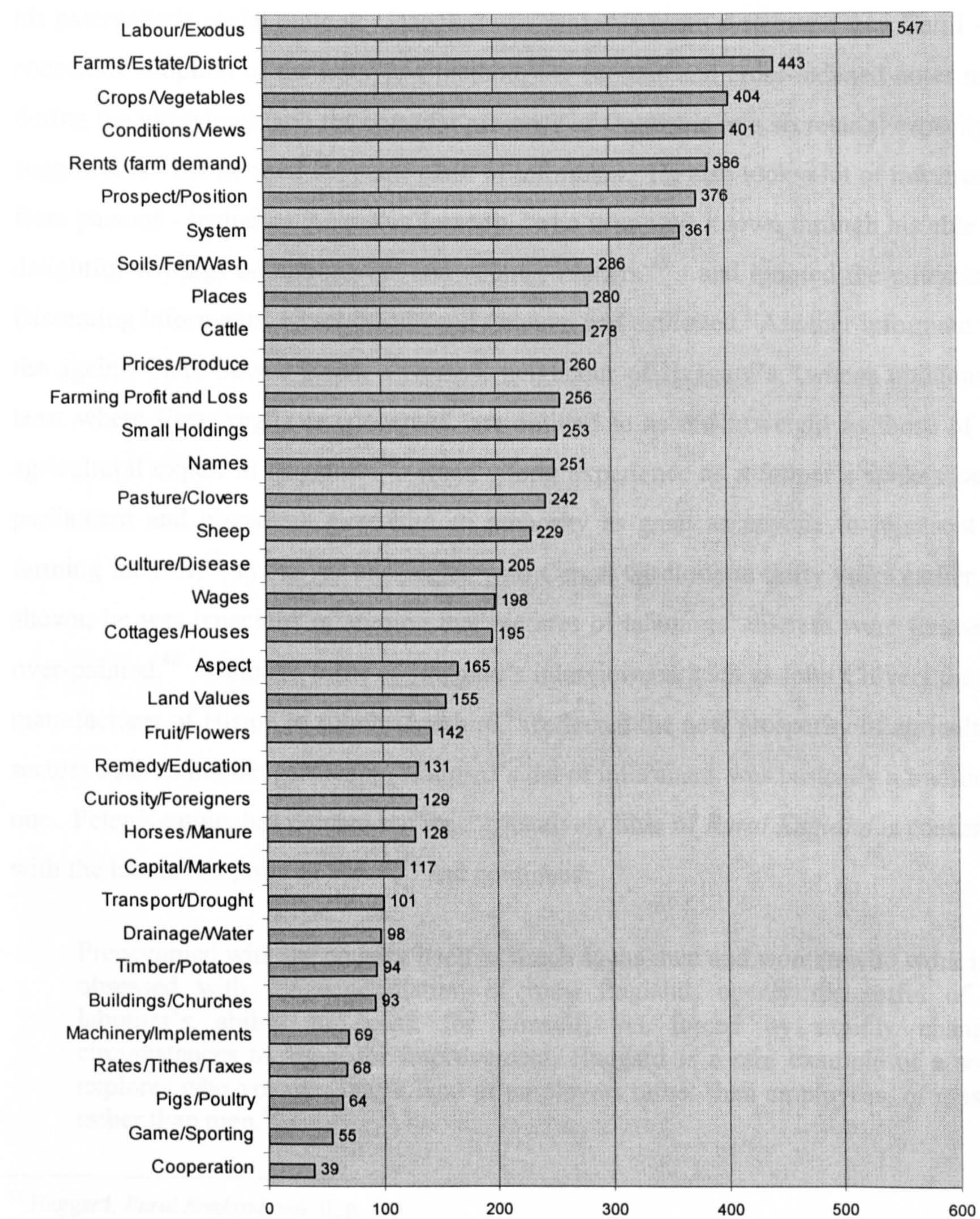
<sup>40</sup> *Economic Journal*, vol. XIII (1903), pp. 207, 209-10.

<sup>41</sup> NRO MS4692/22.

<sup>42</sup> NRO MS4692/23.



**Chart 1: Total number of recorded allusions to each subject in interviews as recorded by Arthur Cochrane**



(Source: Arthur Cochrane’s notebooks, Norfolk Record Office, MS4692/22-3.)



The informants Haggard used were similar to Caird's: landowners and farmers, land agents and auctioneers. This stemmed from Haggard's political Conservatism and his paternalistic social outlook. Haggard was probably more systematic than Caird - the conscious adoption of the interview method, the copious and cross-indexed notes made during the interviews, and the constant presence of Cochrane in a secretarial capacity all suggest this - but he used the same class of informant. He also took a lot of information from parsons - including Augustus Jessopp, 'who is so well known through his able and delightful writings on antiquarian and country matters'<sup>43</sup> - and ignored the potential of Dissenting informants, which Millin and Graham had exploited. Another informant was the ageing Clare Sewell Read, a Norfolk neighbour of Haggard's, 'whose opinions, at least where East Anglia is concerned, are entitled to as much weight as those of any agricultural expert in England'.<sup>44</sup> Read's long experience as a farmer's spokesman in parliament and elsewhere gave him an authority as great as anyone to represent the farming interest;<sup>45</sup> and as his exchanges with Canon Girdlestone thirty years earlier had shown, he was tenacious in arguing that pictures of labourers' distress were frequently over-painted.<sup>46</sup> Although some of Haggard's interviewees, such as John Chivers the jam manufacturer of Histon in Cambridgeshire,<sup>47</sup> reflected the new prosperity of agricultural sectors such as market gardening, Haggard's list of informants was basically a traditional one. Peter Keating, has pointed out that '[r]elatively little of *Rural England* is concerned with the labourer's point of view',<sup>48</sup> and continues:

Preoccupied with the country itself as much as the men and women who work in it, obsessed with the depopulation of rural England, openly distrustful of the labourer's ability to speak for himself, yet forced by rapidly changing circumstances to argue for improvement, Haggard is a rare example of a social explorer who voyages into a land of employers rather than employees, of masters rather than men.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Haggard, *Rural England*, vol. II, p. 505.

<sup>44</sup> *ibid.*, vol. II, p. 528.

<sup>45</sup> See J. R. Fisher, *Clare Sewell Read 1826-1905: A Farmer's Spokesman of the Late Nineteenth Century* (Hull, 1975).

<sup>46</sup> See also Read's remarks on the condition of the labourer in response to Arthur Wilson Fox's paper to the Statistical Society (Arthur Wilson Fox, 'Agricultural Wages in England and Wales during the Last Fifty Years', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, vol. LXVI (1903), pp. 351-3).

<sup>47</sup> Haggard, *Rural England*, vol. II, pp. 51-4.

<sup>48</sup> Peter Keating, *Into Unknown England 1866-1913: Selections from the Social Explorers* (Manchester, 1976), p. 201.

<sup>49</sup> *ibid.*, p. 23.

This is illustrated by a closer examination of some of Haggard's informants. There is not space here to list all his interviewees, but I have taken two counties (which have no particular claims to typicality, either in their systems of agriculture or in Haggard's approach to them) as examples. The following is a list of all those consulted in Cambridgeshire, as recorded in *Rural England*:

1. C. P. Allix, of Swaffham Prior House - a landowner, and practical farmer of 500 acres.
2. W. H. Hall, of Six Mile Bottom - a landowner.
3. Mr. Ambrose, of Partridge Hall - a large farmer.
4. Edward Frost, JP, of West Wratting Hall.
5. William King, JP, of Brinkley.
6. Robert Stephen - chairman of Cambridgeshire County Council, 'whose opinions are certainly worthy of as much weight as those of any man in Cambridgeshire'.<sup>50</sup>
7. Mr. MacArthur, of Bottisham - farmer of 400 acres.
8. Mr. Hancock, of Swaffham Bulbeck - farmer of 120 acres, 80 of them rented from Allix (no. 1, above).
9. Roger Jermyns, of Bottisham Hall.
10. A. J. Pell, of Wilburton Manor - landowner and Conservative MP.<sup>51</sup> Farmer of 1000 acres of his own land.
11. James Luddington - large landowner in the Littleport area.
12. Mr. King - Luddington's bailiff.
13. Mr. Hazell - fruit-farmer of 5 acres.
14. William Everitt - smallholder and chairman of Wilburton Parish Council.
15. Mr. Bidwell - land agent and auctioneer.
16. A large landowner (unnamed).
17. Canon Thornton - Rector of Downham.
18. A Downham smallholder (unnamed).
19. No. 18's son - small tenant farmer.
20. No. 19's wife - mother of 7 children.
21. Mr. Waddelow, of Downham - farmer of 7 acres at £18 per acre per annum.
22. Herbert Fordham, JP - landowner and farmer; County Councillor.
23. Arthur Wright - deputy clerk to Cambridgeshire County Council.
24. The Bursar of St. John's College, Cambridge.
25. Mr. John Chivers, of Histon - jam manufacturer.

The list includes only those Haggard actually records having visited, and does not include any of his correspondents, from whom much additional material for *Rural*

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<sup>50</sup> Haggard, *Rural England*, vol. II, p. 19.

<sup>51</sup> See T. Mackay, *The Reminiscences of Albert Pell* (1908); C. S. Orwin & E. H. Whetham, *History of British Agriculture 1846-1914* (Newton Abbot, 1971 [1st. ed. 1964]), pp. 208-9; Rowland E. Prothero, *English Farming Past and Present* (1912), p. 405.



*England* was gathered.<sup>52</sup> It contains three JPs, two County Councillors and their deputy clerk, a bailiff, an auctioneer, at least four landowners, a parson, and a number of large farmers. Haggard stayed in the homes of at least two of those listed: Allix (no. 1) and Pell (no. 10). He probably visited numbers 2 to 8 (or some of them) in the company of Allix; and certainly saw numbers 18 to 21 with Thornton (no. 17) as a guide.<sup>53</sup> Across the country, Haggard adopted this method of staying with a landowner, and visiting farmers, often tenants of the landowner in question, by which method the number of informants could be maximised. In Wiltshire, for example, two of Haggard's articles were derived from day-long excursions into the countryside from Salisbury, probably in the company of a local guide.<sup>54</sup> With a very short time at his disposal in each county, this was the system by which a large number of people could best be consulted quickly.

There were many potential disadvantages of such an approach, however, although Haggard does not appear to have always recognised them. Firstly, the guide would lead the investigator to those whom he knew best, and who might be expected to share his views. Secondly, where the investigator was accompanied by the local landowner on a visit to his tenants, the tenants were less likely to be willing to speak freely, and were more likely to echo their landlord's opinions. Even if a landowner took the investigator to visit farmers who were not his tenants, they were probably intimidated to an extent by the presence of a noted local dignitary. The case of Northamptonshire illustrates this problem more clearly. This is a list of those interviewed in that county:

1. Sir Charles Knightley, Bart., of Fawsley - landowner of 9,000 acres.
2. Mr. Mitchell - farmer of 3,000 acres, tenant of Sir Charles.
3. Rev. Mr. Evans - Rector of Preston Capes.
4. Mr. Newberry - farmer of 400 acres.
5. Sir Hereward Wake, of Courteenhall - large landowner in Northamptonshire and Essex.
6. John Gudgeon, of Blisworth - farmer of 250 acres (rented from the Duke of Grafton).
7. Sydney Smith, of Quinton - farmer of 600 acres.
8. John Westlake, of Courteenhall - farmer of 110 acres.
9. J. Weston, of Hartwell Park - farmer of 800 acres.
10. Mr. Payne, of Ashton Lodge - farmer of 312 acres (rented from the Duke of Grafton).

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<sup>52</sup> Also, these lists for Cambridgeshire and Northamptonshire do not exactly correspond with Arthur Cochrane's list of interviewees in those counties in NRO MS4692/23. I have simply taken those names mentioned as having been visited in *Rural England*.

<sup>53</sup> *Daily Express*, 6/8/1901, p. 7; Haggard, *Rural England*, vol. II, pp. 41-4.

<sup>54</sup> *Daily Express*, 19/4/1901, p. 4; 22/4/1901, p. 4.



11. Mr. Gotto - land agent in Northampton and Stony Stratford.
12. Cecil Woods, of Northampton - auctioneer and estate agent; Secretary to Chamber of Agriculture.

Haggard and Cochrane stayed at Knightley's (no. 1) and Wake's (no. 5). Numbers 2 to 4 were interviewed in the company of Sir Charles; and numbers 6 to 10 were interviewed while Haggard and Cochrane were staying with Sir Hereward (no. 5). Sir Hereward himself was probably not present - he appears to have been detained in London at this time as his wife was ill<sup>55</sup> - but his daughter may have been, and Sir Hereward certainly arranged the interviews himself.<sup>56</sup> Numbers 11 and 12 were interviewed at Northampton. With the exception of the Rector of Preston Capes (no. 3), all the interviewees in Northamptonshire were directly concerned with the land in some way, and all were agents, landowners or farmers. Thus in Northamptonshire Haggard and Cochrane stayed at three centres - Fawsley, Courteenhall and Northampton - and derived all their on-the-spot information (that is, information not supplied by correspondents) from the vicinity of these three centres, much of it in the company of Sir Charles Knightley, whose presence may have hampered candid opinion-gathering amongst his tenants. Furthermore, only one farmer of less than 200 acres was consulted in the whole county. This bias was not quite so pronounced in Cambridgeshire, where five smallholders or small farmers (plus a farmer's wife) and a farmer of 120 acres were interviewed (nos. 18-21, 8), but the informant base in general was an elite one.

An unavoidable feature of such an inquiry, where as wide an area as possible was to be covered, was the dependence of the investigators, in areas with which they were unfamiliar, on certain people with detailed knowledge of, and useful contacts within, the district in question. The visits to each county were short. Kent, for example, was covered in only three whole days;<sup>57</sup> and the 74 interviews recorded by Cochrane in Yorkshire were spread over just two weeks, a substantial proportion of which was probably spent travelling.<sup>58</sup> The examples listed above indicate that Haggard and Cochrane would stay in two or three centres in each county and make their inquiries

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<sup>55</sup> Wake to Haggard, 24/7/1901, NRO MS4692/25 (Northants.).

<sup>56</sup> Wake to Haggard, 28/7/1901, NRO MS4692/25 (Northants.). He also arranged one interview with a Mr. Whittaker, a tenant of his, though Whittaker's evidence was not used.

<sup>57</sup> Haggard's personal notebook, NRO MS4692/24A, f. 5.

<sup>58</sup> Palmer to Haggard 11/8/1901, and Haggard's note, NRO MS4692/25 (Yorks.).



under the guidance, if not the direction, of their hosts. In some counties the entire itinerary appears to have been arranged by one particular expert. For example, in Yorkshire the arrangements were made, for the most part, by H. E. Palmer, the editor of the *Yorkshire Post*, in which the articles were also being serialised.<sup>59</sup> As the inquiry was well under way by the time the Yorkshire arrangements were being made (May to August 1901), such a guiding hand was essential, as Haggard and Cochrane were occupied elsewhere with interviewing and the constant writing-up of articles to meet the demands of their twice-weekly publication. (Assistance was particularly useful when dealing with such awkward individuals as William Scarth Dixon of York who was unable to confirm arrangements because he was at Stockport races, but left instructions with Palmer that Haggard's visit was not to clash with York races later in the month!)<sup>60</sup>

Similarly, in Hertfordshire, Haggard and Cochrane were under the guidance of Arthur Wilson Fox, assistant commissioner for the Royal Commissions on Labour and Agriculture in the 1890s, and one of the most able and best respected official investigators of the condition of the agricultural labourer. Haggard thought Wilson Fox knew 'as much about British agriculture at large as any man in the country'.<sup>61</sup> Wilson Fox may have been expected to have had his own very definite views on the matters Haggard was investigating. Wilson Fox was rather disappointed that Haggard's stay in Hertfordshire was so short; but he made sure that as much was packed into the time as possible.<sup>62</sup> He also assisted with the itinerary in Lincolnshire, a county he knew well.<sup>63</sup> It should also be borne in mind that some counties<sup>64</sup> were visited before the introductory article in the *Express* on Friday 12th April; and that in at least two cases Haggard was put in touch with potential informants through his relatives.<sup>65</sup> Elsewhere it is clear that friends introduced possible informants.<sup>66</sup> Haggard was clearly operating within a

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<sup>59</sup> Palmer to Haggard, several letters in NRO MS4692/25 (Yorks.). The letter of 11/8/1901 shows quite clearly that Palmer fixed the itinerary. See also Haggard's hand-written note, which corresponds with Palmer's letter, in the same bundle.

<sup>60</sup> Palmer to Haggard, 15/8/1901, NRO MS4692/25 (Yorks.)

<sup>61</sup> *Daily Express*, 26/7/1901, p. 4.

<sup>62</sup> Fox to Haggard, 12/6/1901, 18/7/1901, NRO MS4692/25 (Herts.).

<sup>63</sup> Fox to Haggard, 24/4/1901, 25/7/1901, NRO MS4692/25 (Lincs.), and several other letters from Fox to Haggard in the same bundle.

<sup>64</sup> Wiltshire, Guernsey, Jersey, Sussex, Kent and Devon, and possibly Dorset.

<sup>65</sup> Silas J. Weaver to Mrs. Maddison Green, 18/5/1901 & Jessie Hartcup to Cochrane, 4/3/1901, both in NRO MS4692/25 (Worcs.).

<sup>66</sup> See for example Bevan to Haggard, n.d., in NRO MS4692/25 (Cambs.), which shows that C. P. Allix, of Swaffham Prior House in Cambridgeshire was introduced to Haggard by a friend from Ditchingham;



network of contacts which stemmed from his own particular circumstances as a Norfolk landowner-farmer, and this kept the inquiry firmly located within a framework in which it was almost impossible to find a place for the labourer.

Some of Haggard's correspondents complained about the preponderance of the landowning interest among his witnesses. In Hertfordshire, for example, Lord Salisbury's agent was interviewed,<sup>67</sup> and this prompted a response from a correspondent who, though not a farmer himself, thought farming opinion more valuable to the main purpose of the inquiry:

I see you have been interviewing certain persons in or about this neighbourhood and among others Lord Salisbury's Agent, a gentleman who understands matters from a very different standpoint to that of the actual farmer who has to make ends meet, and I hope you will not mind me saying it is not from the information such men can give that the all-important question to the nation generally of building up the physique of our manhood who will be capable of defending our rights and competing successfully with the men of other countries in their class is likely to be rectified.<sup>68</sup>

In an article in the *Nineteenth Century and After* prompted by Haggard's investigations, Earl Nelson quoted a letter from a land agent, who seemed to sympathise with the labouring classes over the heads of the farming interest: he complained that farmers treated their labourers badly, paying them substandard wages and denying them security of employment.<sup>69</sup> Haggard was aware that a landowner might take a different view of matters from a farmer. In Shropshire he found that the local squires said that there was usually enough labour available; but he found that the general opinion was otherwise: 'To get at the facts of the matter the inquirer must take a walk and call on half a dozen farmers within a radius of three or four miles. Then in nine cases out of ten he will hear a different story [from that told by the squire].'<sup>70</sup>

Haggard's awareness of the differences of opinion between landowner and

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and letters in NRO MS4692/25 (Norfolk), which illustrate how the network of contacts operated in the investigation of Haggard's home county.

<sup>67</sup> *Daily Express*, 26/7/1901, p. 4; Haggard, *Rural England*, vol. I, pp. 534-7.

<sup>68</sup> Gardiner Wilson to Haggard, 12/8/1901, NRO MS4692/25 (Herts.). See Haggard, *Rural England*, vol. I, pp. 578-80 for Haggard's answers to Wilson's criticisms.

<sup>69</sup> Earl Nelson, 'Back to the Land' in *Nineteenth Century and After*, vol. I, no. 298 (Dec. 1901), p. 978.

<sup>70</sup> *Daily Express*, 2/7/1901, p. 4; Haggard, *Rural England*, vol. I, pp. 426-7.



farmer did not translate down the social scale into an attempt to hear the labourers' side of the story. In this respect he was an old-fashioned adherent of the informant approach, which, if Catherine Marsh's model is accepted, was beginning to be challenged in this period, especially by Rowntree's York survey. One commentator, E. N. Bennett (a former Liberal, and later a Labour and National Labour, MP), writing in 1914, remembered that '[t]he valuable information contained in *Rural England* is derived almost entirely from squires, farmers and land agents: how seldom in these pages do we come across conversations with farm labourers.'<sup>71</sup> To adopt Beatrice Webb's categorisation, Haggard's investigation used 'wholesale interviewing' of rural social elites, and supplemented it with questionnaires addressed to a similar section of the rural population.

The reliance on such information inevitably coloured the material Haggard presented. The information and opinions derived from such a one-sided informant base were likely to present the condition of the labourer in as favourable a light as possible. As has been shown in earlier chapters, the estimation of the real value of a labourer's income in this period was contestable, and depended on the opinion of the informant. Haggard usually reported wage figures in the form of the money wage per week, then the value of this wage plus perquisites and harvest money, sometimes detailing the perquisites and sometimes not. Thus in Cambridgeshire, Herbert Fordham, JP, landowner, farmer and County Councillor, gave Haggard the figure of 13s. per week, or 17s. inclusive of extras, (which are not detailed in *Rural England*),<sup>72</sup> and Haggard had no way of cross-checking the latter figure, which seems rather high,<sup>73</sup> given the structure of his investigation.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> E. N. Bennett, *Problems of Village Life* (1914), p. 9.

<sup>72</sup> Haggard, *Rural England*, vol. II, p. 46.

<sup>73</sup> Arthur Wilson Fox thought that agricultural labourers' earnings were 17.9% higher than wages; whereas 17s. is over 30% higher than the weekly wage of 13s. (See Wilson Fox, 'Agricultural Wages', p. 288. This figure was based on his own official investigation of 1901, which itself consisted largely of inquiries addressed to farmers.)

<sup>74</sup> In some reports, Haggard gave the labour cost per acre rather than the average wage for the farm or district, reflecting the centrality of the farming interest to the investigation. Elsewhere, he gave the cost per man of wages and perquisites. It can be argued that this was an inaccurate reflection of the value of the wage to the labourer, as the cost incurred by the employer in supplying the extras may not have translated into an equivalent benefit to the labourer. See chapter 8 for a further exploration of this problem as experienced by the 'scientific' investigators of the problem of poverty in the countryside.



The farming interest had the advantage of having organised groups, such as agricultural clubs or chambers of agriculture, which could be used to consult a number of farmers very quickly. This was an important consideration in such a widespread investigation, especially where the publication was twice-weekly. Even without such clubs it is clear that strong business and social connections within the farming community enabled this class to put its points to Haggard collectively. A dinner party took place on the Hertfordshire/Essex border after the Hertfordshire visit had been concluded, for example, at which the faithful Cochrane was present, as ever, taking notes.<sup>75</sup> The conference was a favourite suggestion of Haggard's correspondents, many offering to bring various leading agriculturists of their district around to their homes to meet Haggard as a group. Many Agricultural Clubs and other associations suggested such meetings, and Haggard sometimes attended them. For example, Easingwold Agricultural Club in Yorkshire passed a resolution inviting Haggard to visit them;<sup>76</sup> and he was also invited to attend an adjourned debate on his articles at the Tunbridge Wells Farmers' Club.<sup>77</sup> The Secretary of the Bristol District Property Protection Society also weighed in with an invitation to meet 'a few of our leading Farmers &c.'<sup>78</sup> F. W. Denham of Darlington offered through the columns of the *Daily Express* to put Haggard in touch with secretaries of his local chambers of agriculture;<sup>79</sup> and the East Sussex Farmer's Club's representative in the Central Chamber of Agriculture wished him *bon voyage*.<sup>80</sup> H. E. Palmer told Haggard in July 1901 that '[t]here is enormous interest in your survey - I see it referred to constantly at agricultural shows.'<sup>81</sup> Haggard often met several men at once, but found that this could be an unsatisfactory method of fact- and opinion-gathering, as it was hard to remember afterwards who had said what.<sup>82</sup> A discussion of this nature would also be less structured than a one-to-one interview, perhaps allowing those present to dictate the subjects under discussion, whereas in a personal interview Haggard might be able to direct the conversation more as he

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<sup>75</sup> See NRO MS4692/22-3.

<sup>76</sup> Meeting of Easingwold Agricultural Club reported in press cutting enclosed with letter from Secretary: Bannister to Haggard, 13/4/1901, NRO MS4692/25 (Yorks.).

<sup>77</sup> Durrant to Haggard, 17/6/1901, NRO MS4692/25 (Kent).

<sup>78</sup> Hunt to Haggard, 15/4/1901, NRO MS4692/25 (Gloucs.).

<sup>79</sup> *Daily Express*, 17/4/1901, p. 4.

<sup>80</sup> *ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>81</sup> Palmer to Haggard, 28/7/1901, NRO MS4692/25 (Yorks.).

<sup>82</sup> Haggard, *Rural England*, vol. II, p. 320.



wished.<sup>83</sup> Indeed, such a conference or meeting, especially where suggested by an Agricultural Club or other such formal grouping, should be seen as an attempt by the farming interests in a district to show a collective face, put their point of view more forcefully and hence defend their own interests more effectively. Haggard needed little prompting in this matter, as it happens; but in an age in which the approach to the agricultural labourer among other social commentators was increasingly sympathetic, such a course of action on the part of the farming community was an obvious response.

In contrast to the farmers, there are very few recorded encounters with labourers in the reports of the investigation,<sup>84</sup> which was also a matter of concern to many of Haggard's correspondents. There was, for example, an interesting exchange of letters between Haggard and J. Martin White. White was the Gladstonian Liberal MP for Forfarshire from 1895 to 1896; and was involved in social investigation himself, as the chief financial backer of Patrick Geddes and later as a member of the Outer London Inquiry Committee.<sup>85</sup> On April 25th 1901, White wrote to Haggard in response to his articles on Wiltshire, recommending that, instead of relying so heavily on farmers, he hear 'something of the agricultural labourers' side of the question'.<sup>86</sup> White, knowing Haggard's political affiliations, added pointedly that he had won a parliamentary seat at the 1895 election, 'fighting as a Liberal for better conditions for the agricultural labourers'. Haggard was a well-known Conservative, and there was a strong political dimension to White's correspondence. On May 3rd, he wrote to Haggard again, suggesting writing to the Liberal agent in each area visited in order to obtain the names of labourers who might be worth talking to: 'I mention the Liberal Agents because the farmers and the landlords are mostly Unionists, whereas the agricultural labourers are mostly Liberals; and I understand you want to get the two sides of the question.'<sup>87</sup> Letters followed enclosing the names of labourers in Wiltshire,<sup>88</sup> although Haggard had already visited that county; and it is in any case unlikely that he would have taken White

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<sup>83</sup> This point was made by L. L. Price, *Economic Journal*, vol. XIII (1903), p. 207.

<sup>84</sup> For rare examples of meetings with labourers, see Haggard, *Rural England*, vol. I, pp. 247, 300, 444, 458-60; vol. II, pp. 369-70.

<sup>85</sup> See Edward G. Howarth & Mona Wilson, *West Ham: A Study in Social and Industrial Problems, being the Report of the Outer London Inquiry Committee* (1907); Paddy Kitchen, *A Most Unsettling Person: An Introduction to the Ideas and Life of Patrick Geddes* (1975), pp. 105-6, 118, 177, 209.

<sup>86</sup> White to Haggard, 25/4/1901, NRO MS4692/25 (Counties Unvisited).

<sup>87</sup> White to Haggard, 3/5/1901, NRO MS4692/25 (Wilts.).

<sup>88</sup> White to Haggard 9/5/1901, 11/5/1901, NRO MS4692/25 (Wilts.).



up on his offer. White, however, remained persistent, and offered to obtain the written testimony of a selection of Wiltshire labourers.<sup>89</sup> There are a number of letters from other correspondents recommending that Haggard speak to labourers, mentioning particular examples by name,<sup>90</sup> and one from a labourer telling him that '[t]his subject is not one that has been often - if at all - written upon from the labourers [*sic*] point of view ... & I trust that I may be able to give some information from the labourers [*sic*] standpoint.'<sup>91</sup> This labourer was unusual: he had contributed letters on rural life to the *Standard*, and wrote the agricultural notes for the *Leighton Buzzard Observer*. He illustrates the point, however, that articulate working-class opinion was available to the investigator who chose to seek it.

White was probably justified in suggesting that Haggard hear 'both sides' of the question, because the reasons given for the labour exodus by labourers or those intimately acquainted with them were rather different from those given by farmers and landowners. At least, different aspects of the problem were emphasised. In particular, insecurity of cottage tenure was mentioned much more often by these informants. Thomas Hardy's long letter to Haggard, reprinted in full in *Rural England*, made this point quite clearly;<sup>92</sup> and White also mentioned it as the first in his list of causes of the exodus.<sup>93</sup> A letter from 'A Grateful Reader', some of which was reprinted in *Rural England*, gave the same primary cause, and suggested very strongly that labourers themselves would attach more importance to cottage tenure than would farmers and landowners. What Haggard edited out of this letter is as interesting as what he actually printed in *Rural England*, and that unused portion is italicised below:

*May I venture, very respectfully, to suggest the desirability of other sources of information. With only one or two exceptions landlords, farmers, land agents, auctioneers and others of the owning and employing fraternity have been your informants. Let me suggest to you Clergymen, Non-Conformist Ministers, Village Blacksmiths & men of his [*sic*] type, Leaders of village Chapels, and above all the Labourers themselves. Until now (I do not write in a cantankerous spirit) your*

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<sup>89</sup> White to Haggard, 13/5/1901, NRO MS4692/25 (Wilts.).

<sup>90</sup> For example Gastling to Haggard, 13/4/1901, NRO MS4692/25 (Suffolk); Muscott to Haggard, 7/5/1901, NRO MS4692/25 (Oxon.).

<sup>91</sup> [Triveby?] to editor of *Daily Express*, 17/4/1901, NRO MS4692/25 (Hunts.).

<sup>92</sup> Haggard, *Rural England*, vol. I, pp. 282-5. The original (dictated) letter is in NRO MS4692/25 (Dorset).

<sup>93</sup> White to Haggard, 3/5/1901, NRO MS4692/25 (Wilts.).



*articles are obviously one-sided.* My idea is, when you extend the scope of your enquiries, you will discover that after all Farmers are not in such a bad way. ... You, when you consult another class will learn the true explanation of the labour difficulty. The slavish system of Tied Cottages is the great factor. The farmers use this as a whip, and drive away the best of the labourers. ... Security of tenure would mean, as any one can see, security of labour.<sup>94</sup>

The 'Grateful Reader' was suggesting a typical list of informants whom a Liberal investigator might approach (although he also mentioned parsons). Haggard thought this correspondent was probably an educated labourer.<sup>95</sup> Another of Haggard's correspondents, this time from Essex, wrote at a very early stage of the inquiry – 25th April 1901 – with a similar complaint: 'So far your articles have smacked too much of the Royal Agricultural Society ... You have told us about the landlords' losses and the farmers, also about the sheep ... but not much about the common labourer.'<sup>96</sup> A Gloucestershire cider merchant asked hopefully, '[s]hall you make inquiry as to the views of the labourers first hand in your inquiries?'<sup>97</sup> but he was to be disappointed, as despite all this prompting Haggard showed little interest in so doing.

Indeed, when he wished to give 'The Labourer's Point of View' in the *Express*, he turned to the Medical Officer of the parish of Williton in Somerset, Dr. Killick, 'a Medical Officer who had [*sic*] Studied the Views of the Workers'.<sup>98</sup> Haggard admitted that until that stage in the investigation (the article appeared on May 30th 1901) the views expressed in the articles had been mainly, and 'of necessity', those of the landowners. As he explained, '[a]s all who are acquainted with him know, the labourer is a shy bird; also he is suspicious. In any case it is difficult to persuade him to talk, or to be sure when he does talk that he is saying what is really in his mind.'<sup>99</sup> Dr. Killick provided a conduit for the views of the labouring classes of his area, as one who was well acquainted with them and their ways. Haggard also spoke to medical officers at Gainsborough in Lincolnshire and at Yeovil in Somerset.<sup>100</sup> Elsewhere, Haggard

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<sup>94</sup> 'A Grateful Reader' to Haggard, [?]/6/1901, NRO MS4692/25 (Wilts.); and reprinted (with corrections) in Haggard, *Rural England*, vol. I, pp. 48-9.

<sup>95</sup> Haggard, *Rural England*, vol. I, p. 48.

<sup>96</sup> Sweetman to Haggard, 25/4/1901, NRO MS4692/25 (Essex).

<sup>97</sup> Harper to Haggard, 19/5/1901, NRO MS4692/25 (Gloucs.).

<sup>98</sup> *Daily Express*, 30/5/1901, p. 4..

<sup>99</sup> *ibid.*, p. 4; Haggard, *Rural England*, vol. I, pp. 225-6.

<sup>100</sup> Haggard, *Rural England*, vol. II, pp. 234-8; vol. I, p. 254.

recognised the value of the testimony of schoolmasters to an analysis of depopulation: 'On such matters ... there is nobody who can be so well informed as the local schoolmaster, since all the youth of the village that, in the ordinary course of events, should constitute the adult population of the future, passes through his hands'.<sup>101</sup> Medical officers, schoolmasters and parsons might give him this sort of information from a relatively 'neutral' perspective. Normally, however, he was content to rely on information from farmers about the disposition of the labourers.

Haggard's apparent lack of interest in what the labourers had to say in different areas of the country is surprising given his attitude towards his own labourers at Ditchingham. In *A Farmer's Year* he was keen to emphasise his familiarity with the labouring class, and the importance of detailed and intensive knowledge of them and their work if their characters were to be understood. Like his friend Thomas Hardy, he objected to the characterisation of the labourer as 'Hodge':

It is the fashion, especially in the comic papers, to talk of the agricultural labourer as Hodge - a term of contempt - and to speak of him as though he had about as much intelligence as a turnip. As a matter of fact, after a somewhat prolonged experience of his class, I say deliberately that, take it all in all, there are few sections of society for which I have so great an admiration.<sup>102</sup>

He understood that the agricultural labourer was in many respects a skilled worker, which only an experience of practical farming could show: few people, he thought, realised the complexity of many of the tasks he had to perform.<sup>103</sup> Haggard, who employed only 15 full-time hands on his farms,<sup>104</sup> and had acted as a Poor Law Guardian, claimed a relatively intimate association with his own labourers, describing himself as one who 'mixes with the labouring classes, and perhaps, to some extent, enjoys their sympathy and confidence'.<sup>105</sup>

He was certainly capable at times of profound sympathy with the poor man's

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<sup>101</sup> *Daily Express*, 20/6/1901, p. 4.

<sup>102</sup> Haggard, *Farmer's Year*, p. 67.

<sup>103</sup> *ibid.*, p. 72. Alun Howkins, 'From Hodge to Lob: Reconstructing the English Farm Labourer, 1870-1914', in Malcolm Chase & Ian Dyck (eds.), *Living and Learning: Essays in Honour of J. F. C. Harrison* (Aldershot, 1996), pp. 218-35.

<sup>104</sup> Haggard, *Farmer's Year*, p. 98.

<sup>105</sup> *ibid.*, p. 186.



plight. The account of his meeting with John Lapwood, an old Essex labourer, is one of the most memorable passages in *Rural England*,<sup>106</sup> and shows once again the importance of consulting with the labourers themselves if certain pieces of information were to be obtained, particularly details of their food and home life. The reader of Lapwood's pathetic story is rewarded with the impression that Haggard was really trying to understand the realities of the poor man's life. Nevertheless, Lapwood, moving as his case appeared to be, and however valuable his information, was not treated as an interviewee within the formal structure of the inquiry: the encounter with him is recorded only in Haggard's personal notebook,<sup>107</sup> not in Cochrane's interview notes. What is more, Haggard verified Lapwood's story by inquiry, not quite trusting the labourer not to exaggerate his former privations. The main purpose of Lapwood's inclusion in the article was to show that material conditions had improved during the previous fifty years, and reinforce Haggard's conclusions about the labourer and depopulation.

If the gradual improvement in the condition of the labourer was one significant presumption of Haggard's (one which he shared with most commentators, Conservative and Liberal), the superiority of rural over urban life was another; and it is worth dwelling on this aspect of his approach. Haggard was always keen to emphasise his belief that however bad working-class living conditions might be in parts of rural England, they were a good deal worse in the towns. In his section on Kent, he summarised the contents of a letter from a Miss Mary Russell, who knew about the housing and conditions of the hop-pickers who migrated to Kent from the towns in the autumn. She described in detail the poor condition of their huts, the illiteracy of the majority, their affection for beer, and the infestation of their children with insects. 'The condition of a woman whose child was born in one of these huts was, she said, too awful to describe to me.'<sup>108</sup> Haggard's point was that town life was even worse than this: 'After all, it must be remembered that around these crowded insanitary hovels breathes the sweet, fresh air, and above them stretches the blue sky of English summer. In the festering slums of London such blessings are absent.'<sup>109</sup> Likewise, the case of Mr. Somerville, a labourer from Ledbury

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<sup>106</sup> *Daily Express*, 12/7/1901, p. 4; Haggard, *Rural England*, vol. I, pp. 458-60. The passage has been quoted by a number of historians. See for example Keating, *Into Unknown England*, pp. 208-9.

<sup>107</sup> NRO MS4692/24A, ff. 37-8.

<sup>108</sup> Haggard, *Rural England*, vol. I, p. 164; Russell to Haggard, n.d., NRO MS4692/25 (Kent).

<sup>109</sup> Haggard, *Rural England*, vol. I, p. 165.



in Herefordshire, was used to show that the healthy effects of country air could offset the lowness of rural wages. Somerville had worked in the collieries, where he earned £2 per week, but returned to the land, where he only earned 15s., because he preferred the lifestyle.<sup>110</sup> In Worcestershire, while Haggard and Cochrane were visiting Haggard's wife's family at Forehill House, they ran into a disreputable group of urbanites: 'The dray full of half tipsy men we met on Birmingham Road ... These are the delights the countryman seeks in towns.'<sup>111</sup> In Nottingham, they saw a crowd of pale, anaemic-looking children, which prompted Haggard to contrast them with the healthier-looking 'country-bred youngsters' to be found in rural areas.<sup>112</sup> The countryside, with its fresher air, fewer morally injurious influences and supposedly benevolent paternalistic social structure, was thought a healthier place to live, lower wages and duller lifestyle notwithstanding. This was a main thrust of the conclusion to *Rural England*.<sup>113</sup>

While Haggard was taking very much the farmers' line in his articles, many of those who read them were in fact from the labouring classes. As one correspondent pointed out, 'though the Daily Express is not a paper that many people of the middle and upper classes read it is the lower classes who really have most to say in the matter & who want educating most'.<sup>114</sup> The significance of this remark was not lost on Haggard, who highlighted this portion of the letter. While it is true that many of the readers of the 'Back to the Land' series were farmers, there is evidence that at least some of the labouring classes read it for themselves. Even if they did not read the articles in the *Express*, they may have come into contact with them through local newspapers, in which they were often reprinted. One correspondent from Horncastle in Lincolnshire, who had read Haggard's articles in the *Stamford Mercury*, wrote with 'another side of the question', describing how his aged father could not pay the rent on his small farm, and how he was now left homeless with a wife and seven children under eight years old.<sup>115</sup> It would be interesting to assess the response of the investigated population to what were often highly critical and judgmental articles written from the standpoint of rural elites.

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<sup>110</sup> *ibid.*, vol. I, p. 300.

<sup>111</sup> Haggard's personal notebook, NRO MS4692/24A, f. 20.

<sup>112</sup> Haggard, *Rural England*, vol. II, p. 281.

<sup>113</sup> *ibid.*, vol. II, p. 567.

<sup>114</sup> Elway to Haggard, 13/4/1901, NRO MS4692/25 (Gloucs.).

<sup>115</sup> Deane to Haggard, 6/9/1901, NRO MS4692/25 (Lincs.).



The nature of the evidence makes this side of the question hard to address; but one striking example of the labourers' reaction to Haggard's articles is preserved in a remarkable letter in the Norfolk Record Office. At St. Neot's in Huntingdonshire, Haggard interviewed Tom Stone, an example of the labouring class, though he was by this time a publican and a gardener and clearly enjoyed a somewhat higher social standing. Reporting Stone's remarks in detail, Haggard wrote in the *Express* of 20th August that the St. Neot's labourers were lazy, ignorant and unintelligent.<sup>116</sup> These remarks nonetheless found their way back to the labourers of his district, and, in Stone's words, 'upset the tempers of the working men immensely'.<sup>117</sup> The labourers gathered outside his house, jeering until after midnight, and threatened him with physical harm if he strayed from the premises. (See Appendix VI for a full reprint of the offending passage and Stone's letter.) This example illustrates the class tensions inherent in such an inquiry, and suggests that the implications of Haggard's researches cut very deeply into rural society.

The conclusions drawn by Haggard from his investigations were, in most respects, much as could have been expected. He identified two main problems facing English agriculture: foreign competition and the scarcity of labour. On the subject of foreign competition, he concluded that protection, while a good idea in principle, was a 'chimera', highly unlikely to be adopted, and therefore he forbore from advocating it, concentrating on other measures which might improve the lot of the agricultural interests. He argued that James Caird's optimism, fifty years earlier, about the adoption of free trade had been misplaced.<sup>118</sup> His main proposal for counteracting the effects of foreign competition was the establishment of an Agricultural Post (under a strengthened Ministry of Agriculture) to improve supply to domestic markets.<sup>119</sup> On depopulation, he thought that '[t]he results of my inquiries on this point are even worse than I feared ... it is now common for only the dullards, the vicious, or the wastrels to stay upon the land, because they are unfitted for any other life'.<sup>120</sup> Pessimism ran through Haggard's

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<sup>116</sup> *Daily Express*, 20/8/1901, p. 7.

<sup>117</sup> Stone to Haggard, n.d., NRO MS4692/25 (Hunts.).

<sup>118</sup> Haggard, *Rural England*, vol. II, pp. 563-4.

<sup>119</sup> *ibid.*, vol. II, pp. 566-8.

<sup>120</sup> *ibid.*, vol. II, p. 539.

conclusions: agriculture, he thought, was 'fighting against the mills of God',<sup>121</sup> and he did not believe that 'anything short of actual starvation will cause those who have become accustomed to a city life - or, still more, their children - to return to labour on the soil even if they were fitted so to do'.<sup>122</sup>

Haggard considered that of the three great orders of the agricultural population, the landowners, especially the small landowners, had suffered most from the crisis in English agriculture. The farmers, also, 'do no more than make a hard living',<sup>123</sup> although aspects of their lives, especially their independence, might be envied by men of similar status in towns. On the other hand, the labourers were 'more prosperous to-day than ever they have been before',<sup>124</sup> yet also more discontented. Such judgements, once again, reflect Haggard's choice of informants, and were contested by his correspondents: the 'Grateful Reader', for example, thought that 'the most striking commercial fact of my lifelong observation is the prosperity of farmers',<sup>125</sup> and another reckoned that 'the farmer is a confirmed grumbler & I never believe a word he says'.<sup>126</sup>

The three main reasons for the rural exodus, Haggard concluded, were the lack of prospects on the land, on which almost all the labourers would remain mere wage-earners with no chance of advancement to the status of a farmer; the system of education, which was an urban one, and did not teach the rural children to appreciate nature and love the land, but which at the same time broadened their horizons sufficiently to make town life seem attractive; and the poor standard and unavailability of cottages, which drove young people to the towns.<sup>127</sup> To counteract the effects of these causes, Haggard proposed an extension of smallholding programmes, particularly through government aid to co-operative ventures and Credit Societies; a revised schooling system which allowed children to work in the fields in the summer and attend school in the winter; and an extension of the provisions of the Housing of the Working Classes Act (1890) to enable

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<sup>121</sup> Haggard, *Rural England*, vol. II, p. 536. The phrase was first used in Haggard's notebook, NRO MS4692/24A, f. 63.

<sup>122</sup> Haggard, *Rural England*, vol. II, p. 541.

<sup>123</sup> *ibid.*, vol. II, p. 543.

<sup>124</sup> *ibid.*, vol. II, p. 545.

<sup>125</sup> *ibid.*, vol. I, p. 48; see 'A Grateful Reader' to Haggard, [?]/6/1901, NRO MS4692/25 (Wilts.).

<sup>126</sup> Murray to Haggard, 17/4/1901, NRO MS4692/25 (Counties Unvisited).

<sup>127</sup> *ibid.*, vol. II, p. 546.



more cottages to be built in rural areas. For Haggard, England's 'greatest safeguard lies in the re-creation of a yeoman class, rooted in the soil and supported by the soil'.<sup>128</sup> He took Denmark, which he later investigated in more detail, as a model: landownership was much more widespread there than in England.<sup>129</sup> Such a conclusion, emphasising the importance of the land, reflected his own background, and the methods he chose for his investigation.

Haggard ultimately viewed the rural poor through the eyes of a country squire, a man brought up to love the land, and with a strong belief in the importance of the maintenance of healthy country stock for the continuing success of the empire. The effects of the depression, and the depopulation of rural districts which followed, caused him considerable anxiety, and the threat of such an exodus haunted him throughout his mammoth investigation and dominates the pages of *Rural England*. In contrast to George Millin and Anderson Graham, however, Haggard only rarely consulted those whose exodus he dreaded. He adopted the high-Tory method of investigating the rural poor, and in so doing prompted indignant protest from more Liberal-inclined commentators. He remained obsessed with the problem of depopulation, arguing in 1905 that the stout yeomen who epitomised the virtues of independence were all country bred;<sup>130</sup> in 1906 despairing that, despite all his tireless activism in the cause, little or nothing had been done since his articles were published to such acclaim;<sup>131</sup> and in 1912 lamenting his failure to persuade those in power of the urgency of his cause: 'I suppose it will go on - the devouring cities growing more and more bloated, and the starved land becoming more and more empty'.<sup>132</sup> Haggard's investigation is a valuable source for the historian of agriculture and rural life, but it must be understood for what it was: preoccupied with the problem of depopulation, and concerned mainly with the landowning and farming interests. The claim by the *Daily Express* that 'Mr. Haggard ... Holds no Brief for any one Class of those who Depend on Agriculture'<sup>133</sup> is not borne

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<sup>128</sup> *ibid.*, vol. II, p. 575.

<sup>129</sup> *ibid.*, vol. II, pp. 570-2; see Haggard, *Rural Denmark* (1910).

<sup>130</sup> Haggard, *The Poor and the Land*, pp. xviii-xix.

<sup>131</sup> H. Rider Haggard, *Rural England, being an Account of Agricultural and Social Researches Carried Out in 1901 and 1902* (new ed., 2 vols., 1906), preface.

<sup>132</sup> Haggard, *Days of My Life*, vol. II, p. 203. The book was written in 1912, but not published until after Haggard's death.

<sup>133</sup> *Daily Express*, 23/7/1901, p. 4.

out by the structure or the presentation of his investigation.



## **Chapter 7: The sociology of rural England**

This chapter will be concerned with the more professedly 'sociological' investigations of country life which began to be carried out in this period, under the influence of Seebohm Rowntree's social survey of York, carried out in 1899 and published to great interest and acclaim in 1901. This study, and the methods it used, directly influenced the social investigation of the countryside. While chapter 6 dealt with an inquiry deeply rooted in the traditions of agricultural investigation, this chapter examines those who developed concepts and methods derived from urban social surveys to the investigation of rural problems. 'Sociology' as a discipline and an approach emerged from the towns; and the application of the techniques pioneered by Rowntree in York to rural conditions was not a simple procedure. Rowntree himself, interested though he was in rural problems, never attempted to replicate his York study on a rural community, and approached the investigation of rural life very differently. This chapter analyses the approaches of two investigators who adopted his methods. It will consider how far the methods used to investigate urban life could really be applied successfully to rural conditions; and in particular will show how poverty remained a contestable concept in its application to the rural scene. It will be seen that the rural location of these researches remained a powerful determinant of the ways in which they were carried out; and that powerful conceptions of the superiority of rural life affected the theory and practice of even the most 'scientific' investigator. The implications of this for rural labouring communities, and some of their possible responses to this form of investigation, will be discussed at the end of the chapter.

The ideology of 'national efficiency' provided the background to these inquiries. Depopulation continued to overshadow the investigation of the countryside; and the interlinkage of depopulation with the problems of urban life gave the 'rural labour problem' a national significance. The agricultural labourer was now fully integrated into national life. Olive Dunlop, in a history of the farm labourer published in 1913, suggested that the 'Back to the Land' movement was the culmination of a growing realisation on the part of the urban industrial classes that their own interests were bound



up with those of the agricultural labourers.<sup>1</sup> Her chapter on the development of allotments and smallholding was entitled, significantly, 'The Nation and the Labourer'.<sup>2</sup> The countryside remained the reservoir of strength on which the nation could call on in times of crisis. In the 'quest for national efficiency'<sup>3</sup> a particularly important place was reserved for rural life. As Seebohm Rowntree insisted in his pamphlet on *The Labourer and the Land*, '[r]ural and urban conditions are too intimately related for a general and permanent improvement to take place in the one that is not rapidly reflected in the other.'<sup>4</sup> By 1914 another investigator could ask rhetorically, 'are we not agreed that the future of the nation depends very largely upon the rural population, which must of necessity be physically more efficient than the urban?'<sup>5</sup> The problem of poverty, as investigated by Booth and Rowntree, gave a new urgency to rural social reform. The discovery that the rural population suffered from poverty in proportions as great as the mass of town-dwellers, and lived in housing often as poor as in urban slums, gave an even greater urgency to the task of rejuvenating rural life. E. P. Hennock has traced the developments in the measurement of urban poverty 'from the metropolis to the nation', arguing that poverty during the period 1880-1920 became seen as a national problem, rather than one confined to the slums of London.<sup>6</sup> Rural England had its own part in this story, as Hennock has noted more recently, with reference to Rowntree's rural work.<sup>7</sup>

As highlighted in previous chapters, a problem associated with depopulation was the retention on the land of the least physically and intellectually capable of rural youth. This was the complaint of many farmers and their spokesmen to the Labour Commissioners and to Rider Haggard, for example. In the age of eugenics, the problem gained an additional significance: not only would agricultural work be done

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<sup>1</sup> Olive Jocelyn Dunlop, *The Farm Labourer: The History of a Modern Problem* (1913), pp. 221-5.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, ch. 7.

<sup>3</sup> G. R. Searle, *The Quest for National Efficiency: A Study in British Politics and Political Thought, 1899-1914* (1990 [1st. ed. Oxford, 1971]).

<sup>4</sup> B. Seebohm Rowntree, *The Labourer and the Land* (1914), p. 5; quoted in Asa Briggs, *Social Thought and Social Action: A Study of the Work of Seebohm Rowntree* (1961), p. 74.

<sup>5</sup> Hugh Aronson, *The Land and the Labourer* (1914), p. 269.

<sup>6</sup> E. P. Hennock, 'The Measurement of Urban Poverty: From the Metropolis to the Nation 1880-1920', *Economic History Review*, 2nd. series, vol. XL, no. 2 (1987), esp. pp. 214-15. On p. 214n27 Hennock notes that Rowntree later turned his attention to the study of rural poverty.

<sup>7</sup> E. P. Hennock, 'Concepts of Poverty in the British Social Surveys from Charles Booth to Arthur Bowley', in Martin Bulmer, Kevin Bales and K. K. Sklar (eds.), *The Social Survey in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 204, 209.



inefficiently, but future generations would suffer from the unfitness of their ancestors. The Report of the Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration in 1904 was primarily concerned with 'deterioration' in its urban context, but some insights into the relevance of the problem for rural life can be gained from the evidence submitted to it. Depopulation was a concern to the committee, which noted that the opinion of some observers was that there was a parallel exodus of the 'debilitated' urban population back into the countryside.<sup>8</sup> Those who remained on the land were the worst specimens of the race: as H. J. Wilson, H. M. Inspector of Factories in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, told the committee, 'the strongest men, physically and mentally, leave the country districts to go into the towns where their abilities will benefit them ... I have noticed cripples and imbeciles, and that sort of people, are left about country villages'.<sup>9</sup> As Wilson and other authorities consulted by the committee recognised, however, the evidence to support these claims was only impressionistic, and was not supported by any anthropometric data or scientific evidence.<sup>10</sup> G. H. Fosbroke, the Medical Officer of Health to Worcestershire County Council, explicitly told the committee that the worst labourers remained on the land and bred worse children, but admitted that his evidence was based only on impressions and on the complaints of farmers.<sup>11</sup> Some 'scientific' information about the condition of the urban population had been supplied by Charles Booth's work in London and Seebohm Rowntree's in York, and Rowntree had linked his survey to the 'national efficiency' question by relating it to the fitness of recruits.<sup>12</sup> The committee questioned Booth and Rowntree as to their opinions about the urban population. It was recognised, however, that more exact knowledge of the conditions of rural life was needed before any remedies could be proposed.

The coming of the poverty survey appeared to herald the possibility of an objective approach to investigating the conditions of the working classes of both town and country. Rowntree's York study in particular had supplied much information that

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<sup>8</sup> *Report of the Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration*, PP 1904, cd. 2186, vol. I, parag. 184; vol. II, qq. 1969-93.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, vol. II, qq. 1977-8.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, vol. II, qq. 1980, 1989-90 for Wilson's evidence; q. 11973 is another example.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, vol. II, qq. 6664-8.

<sup>12</sup> B. Seebohm Rowntree, *Poverty: A Study of Town Life* (2nd. ed., 1902 [1st. ed. 1901]), pp. 209-16 on the effects of physical deterioration on the heights, weights and general health of schoolchildren; pp. 216-21 on the health of recruits. See Searle, *National Efficiency*, pp. 64-5.



was at that time unavailable for rural districts. Rowntree, employing various methods of fact-gathering, ascertained the economic circumstances of every working-class household in York. He sent an investigator to each house, who decided, on the basis of the appearance of the household and the opinions of neighbours, whether that household was in poverty. 29.84% of the population was shown by this method to be living in a condition of poverty (see chart 2). As some historians have pointed out, it has surprised some readers of Rowntree's work to discover that the total extent of poverty in York was calculated in this impressionistic way.<sup>13</sup> However, Rowntree separated poverty into 'primary' and 'secondary' poverty. 'Primary poverty' was defined as a condition in which household income was not sufficient for the maintenance of physical efficiency, and was measured by establishing a poverty line and including in the category all those whose incomes fell below it. 'Secondary poverty' was a condition in which household income would have been sufficient for the maintenance of physical efficiency but for some non-essential expenditure. 'Secondary poverty' was calculated by subtracting the numbers in 'primary poverty' from those living in poverty. Using these concepts and methods, as chart 2 shows, Rowntree demonstrated that 9.91% of the population of York lived in 'primary poverty' and 17.93% in 'secondary poverty'. Rowntree also divided the population into classes, along the lines of Booth's classification of the London population; and supplemented his survey with information on the physique of the population, an analysis of a selection of York family budgets, and information on public houses, schools, churches, friendly societies and poor relief. He also attempted to enumerate the immediate causes of poverty in York. Catherine Marsh has seen Rowntree's survey as an important milestone in the transition from 'informant' to 'respondent' investigations;<sup>14</sup> and although the information supplied by householders was supplemented by additional input from 'voluntary workers, "district visitors," clergymen, and others',<sup>15</sup> the household inquiry represented a move from the 'wholesale' interviewing of Charles Booth's study<sup>16</sup> towards 'retail' interviewing.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Hennock, 'Measurement of Urban Poverty', p. 209.

<sup>14</sup> Catherine Marsh, 'Informants, Respondents and Citizens', in Martin Bulmer (ed.), *Essays on the History of British Sociological Research* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 215-16.

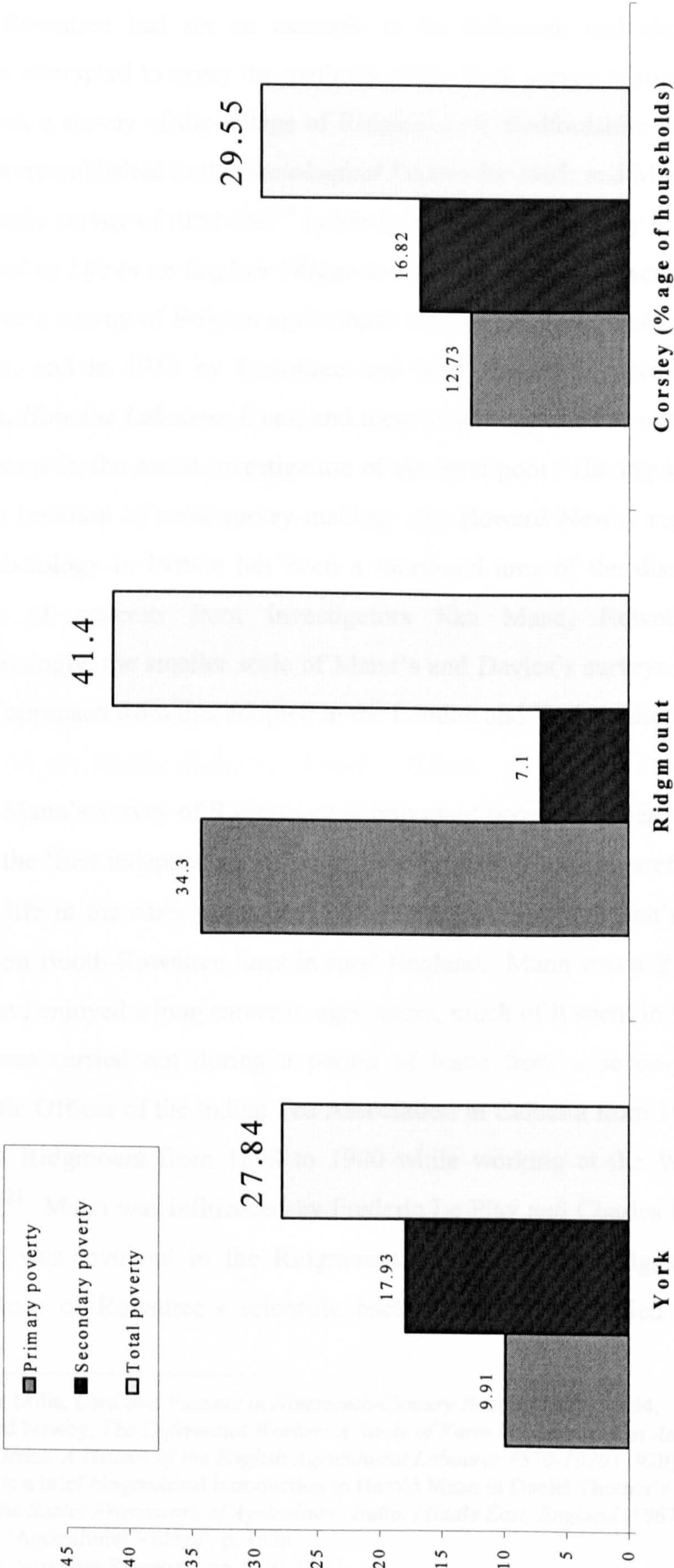
<sup>15</sup> Rowntree, *Poverty*, p. 14.

<sup>16</sup> Beatrice Webb, *My Apprenticeship* (Harmondsworth, 1971 [1st. ed. 1926]), pp. 234-40.

<sup>17</sup> Bulmer *et al*, *The Social Survey*, p. 22.



Chart 2: percentage of population in primary and secondary poverty in York (1899),  
Ridgmount (1903) and Corsley (1905-6)



(Source: Mark Freeman, ‘Investigating Rural Poverty 1870-1914: Problems of Conceptualisation and Methodology’, in J. Bradshaw & R. Sainsbury (eds.), *Getting the Measure of Poverty: The Early Legacy of Seebohm Rowntree* (Bristol, forthcoming).)



Rowntree had set an example to be followed; and shortly afterwards two ventures attempted to apply the methods of his York survey to rural life. Harold Mann undertook a survey of the village of Ridgmount in Bedfordshire in 1903, the results of which were published in the *Sociological Papers* for 1905; and Maud Davies carried out her 'classic survey of rural life'<sup>18</sup> in her home parish of Corsley in Wiltshire in 1905-6, published as *Life in an English Village* in 1909. These works were followed in 1910 by Rowntree's survey of Belgian agricultural conditions, *Land and Labour: Lessons from Belgium*, and in 1913 by Rowntree and May Kendall's survey of rural household budgets, *How the Labourer Lives*; and these works appeared to many observers to mark a new stage in the social investigation of the rural poor. Having said this, they did not father a tradition of rural survey-making. As Howard Newby regretted in the 1970s, 'rural sociology in Britain has been a moribund area of the discipline, despite early flickers of concern from investigators like Mann, Rowntree and Davies'.<sup>19</sup> Unsurprisingly, the smaller scale of Mann's and Davies's surveys prompted a different kind of approach from that adopted in the London and York studies.

Mann's survey of Ridgmount is important because he was, as described by F. E. Green, the 'first independent investigator to present us with a carefully drawn picture of village life in the early years of the twentieth century'.<sup>20</sup> Mann's was the first social survey on Booth-Rowntree lines in rural England. Mann was a Yorkshireman, born in 1872, and enjoyed a long career in agriculture, much of it spent in India: the Ridgmount study was carried out during a period of leave from a seven-year appointment as Scientific Officer of the Indian Tea Association in Calcutta from 1900 to 1907. He had lived at Ridgmount from 1898 to 1900 while working at the Woburn Experimental Station.<sup>21</sup> Mann was influenced by Frederic Le Play and Charles Booth, and Rowntree himself was involved in the Ridgmount project.<sup>22</sup> Asa Briggs has pointed to the importance of Rowntree's scientific background<sup>23</sup> - he studied chemistry at Owens

<sup>18</sup> Dennis Mills, *Lord and Peasant in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (1980), p. 54.

<sup>19</sup> Howard Newby, *The Deferential Worker: A Study of Farm Workers in East Anglia* (1977), p. 100.

<sup>20</sup> F. E. Green, *A History of the English Agricultural Labourer 1870-1920* (1920), p. 153.

<sup>21</sup> There is a brief biographical introduction to Harold Mann in Daniel Thorner's introduction to Harold H. Mann, *The Social Framework of Agriculture: India, Middle East, England* (1967).

<sup>22</sup> Mann, 'Agricultural Village', p. 163n.

<sup>23</sup> Briggs, *Seebohm Rowntree*, pp. 9-10, 12.



College in Manchester - and Mann's is no less significant. He described himself as a 'man of science',<sup>24</sup> and Daniel Thorner has pointed out that his 'fame in agriculture and the natural sciences always overshadowed his remarkable achievements in the field of social study'.<sup>25</sup> Knowing the nature and extent of the social problem was the central motivation for Mann: reviewing Rowntree's *Land and Labour* for the *Indian Interpreter* he argued that '[w]e shall never ... get beyond vague generalizations with regard to the social and economic conditions of the people unless we face the problem and go and get the facts at first hand for ourselves.'<sup>26</sup> Having applied these principles to English village life, Mann went on, with the encouragement of Patrick Geddes among others, to undertake a detailed survey of Poona in the Deccan, and later investigated particular problems such as the housing and employment of the 'untouchable' classes.<sup>27</sup> Mann was recommended as a skilled social investigator by Sidney Webb, L. T. Hobhouse and others;<sup>28</sup> and it is probable that had he not spent so much of his life in India, his impact on the history of British social investigation would have been greater.

Maud Davies was a native of Corsley in Wiltshire, her father being the local squire, Bryan Martin Davies of Corsley House. She was a member of the London County Council's School Care Committee - she wrote a short book on the work of such committees<sup>29</sup> - and was connected with Sidney and Beatrice Webb. Davies also aligned herself within the social-scientific mode of operation. Her survey was, according to a reviewer in the *Economic Journal*, 'a new departure in sociological investigation' but still 'typical of the aims of modern sociology, which endeavours above all things to get knowledge, and seeks to know before it attempts to reform'.<sup>30</sup> The investigation was carried out under the auspices of the London School of Economics; and the Webbs advised her 'on how to investigate and where to look for possible sources of information'.<sup>31</sup> Their influence is reflected in the presentation of the study, which

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<sup>24</sup> Mann, *Social Framework*, ch. 1.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*, p. xix.

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>27</sup> H. H. Mann, 'The Untouchable Classes of an Indian City', *Sociological Review*, vol. V (1912), pp. 42-55.

<sup>28</sup> Mann, *Social Framework*, p. xxii.

<sup>29</sup> M. F. Davies, *School Care Committees: A Guide to Their Work* (1909).

<sup>30</sup> *Economic Journal*, vol. XX (1910), p. 610.

<sup>31</sup> M. F. Davies, *Life in an English Village: An Economic and Historical Survey of the Parish of Corsley in Wiltshire* (1909), p. vii.



begins with a long section on the history of the parish, concerned in particular with institutions such as the Poor Law. The rural location of the survey ensured the inevitable treatment of the enclosure movement and the proletarianisation of the agricultural workforce. Davies was also responsible for a brief study of married women's work in rural districts for the Women's Industrial Council.<sup>32</sup> She committed suicide in 1913.<sup>33</sup>

The sites chosen for inquiry by Mann and Davies differed in some respects. Ridgmount was a closed village, part of the Duke of Bedford's estate; and was an almost wholly agricultural community. The old industries of straw-plaiting and lacemaking had all but disappeared;<sup>34</sup> and as Peter Laslett has emphasised, '[n]ot so much as a loaf of bread was baked in the village; it all came in horse vans from the towns.'<sup>35</sup> The stultification of the village community was reflected in the levels of poverty Mann uncovered: 41.4% of the population, an even higher proportion than in York or London, was living in poverty, of which 34.3% was in primary, and 7.1% in secondary, poverty. Unlike Ridgmount, Corsley, as Dennis Mills has pointed out, exhibited a relatively broad occupational structure, and Davies emphasised the importance of secondary and supplementary incomes in her study.<sup>36</sup> The survey was carried out in two phases. Between November 1905 and early January 1906 a form, reprinted as Appendix VII, was filled out for each household, based on information given by a member of the household: this followed Rowntree's method of 'retail' interviewing. The second phase, which took place from winter 1905-6 to winter 1906-7, entailed the collection of information 'as to the characteristics of the various households'.<sup>37</sup> This involved consultation with a number of moral authorities in the parish. Davies's survey showed that 29.55% of the households of Corsley lived in poverty, of which 12.73% was primary and 16.82% secondary (see chart 2). The proportion of the population in poverty would certainly have been higher than this, but

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<sup>32</sup> M. F. Davies, 'Rural Districts', in Clementina Black (ed.), *Married Women's Work, being the Report of an Enquiry Undertaken by the Women's Industrial Council* (1915), pp. 230-51.

<sup>33</sup> The story of Davies's suicide is told in the *Times*, 6/2/1913, p. 8 and 14/2/1913, p. 3.

<sup>34</sup> H. H. Mann, 'Life in an Agricultural Village in England', *Sociological Papers*, vol. I (1905), pp. 165, 173. See also *Royal Commission on Labour: Assistant Commissioners' Reports on the Agricultural Labourer, Vol. I: England*, PP 1893-4, C. 6894-I, p. 24.

<sup>35</sup> Peter Laslett, *The World We Have Lost* (1971 [1st. ed. 1965]), p. 217.

<sup>36</sup> Mills, *Lord and Peasant*, pp. 54-60; Davies, *English Village*, pp. 124-30.

<sup>37</sup> *ibid.*, p. 100.



she gave no figures for it.

Neither Mann nor Davies was as explicit as Rowntree in the explanation of their methods of calculating secondary and total poverty.<sup>38</sup> Generally, however, the method of Davies's survey was much the same as Rowntree's: a primary poverty line was adopted, the income of each household ascertained as accurately as possible, and the number in primary poverty calculated. A total poverty figure was arrived at by impressionistic methods, and the primary poverty figure subtracted from this to arrive at a number in secondary poverty. Mann was vaguer than Davies about his calculations; but it appears that he progressed somewhat differently, by examining the circumstances of each household, deciding whether it was in primary or secondary poverty, or not in poverty at all, and adding the first two figures together to obtain a total for those in poverty. Davies extended her inquiries into the history, the social life (including, like Rowntree, a survey of activity in public houses), and the moral character of the Corsley population; and she also employed Rowntree's concept of the poverty cycle to illustrate the dynamic nature of poverty, showing how most of the Corsley population were likely to pass through a condition of poverty at some point during their lives. She supplemented her survey with a more detailed analysis of thirteen domestic budgets from families in varying circumstances in the parish.

In all these investigations, the primary poverty figure rested on the reliability of the information obtained on household incomes. The adult male cash wage was not necessarily the only source of income in an urban household. Supplementary incomes, charitable gifts and poor relief could all make an important contribution to its income, and Rowntree had enumerated these additional resources in York with as much precision as possible. There were, however, additional practical problems with conducting an economic survey of rural life. Many rural households had irregular incomes: indeed the widespread custom of harvest payments made irregularity of income general even for those regularly employed. Mann and Davies found that a large

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<sup>38</sup> Davies has one claim to conceptual and methodological innovation. She included in her secondary poverty category those households with a margin of less than one shilling above the primary poverty line. Davies justified this on the grounds that the primary poverty line did not include such items as insurance; it was also, however, a tacit recognition of the impossibility of managing the household economy on the primary poverty line. (Davies, *English Village*, p. 145.)



range of additional earnings and resources, which were not generally available in towns, had to be taken into consideration in the calculation of family income; and these presented both methodological and conceptual problems for the investigator. Mann, for example, considered ten different sources of non-wage income which had to be taken into account in determining agricultural incomes.<sup>39</sup> Two particular additional difficulties were the evaluation of payments in kind, and the assessment of the economic value of allotment and garden produce.

While the practice of payment in kind had declined somewhat during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, it was still common in many areas. Of the 42 households whose budgets for typical weeks were analysed by Rowntree and Kendall in 1913, 25 received perquisites of one kind or another, and the families obtained an average of 4.3% of their total protein consumption from perquisites and charitable gifts, the highest proportion being 17.7%.<sup>40</sup> Mann found no payments in kind surviving in Ridgmount (or, if there were any, he ignored them) but the practice lingered in Corsley.<sup>41</sup> Davies estimated the free house and garden enjoyed by many labourers as worth 1s. 6d. per week; free beer where given at 1s. per week; and additional harvest payments, where the amount received was not known, at £2 12s., equal to 1s. per week.<sup>42</sup> These were necessarily arbitrary measures, and could not represent the real value of non-pecuniary income to the family. Free milk, received by a number of families in Corsley, was allotted its market value - 3d. per quart.<sup>43</sup> This was a fair measure, but an inaccurate reflection of family circumstances: if a free quart of milk were replaced by an extra 3d. on the wage, the money would probably not have been spent on a quart of milk. Ascribing a value to free beer was particularly problematic: beer did not contribute to the physical efficiency of the family, and the provision of beer was a morally questionable practice. Valuing any of these perquisites necessarily

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<sup>39</sup> Mann, 'Agricultural Village', pp. 169-76. The full list was: money sent home by children; allotments; harvest money; parochial charities; home industries; pigs and fowls; odd jobs; fruit farm; pensions and poor relief.

<sup>40</sup> B. Seebohm Rowntree & May Kendall, *How the Labourer Lives: A Study of the Rural Labour Problem* (1913), table between pp. 37 & 37. One household obtained 19.3% of its protein from charitable gifts: this was a special case, however, as it was a family whose breadwinner boarded with his employer.

<sup>41</sup> However, Davies noted that the labourers, with a low cash wage, actually received little in kind. (Davies, *English Village*, p. 118.)

<sup>42</sup> Davies, *English Village*, p. 115.

<sup>43</sup> *ibid.*, p. 116.



involved processes of cultural judgement; and the techniques used were contestable. The self-consciously economic investigations in urban areas reduced poverty to a question of the adequacy of pecuniary income, and if this was a limited definition in an urban context, it was perhaps even more inappropriate in a rural area, where the cash-nexus had not achieved the primacy it had attained in the urban economy.

The produce of gardens and allotments was also an important feature of the domestic economy of many rural labouring families. Rowntree was able to dismiss the importance of allotments in his calculations of poverty in York, as there were only about 120 in the city, mostly kept by 'well-to-do working men', and found the number keeping pigs and hens 'insignificant',<sup>44</sup> but such considerations were far more important in the rural context. Rowntree and Kendall pointed out in 1913 that 'many labourers have gardens or allotments on which they can raise an important proportion of their total food requirements',<sup>45</sup> implying that such produce might raise a family above the poverty line. Eleven of the 42 families in Rowntree's sample had allotments, and two had a share of common land. A majority of the families obtained some of their food from gardens or allotments, and in one case 23% of the total protein consumed came from home produce,<sup>46</sup> clearly more than would be expected from an urban worker's garden. The average figure for the 42 households was 7.5% of protein consumed. To measure the economic value of domestic produce was extremely difficult. As F. E. Green explained,

It is very difficult to get accurate information on the total value of a year's produce from an allotment or a private garden. Those who work them, naturally enough pick the crops as they mature for their own table, perhaps only a few pounds at a time, and this kind of thing is not conducive to good book-keeping.<sup>47</sup>

As Rowntree and Kendall were interested in domestic produce mainly as a nutritive rather than an economic resource, this problem did not apply to them in quite the same way as it did to Mann and Davies. Like Rowntree, however, Davies found that the allotment or garden was a 'valuable asset' to the labourer, but seems to have found it difficult to ascribe a value to the food produced except where it had been sold for money

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<sup>44</sup> Rowntree, *Poverty*, p. 113.

<sup>45</sup> Rowntree & Kendall, *How the Labourer Lives*, p. 31.

<sup>46</sup> *ibid.*, table between pp. 36-7; see also p. 51.

<sup>47</sup> F. E. Green, *Everyman's Land and Allotment Book* (n. d. but probably 1915), p. 83.



rather than consumed by the family itself.<sup>48</sup> She circumvented this difficulty in her poverty line calculations by assuming that the value of garden produce equalled the rent paid for a cottage.<sup>49</sup> Mann estimated the available profit from an average allotment.<sup>50</sup> Both of these were at best approximate measures of the economic value of allotment or garden produce to a labouring family.

Furthermore, the allotment was not merely a material resource: for the investigator of rural social conditions it was a value-laden commodity, a reflection of the moral superiority of rural life. In 1870 Thomas Kebbel had seen it as an invigorating feature of existence in the countryside: 'While cultivating his potatoes, his turnips, and his wheat, to say nothing of fruit and flowers, the labourer is merged in the husbandman, and begins to understand, for the first time, what is meant by the dignity of industry. The plot of ground, too, is the source of a common interest to the whole family, and the pride they take in it sheds a humanising influence on the otherwise cheerless tenor of their lives.'<sup>51</sup> Throughout the 1880s and subsequent decades, the question of allotment provision, linked to the more radical proposals for land reform and smallholdings, was a central issue of rural politics, having both an economic and a cultural significance. The allotment or smallholding held a great moral authority, and even for the town-dweller represented a potential avenue for personal economic and social advancement. Thus in *Land and Labour* Rowntree looked to the Belgian model of living in the countryside but working in the town as a means of reinvigorating the moral and physical condition of the British worker.<sup>52</sup> Rowntree and Kendall did, however, recognise the disadvantages attached to allotment-holding in rural communities: work on an allotment was the same as the work the labourer did for wages, and did not constitute a valuable and invigorating change.<sup>53</sup> Insights like this reflect the authors' desire to go beyond the confines of the economic and statistical interpretation of labouring life; and they remind the reader that the moral and cultural aspects of social investigation in rural areas were inextricably

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<sup>48</sup> Davies, *English Village*, pp. 136-7.

<sup>49</sup> *ibid.*, p. 141.

<sup>50</sup> Mann, 'Agricultural Village', pp. 170-2.

<sup>51</sup> T. E. Kebbel, *The Agricultural Labourer: A Short Summary of his Position* (1870), p. 71.

<sup>52</sup> B. Seebohm Rowntree, *Land and Labour: Lessons from Belgium* (1910), pp. 288-94. See also his evidence to the Physical Deterioration Committee, in which he praised the Garden City movement, and described a suburban housing scheme in York with which he was involved. (PP 1904, vol. II, qq. 5103-4, 5119-21, 5187-9.)

<sup>53</sup> Rowntree & Kendall, *How the Labourer Lives*, pp. 31-2, 332.



lined with any survey of material conditions.

It might well be argued that the widespread and systematic survey of material conditions would be likely to miss many of these additional resources. The brief visits of Rowntree's investigator to the working-class households of York could uncover only the bare essentials of the household's circumstances. Helen Bosanquet, Rowntree's sternest critic, argued that to understand the intricacies of the domestic economy of the poor required a much longer association with a family and an intimate knowledge of its budgeting.<sup>54</sup> Anecdotal studies offered evidence of the potential of the distributional study to mislead. Martha Loane knew of a large family 'in the country'<sup>55</sup> which on first glance appeared to be supported by the father's wages of 16s. per week. Investigating this case in more depth, however, she discovered that, including the father's overtime pay and supplementary income, the family's cash income alone totalled 22s. 7d., and that a large garden (in which the entire annual supply of fruit and vegetables was grown), free milk from a farmer's wife and gifts of clothing made the 'real income' at least 30s.<sup>56</sup> The family pig was another resource; and there was evidence of considerable redistribution of goods within the family, the eldest child's clothing being handed down to her siblings.<sup>57</sup> Poverty investigators admitted these difficulties. Charles Booth despaired of comparing town and country conditions: in his evidence to the Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration he remarked that '[c]ountry conditions are very different, both as to the way in which they try to live and as to the extra chances they have in garden produce, and so on. I am not able to give you a comparison.'<sup>58</sup> The smaller scale of Mann's and Davies's studies made the deeper investigation of these extra resources possible; but their accuracy and reliability is still open to question. These complexities made any realistic quantitative assessment of family income difficult; and the cultural questions they raised struck at the heart of Edwardian definitions of poverty.

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<sup>54</sup> Bosanquet, Mrs. Bernard, *The Poverty Line* (1903).

<sup>55</sup> M. Loane, *The Queen's Poor: Life as They Find It in Town and Country* (with an introduction by Susan Cohen and Clive Fleay, 1998 [1st. ed. 1905]), p. 155.

<sup>56</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 156-7.

<sup>57</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 156-7.

<sup>58</sup> PP 1904, vol. II, q. 1159.



Poverty had its cultural dimensions wherever it was located: it could never be given a value-free definition. The question of secondary poverty illustrates this even more clearly. Rowntree defined secondary poverty as a condition in which physical efficiency could theoretically be maintained were the household income not inefficiently spent: this expenditure, however, as he explicitly pointed out, could be 'useful or wasteful'.<sup>59</sup> On these grounds, he has been defended by historians from the charge of excessive cultural judgementalism.<sup>60</sup> Mann, however, took a more moralistic approach to the category of secondary poverty. He defined it as poverty 'due to an uneconomical application of earnings',<sup>61</sup> but linked it more directly to 'character' than Rowntree had done. Half the families in secondary poverty in Ridgmount were in that condition because of drink 'and its associated vices'.<sup>62</sup> The most noticeable fact about Mann's findings, however, is the limited extent of secondary poverty that he uncovered: only 7.1% of the population (see chart 2). Mann's explanation for this was related to land tenure in the village: 'In a village lying in the heart of the agricultural districts of England, and of which the bulk of the place belongs to landlords who are particular as to the character of their cottage-tenants, the amount of secondary poverty is necessarily limited.'<sup>63</sup> This highlights the importance of the character of social relations in the countryside, and the intimacy of their connection with the concept of rural poverty.

Whatever their cultural preoccupations, however, Mann's and Davies's investigations appeared to show that poverty was as widespread in rural districts as in York and London. In one sense, at least, Mann's findings were even more striking than Rowntree's in York, as nearly five-sixths of Ridgmount poverty was primary. Furthermore, the poverty which had been identified by urban investigators could be experienced more intensely in the countryside. Paradoxically, it could be argued that the very features of rural life which were adduced by some investigators to show that country life was better than urban life actually contributed to worsen the problem of poverty. Thomas Kebbel had pointed to the longevity of agricultural labourers as

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<sup>59</sup> Rowntree, *Poverty*, p. 87.

<sup>60</sup> J. H. Veit-Wilson, 'Paradigms of Poverty: A Rehabilitation of B. S. Rowntree', in David Englander & Rosemary O'Day (eds.), *Retrieved Riches: Social Investigation in Britain 1840-1914* (Aldershot, 1995), pp. 203, 212, 214; Briggs, *Seebohm Rowntree*, p. 34; Hennock, 'Concepts of Poverty', p. 199.

<sup>61</sup> Mann, 'Agricultural Village', p. 169.

<sup>62</sup> *ibid.*, p. 185.

<sup>63</sup> *ibid.*, p. 185.



evidence of their better conditions:<sup>64</sup> certainly they were healthier, but their longer old age meant that they spent more time in poverty. Infant mortality was also lower in rural areas:<sup>65</sup> this could be seen as a reflection of the healthier conditions of rural life, but it meant that families were often larger, and thus the poverty cycle was intensified. (As Neil Philip has pointed out, the average family size was not much higher in the countryside, but there appear to have been more very large families.)<sup>66</sup> Maud Davies found that of 28 cases of families in primary poverty in Corsley, 17 were due to low wages or largeness of family.<sup>67</sup> Furthermore, 76 of the 121 children in the parish were in primary poverty, and Davies remarked that the remaining 45 would probably have been or could expect to be in primary poverty at some time in their lives.<sup>68</sup> The figures from J. A. Spender's report on pensions suggest that it was possible that later middle-age poverty might be alleviated by a longer active working life in agriculture than was usual in other sectors,<sup>69</sup> but at this age it was likely that the family with many children would in any case be in a state of relative comfort because of supplementary incomes.

It could be retorted that these problems associated with rural life were overridden by compensating factors. In particular, the argument that charity was more liberally and efficiently bestowed in the countryside was still advanced in the Edwardian period. The flourishing of country literature helped this vision of the organic community to persist. Despite the efforts of many commentators to overturn the romantic conception of rural life, enough observers clung to the paternalistic ideal and notions of social inclusiveness for country life to continue to bear a certain ideological significance. The 'garden city' movement, Ruskinism and the popularity of 'country books' bear witness to a revival of pastoralism in the Edwardian years.<sup>70</sup> Helen Allingham's popular books, for example, showing pretty honeysuckle cottages and contented dairymaids, were a powerful force in shaping conceptions of the

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<sup>64</sup> Kebbel, *The Agricultural Labourer*, p. 223.

<sup>65</sup> See Dr. J. F. W. Tatham's report to the Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration, in which he showed that infant mortality in rural counties was 138.8 and 111.0 for males and females respectively, compared with 180.0 and 149.2 in urban counties. (PP 1904, vol. I, Appendix Va.)

<sup>66</sup> Neil Philip, *Victorian Village Life* (Idbury, Oxon., 1993), p. 24.

<sup>67</sup> Davies, *English Village*, pp. 142-3.

<sup>68</sup> *ibid.*, p. 149.

<sup>69</sup> J. A. Spender, *The State and Pensions in Old Age* (1892), pp. 42-3.

<sup>70</sup> See Jan Marsh, *Back to the Land: The Pastoral Impulse in Britain from 1880 to 1914* (1982).



countryside.<sup>71</sup> The activities of folklore collectors and rustic enthusiasts such as Gertrude Jekyll were part of a passion for documenting a vanishing way of life; but it was this vanishing life which for many untutored urban observers remained the essence of rurality. It was still the first task of many investigators to explode the myths surrounding rural life. It was the duty of many to point out that the appeal of 'Back to the Land' was quite unsubstantiated. Thus Harold Mann's conclusion to his survey of Ridgmount expressed unequivocally the futility of what one historian has called the 'pastoral impulse':<sup>72</sup> 'the outcry against the depopulation of the country ... must remain little more than a parrot-cry', he argued, until something was done to improve the material condition and the outlook of the agricultural labourer.<sup>73</sup>

While the rural poverty statistics made for reading as shocking as those for London and York, one mode of analysis which did not translate from urban surveys to work in rural areas was the classification of the population. Booth divided the population of London into eight classes, A to H, the definitions of each class being based on income, except for Class A, the lowest class, which consisted of 'labourers, loafers, semi-criminals' and 'the homeless outcasts of the streets' among others, Class B which comprised 'shiftless' casual labourers, and Class C, whose earnings were low and irregular.<sup>74</sup> Rowntree adopted a sevenfold classification of the York population, A to G, mostly based on income. The social classification approach was not adopted by rural investigators. This is not to say that the population was never categorised. In the nineteenth century, official investigators subdivided the agricultural population by the nature of their hire or the type of agricultural occupation in which they were engaged. These categories, however, dealt largely with the mechanics of agricultural employment; and although it was recognised that the structure of agricultural hiring had important knock-on social effects, these classification schemes did not serve a direct social purpose in the way that Booth's and Rowntree's did.

There were several reasons why the early rural sociologists did not adopt the

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<sup>71</sup> Helen Allingham & Stewart Dick, *The Cottage Homes of England* (1984 [1st. ed. 1909]).

<sup>72</sup> Marsh, *Back to the Land*.

<sup>73</sup> Mann, 'Agricultural Village', pp. 192-3.

<sup>74</sup> Booth, 'The Inhabitants of Tower Hamlets (School Board Division), Their Condition and Occupations', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, vol. L (1887), p. 329.



same strategy. Booth subdivided the population of London in this way in order to isolate the different social problems and suggest different remedies for each. Rowntree's motives were similar. Subdivision was generally less important in rural areas, for the simple reason that in most rural theatres of investigation the majority of the population were engaged in one industry (agriculture) and one occupation within that industry (labouring). Labouring, at least to urban observers unacquainted with the variety of agricultural functions performed by the individual labourer, appeared to be the same everywhere. The 'rural labour problem' was just one social problem, whereas in the towns a variety were pressing. Thus C. F. G. Masterman, in *The Condition of England*, dealt in turn with the different classes of urban England, and then in a separate chapter with rural life.<sup>75</sup> Because most investigators viewed rural life from an urban perspective - even if they were country-dwellers themselves they worked within an urban-dominated analytical framework - they did not usually disaggregate the various problems of rural life.

A second reason was the size of area that was dealt with in urban investigations. Either the area studied was very large - as was the case with Haggard in England or Rowntree in Belgium - and the interview or correspondence method was adopted, which did not allow for such close gradations of the population; or it was very intensive, and represented a community which was small enough to be investigated as a whole and did not need to be separated out into sub-strata. In a village or a parish the individual and the community were both accessible to the investigator, whereas London and York were not of manageable size. Booth's famous maps of London, as Ifan Shepherd has pointed out, were colour-coded by street, and this concealed many of the variations within the streets: the individual was not accessible in an urban survey.<sup>76</sup>

A third reason was related to the fact that the rural population, for all the evidence that had been adduced as to the unenviability of its position in many respects, was still seen as a reservoir of national strength and character. The countryman was still

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<sup>75</sup> C. F. G. Masterman, *The Condition of England* (1909), ch. 6.

<sup>76</sup> Ifan Shepherd, 'Mapping the Poor: The Micro-Geography of Poverty in Late-Victorian London', in J. Bradshaw & R. Sainsbury (eds.), *Getting the Measure of Poverty: The Early Legacy of Seebohm Rowntree* (Bristol, forthcoming).



worthy of respect. The rural equivalent of Booth's Class A, loafers or tramps, were more likely to be viewed as lovable eccentrics than as a social danger. A 'village idiot' might be pitiable, but was not a threat to the social order: indeed, he provided an opportunity for well-meaning paternalistic benevolence. Augustus Jessopp's 'Swain of Arcady', a Scarning loafer who worked when he wanted to, and was filthy in his habits, was eccentric, and possibly amoral, but he did nobody any harm.<sup>77</sup> Jessopp called him 'a loafer by common consent'.<sup>78</sup> The Devonian resident investigator Stephen Reynolds knew of a tramp, given the delightful sobriquet of 'Beautiful Onionhead', who lived in a cave somewhere along the cliffs and was if anything pitied, certainly not detested, by the local working-class community.<sup>79</sup> In London and other large towns, Class A, while still not large, was more heavily concentrated, and generally more vicious. Rural vagrants were often refugees from towns who were no longer eligible to spend time in urban casual wards and temporarily removed themselves to the 'spikes' of rural workhouses. Much of the rural Class A, then, was in fact an urban social problem.

Booth's Classes B and C were also less apparent in rural areas. Indeed, Booth's solution to the problem of the large metropolitan Class B was removal to a rural environment.<sup>80</sup> Class B was best represented in the countryside by the seasonal workers who helped with the fruit harvest, and especially with hop-picking. Rider Haggard and others included some rich descriptions of the filthy and degraded habits of these workers in their social investigations.<sup>81</sup> Such workers, however, also spent most of their lives in the towns and they were thus not specifically a rural problem. Some commentators, such as Mary Russell of Kent who supplied Rider Haggard with information about hop-pickers, thought that the time spent by these people in this relatively congenial summer employment was of great social value.<sup>82</sup> There was a problem of casual labour in

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<sup>77</sup> Augustus Jessopp, *Arcady: For Better for Worse* (popular edition, 1887 [1st. ed. 1887]), ch. 6, esp. p. 176.

<sup>78</sup> *ibid.*, p. 184.

<sup>79</sup> Stephen Reynolds, *Alongshore: Where Man and the Sea Face One Another* (1910), ch. 20.

<sup>80</sup> See Brown, 'Charles Booth'.

<sup>81</sup> See Haggard, *Rural England*, vol. I, pp. 163-5. See also Christopher Holdenby, *Folk of the Furrow* (1913), ch. 11. Gypsies may also have fallen into Class A: they were a vagrant and semi-criminal population. However, the Borrowian romance surrounding the gypsy lifestyle was at its height in the Edwardian period, and it is rare that one finds a harsh criticism of gypsies in the literature of the period. In any case, the gypsy population had declined by this time, and was mostly an irrelevance in studies of rural social life and poverty.

<sup>82</sup> Haggard, *Rural England*, vol. I, p. 164. See also Jack London, *The People of the Abyss* (New York, 1903), chs. 14-15.



agricultural employment, but it was generally agreed that hours were becoming more regularised in this period.<sup>83</sup> The wages of such labourers, in any case, and agricultural labourers in general, were so low that they were usually unable to engage in the kinds of vices - most notably excessive drinking - which were so common in towns. (The practice of payment in kind, albeit in decline by the start of the twentieth century, also tied up a proportion of the labourer's income and prevented it from being spent unwholesomely.)

In many respects, the problems of Rowntree's classes C and D were the problems of the rural labouring classes. There was little intense poverty in the countryside, but families were constantly at the margins of poverty, living the sort of precarious existence that was shared by Maud Pember Reeves's families in Lambeth or Florence Bell's in Middlesbrough. Rowntree remarked that his class D, whose members were unlikely to be in primary poverty, had little education, and a limited intellectual outlook.<sup>84</sup> The lives of the women in this class were more private than in other classes, and therefore even more monotonous.<sup>85</sup> The same diagnosis was repeatedly made of rural life, by Rowntree himself among others. The agenda of investigators and reformers from the 1880s onward, and especially as the problem of depopulation appeared to worsen, often emphasised the spiritual poverty of villages, and the need to provide entertainments and social facilities in order to relieve the tedium of country life.<sup>86</sup>

Partly in view of this feature of rural life, Rowntree, like Charles Booth, took a different approach when he turned his attention to the investigation of social conditions in the countryside. Most of his Belgian study was carried out using the informant method, which served as a means of getting access to information about a large area with relatively little difficulty. The British study, *How the Labourer Lives*, by contrast, took a more intensive approach. 42 domestic budgets, from various parts of the

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<sup>83</sup> See for example Alan Armstrong, *Farmworkers: A Social and Economic History 1770-1980* (1988), pp. 98-9, 112-13, 144. On p. 144 he notes that there was still a significant group of casual workers, but this was often composed of seasonal migrants, especially the Irish in the north of England.

<sup>84</sup> Rowntree, *Poverty*, p. 74.

<sup>85</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 77-8, 78n1.

<sup>86</sup> See above, pp. 97-100, and below, pp. 255-8, for further discussions of the problem of cultural and spiritual poverty.



country,<sup>87</sup> were analysed, and each was accompanied by a detailed description of the household and its circumstances. Rowntree had used the analysis of budgets to supplement the broader picture supplied by his York survey. In the rural study, however, he approached the work from the opposite direction. The bulk of *How the Labourer Lives* consisted of the 42 budgets and monographs; and this was supplemented by a commentary, derived from 'some hundreds of visits to labourers' homes in many parts of the country',<sup>88</sup> on 'The Labourer's Outlook'. One justification for the adoption of this method was the nature of the agricultural population. Agricultural labour, Rowntree thought, produced 'a solid strength of character',<sup>89</sup> whereas the town-dweller 'suffers from ... living in a crowd': 'His opinions are the opinions of the crowd - and a crowd is easily swayed, for evil as well as for good.'<sup>90</sup> Rowntree thought that individuality was the hallmark of the countryman (ironic given that he, like most commentators, tended to refer to 'the labourer' in the singular). This individuality, which was repressed by the crowded conditions of urban life, prompted a different kind of social investigation, in which social problems were approached through the individual rather than the mass.

The approach taken by Rowntree and Kendall was deliberately non-statistical. This was partly a corollary of the monographic approach. They included a statistical summary of the budgets, for what it was worth, which is interesting but clearly could not be employed in making any meaningful generalisations. This, however, was not their intention: they aimed to select individual cases from which general *impressions* might be derived, rather than to reach any 'scientific' conclusions about labouring life. In this context, they may be compared with Rider Haggard, who took a similar approach, albeit with a very different social grade of informant. However, the monographic method was selected for another reason: as the authors explained, they hoped to 'give the reader the sense of intimate contact with facts which statistics alone do not always convey'.<sup>91</sup> Rowntree and Kendall attempted to portray 'the meaning of inadequate wages in terms

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<sup>87</sup> 10 were from Oxfordshire, 8 from Essex, 4 from Berkshire, 1 from Bedfordshire, 4 from Leicestershire, and 15 from Yorkshire, of which 9 were from the North Riding, 4 from the East Riding and 2 from the West Riding.

<sup>88</sup> Rowntree & Kendall, *How the Labourer Lives*, p. 6.

<sup>89</sup> *ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>90</sup> *ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>91</sup> *ibid.*, p. 6.



of sober reality'<sup>92</sup> rather than simply to demonstrate the extent of the problem. In terms of presentation, the anecdotal approach was often the best way to achieve this objective, and Rowntree was fortunate to have the assistance of May Kendall, who had, in Asa Briggs's words, a 'gift for homely anecdote' that 'made many of Rowntree's articles and books more readable than they otherwise would have been'.<sup>93</sup> As John Fraser has argued,<sup>94</sup> it seems likely that Rowntree and Kendall were influenced by the developments in cultural investigation that are described in chapter 8.

Similarly, both Mann and Davies also stressed the importance of a more intensive and intimate knowledge of the people under investigation. Even within the context of his own strictly economic survey, Mann found that to ascertain conditions accurately required a penetration into, rather than a superficial treatment of, village life. When the respondent method was being used, the investigated population was supplying the information about itself. Remembering his Ridgmount study in 1961, Mann remarked on

the failure of the so-called 'census' method of getting accurate data except for the simplest facts, such as the relative number of males and females, the size of families, or the age structure of the population. When one attempted to get data as to economic position, a census enumerator would be apt to get answers to his questions which would be far from an accurate presentation of the facts. In other words, it is only when the investigator is closely in touch with the people, and is quite familiar with their background that the data obtained are likely to be correct.<sup>95</sup>

Mann was careful to point out that he and his assistants were familiar with the area before carrying out the work.<sup>96</sup> For all the advantages of respondent over informant methods, the former posed new problems which had to be overcome if it was to yield usable information. It was essential for the investigator to have the confidence of the

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<sup>92</sup> Rowntree & Kendall, *How the Labourer Lives*, p. 6.

<sup>93</sup> Briggs, *Seebohm Rowntree*, p. 83. Kendall seems to have done the bulk of the fieldwork for the study; and she was also responsible for the budgets in Rowntree's study of unemployment in York, on which she worked without a co-authorship credit. (B. Seebohm Rowntree & Bruno Lasker, *Unemployment: A Social Study* (1909), p. xvii.) Kendall wrote the descriptions of individual families and supervised their budget-keeping.

<sup>94</sup> John Fraser, 'George Sturt ("George Bourne") and Rural Labouring Life', PhD thesis, University of Minnesota (1961), p. 205.

<sup>95</sup> Mann, *Social Framework*, pp. 22-3.

<sup>96</sup> Mann, 'Agricultural Village', pp. 164-5.



villagers if accurate information - especially budgets - was to be obtained.<sup>97</sup> Like Mann, Davies stressed that the inhabitants cooperated fully with the investigation.<sup>98</sup> Her own feelings were that the scientific investigation of life in her own village led to findings which 'were entirely at variance with the preconceived notions she had formed from twelve years' superficial acquaintance with the parish and its inhabitants'.<sup>99</sup> It may have been, however, that what she really obtained was a more realistic picture of the village which she had only known as the daughter of the local squire, and it was her closer involvement with the people themselves during the period of the investigation that brought about what she felt was a deeper knowledge of the social life and conditions in the parish.

Davies, like Charles Booth, found that the rural location of her survey allowed a more intensive approach to be adopted. Gilbert Slater, the historian of rural life, thought that she had achieved 'a fulness and accuracy which could not possibly be attained in an urban survey'.<sup>100</sup> A reviewer in the *Economic Journal* claimed for Davies's work that it marked 'a new departure in sociological investigation, at any rate when we consider the scale on which it has been carried out'.<sup>101</sup> This comment can be read in two ways: on the one hand, the *smallness* of the scale was noteworthy - the population covered was small - and, on the other, the *completeness* of its coverage could not be approached in a survey of an urban community. Potential informants were, in theory at least, likely to know the village more completely than was possible in a town, and be able to pronounce judgements on every member of the community. There were two reasons for this: on a practical level, the smallness of the population, and, ideologically, the supposed persistence of face-to-face social relations in rural society. Davies, supplementing her own knowledge of Corsley life, made full use of 'a person who knew the parish intimately',<sup>102</sup> for example, and obtained a more complete set of information than she could have done in an urban context. Her efforts in this direction can be contrasted with those of Frederick Scott, who in 1888 published the results of a house-to-house inquiry

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<sup>97</sup> Mann, *Social Framework*, p. 23.

<sup>98</sup> Davies, *English Village*, p. 104.

<sup>99</sup> *ibid.*, p. 285.

<sup>100</sup> *Sociological Review*, vol. III (1910), pp. 170-1.

<sup>101</sup> *Economic Journal*, vol. XX (1910), p. 609.

<sup>102</sup> Davies, *English Village*, p. 102.



into the conditions of the population in two parishes in Manchester and Salford.<sup>103</sup> Scott used mission women to carry out this survey; and as E. P. Hennock has pointed out, 'no-one who had to rely on a voluntary body could hope to cover an area the size of Manchester and Salford'.<sup>104</sup> In York, while Rowntree achieved completeness of coverage, the depth of investigation could not have been great. As Peter Kaim-Caudle has pointed out, Rowntree's investigator may have enjoyed an average of only seven minutes in the company of each family.<sup>105</sup> Davies, on the other hand, was able to achieve a more intensive perspective on the lives of the Corsley people: as one admiring commentator remarked, 'Miss Davies has evidently spared no pains to get at the home life of the labourer, and she seems to have looked in upon him at meal times and seen with her own eyes how he fared'.<sup>106</sup> In a small parish, it was possible for one person to carry out a house-to-house investigation, and to supplement this with the informed - if prejudiced - opinion of local authorities such as clergymen.

Like Mann, Davies realised that a number of social barriers separated her from the information she wanted. She was aware of the potential problems of the informant approach. In her book on School Care Committees, she explained her view of the most suitable technique, albeit in an urban context. She thought that the most trustworthy evidence came from 'those who live not very differently from the working classes themselves, and yet are enough removed from their social sphere to be free from the petty spites and jealousies, that too often poison the imaginations and tongues of neighbours'.<sup>107</sup> Dissenting ministers often made better informants than the 'aristocratic' visitors who worked for the Church of England clergy, for example.<sup>108</sup> Davies, like Anderson Graham, was advocating an informant method, but one which took account of the intimacy of contact which the informant himself had with the working classes. There is no direct evidence that she was influenced by social commentators who took a

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<sup>103</sup> Frederick Scott, 'The Condition and Occupations of the People of Manchester and Salford', *Transactions of the Manchester Statistical Society* (1888-9), pp. 93-116.

<sup>104</sup> Hennock, 'Measurement of Urban Poverty', p. 211.

<sup>105</sup> Peter Kaim-Caudle, 'Misleading Data: Comments on the First and Third Social Surveys of York', in J. Bradshaw & R. Sainsbury (eds.), *Getting the Measure of Poverty: The Early Legacy of Seebohm Rowntree* (Bristol, forthcoming).

<sup>106</sup> *Standard*, 7/2/1910, p. 6. I am grateful to John D'Arcy of the Wiltshire Record Office for directing me to this reference.

<sup>107</sup> Davies, *School Care Committees*, p. 44.

<sup>108</sup> *ibid.*, p. 44.



more intensive and personal approach, but she was a district visitor herself, and clearly understood the power of social sympathy and the importance of winning the confidence of the working classes.

For all her professed sympathy with the poor man's plight, however, Davies's strategy of social investigation still involved the use of informants to make moral assessments of the working-class subjects of the investigation. She claimed that her investigation divested her of her many misconceptions derived from the superficiality of her prior knowledge of the village, but her approach to the working-class population was in some senses still 'superficial'. Many of the opinions expressed in *Life in an English Village* savour of the manor house from which she came. Like Lady Bell in Middlesborough, Davies swept into her own working-class backyard, inquiring into the habits of the poor with an air of moral judgmentalism which was not wholly redeemed by her attempts to empathise with them. Her investigation of 'Character and its Relation to Poverty' is a good example. The importance in this inquiry of the households' 'Promptness in Paying Debts and Thrift Generally' reflected the cultural standpoint of Davies and the bulk of her informants. The householders themselves had supplied information on their backgrounds and earnings (though the latter were checked by a respectable and trustworthy informant); but the investigation of 'character' necessarily proceeded on different lines. The 'character' of 162 households (excluding the artisan population, who were known for their thrift and temperance, and did not require investigation under this heading) was described by 'various persons likely to be well informed'.<sup>109</sup> It is not always clear from whom the reports on the adult population were taken, but the information on the children was derived from the reports of the parish schools. Sometimes two views were obtained for a household, one of them often coming from the employer of the head of household. Except in cases where the employer gave information, the source was not usually cited. This is a selection from the reports:

Man gives no trouble. Wife inclined to drink; respectable otherwise. Son out of work; was bad at getting up in the mornings some time back.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Davies, *English Village*, p. 154.

<sup>110</sup> *ibid.*, p. 159.



[A widow's household:] Don't know much about her; used not to bear good character. "Eldest son lazy, drunken, little beggar." Those young men generally in any mischief going.<sup>111</sup>

Very respectable people. Informant had once seen him with "a little beer" and then very quarrelsome. A man scarcely ever seen at public-house.<sup>112</sup>

(1) Very decent man. Wife a bad woman; would do any one harm if she got the chance. (2) Very nice, hard-working man; wife not so good as he is (tongue).<sup>113</sup>

The last example is a case where two reports were obtained for one household. In this instance, the reports concurred, but in other cases the two opinions could differ. One household, for example, which was in primary poverty, was summarised briefly and inconclusively by two informants: (1) Respectable. (2) *Employer*: Very nice man; wife dirty and untidy.<sup>114</sup> These statements, however accurate, came from one class, and were not counterbalanced by any working-class opinion. It will be noted that the questionnaire which the working-class householders were asked to fill out contains little or no scope for the expression of opinion. Furthermore, even within this limited series of questions, Davies remarked that some of the answers given were unlikely to be a perfectly unbiased reflection of the truth.<sup>115</sup> Within the informant structure of the 'character' study, however, she did not make the same observation. The very fact that those consulted were 'likely to be well informed' was sufficient.

Davies's comments on the children of the parish are even more revealing, showing as they do the influence that the 'national efficiency' debate had on her study. Children were a particular interest of hers, as her School Care Committee work shows; and in the presentation of her findings in Corsley she emphasised the size of the problem of primary poverty among children, which Rowntree had pointed to in defining the 'poverty cycle'. Davies clearly positioned herself within the debate on physical degeneration. Historians have paid particular attention to fears about racial degeneration in towns and cities in this period, and stressed the importance of notions of

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<sup>111</sup> *ibid.*, p. 165.

<sup>112</sup> *ibid.*, p. 181.

<sup>113</sup> *ibid.*, p. 179.

<sup>114</sup> *ibid.*, p. 159.

<sup>115</sup> *ibid.*, p. 101. In Davies's defence, however, it should be pointed out that she also pointed out the tendency of employers to over-value the 'extras' earned by their labourers.



the urban 'residuum' to investigators such as Booth and Rowntree.<sup>116</sup> Rowntree was convinced that 'no civilisation can be sound or stable which has at its base this mass of stunted human life',<sup>117</sup> and Lady Bell was conscious that her investigations in Middlesbrough were taking place at a time when 'we are constantly, anxiously, unavailingly, trying to prevent the much-discussed deterioration of the race'.<sup>118</sup> The same problems were identified by Davies from a rural point of view. Her reports make use of the terms employed by her contemporaries on 'degeneration', 'deterioration' and 'deficiency'. In her table of household 'character' she highlighted those families where 'one or more children show characteristics which might be the result of poverty and insufficient feeding. These marks of *deficiency* are dulness, nervousness, laziness, "strangeness" or "peculiarity" of disposition, dirtiness of disposition.'<sup>119</sup> She emphasised that such 'deficiency' was widespread 'even in a rural district where every advantage of good air and healthy surroundings is obtained'.<sup>120</sup> Davies concluded her study by arguing the need for reform, drawing in the themes of rural depopulation and urban degeneration, and expressing the hope that Corsley would in future 'bring up an increased number of sons and daughters, more healthy, vigorous, and efficient than their elder brothers and sisters of the past, and ready to renew the less generous blood of the towns, or to recruit the Army and Navy'.<sup>121</sup> An implication of this social-imperialist approach, as her comments on 'deficiency' make clear, was a form of social study which viewed the working classes from an elevated social position: one from which they were seen first and foremost as a national resource rather than simply as individuals.

These 'scientific' investigations, then, took place within a moral framework which operated upon rather than stemmed from the working-class populations. Davies's 'view from above' could be challenged on the grounds that the conditions she described, often through the eyes of village elites, would have been viewed very differently from a working-class perspective. The observations of such investigators were necessarily coloured by their own social position and their own expectations. As E. P. Hennock has

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<sup>116</sup> For example, John Brown, 'Charles Booth and Labour Colonies 1889-1905', *Economic History Review*, 2nd. series, vol. XXI (1968), pp. 349-60.

<sup>117</sup> Rowntree, *Poverty*, p. 304.

<sup>118</sup> Lady Bell, *At the Works: A Study of a Manufacturing Town* (1985 [1st. ed. 1907]), p. 171.

<sup>119</sup> Davies, *English Village*, p. 152.

<sup>120</sup> *ibid.*, p. 153.

<sup>121</sup> *ibid.*, p. 290.



pointed out, for all the 'scientific' pretensions of the poverty surveys of Booth and Rowntree, their evaluation of household circumstances was ultimately based on a count of 'impressions, carefully cross-checked with other impressions insofar as they were available'.<sup>122</sup> Karel Williams has characterised Rowntree's impressionistic poverty investigation as having 'only operationalised stock responses to the working class'.<sup>123</sup> Where Rowntree had included in the 'secondary poverty' category those living in 'obvious want and squalor',<sup>124</sup> Davies similarly included those 'obviously living in want'.<sup>125</sup> Mann did not explicitly define his version of the category - though it was clearly based on Rowntree's - and he admitted that '[i]n deciding whether a particular household is to be classed as poverty-stricken, the personal feeling of the enumerator also affects the results considerably.'<sup>126</sup>

This is the point of the 'survey' method: those who observed these conditions may well take a different view from those who experienced them. In his article on 'The Dorsetshire Labourer' twenty years before the Mann and Davies surveys, Thomas Hardy criticised the 'view from above':

The happiness of a class can rarely be estimated aright by philosophers who look down upon that class from the Olympian heights of society. Nothing, for instance, is more common than for some philanthropic lady to burst in upon a family, be struck by the apparent squalor of the scene, and to straightway mark down that household in her note-book as a frightful example of the misery of the labouring classes.<sup>127</sup>

On one level, it was possible to fool the investigator. Hardy identified tactics used to outwit middle-class visitors. One woman told him that 'I always kip a white apron behind the door to slip on when the gentlefolk knock, for if so be they see a white apron they think ye be clane'.<sup>128</sup> On another level, the prejudices of the middle-class investigators led them to a series of conclusions with which the investigated population would be unlikely to agree: 'slovenliness' was not always 'accompanied by

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<sup>122</sup> Hennock, 'Measurement of Urban Poverty', p. 208. See also Hennock, 'Concepts of Poverty', p. 194; 'Poverty and Social Theory in England: The Experience of the 1880s', *Social History*, no. 1(1976), p. 74.

<sup>123</sup> Karel Williams, *From Pauperism to Poverty* (1981), p. 348.

<sup>124</sup> Rowntree, *Poverty*, p. 115.

<sup>125</sup> Davies, *English Village*, p. 145.

<sup>126</sup> Mann, 'Agricultural Village', p. 185.

<sup>127</sup> Thomas Hardy, 'The Dorsetshire Labourer', *Longman's Magazine*, vol. II (July 1883), p. 255.

<sup>128</sup> *ibid.*, p. 255.



unhappiness'.<sup>129</sup> Hardy expressed approval of 'workfolk philosophers who recognise, as Lord Palmerston did, that dirt is only matter in the wrong place',<sup>130</sup> and disapproved of moral judgements based on cleanliness. Stephen Reynolds, whose role as an investigator will be examined in more detail in chapter 8, affirmed this point in *A Poor Man's House*, published the year before Davies's survey: he argued that middle-class sensibilities could not appropriately be brought to bear on the conditions of the working classes, as the lifestyles of the two classes were so different that different yardsticks needed to be used in judging the habits of each.<sup>131</sup> (This part of his work was so contentious that one publisher offered to publish *A Poor Man's House* on the condition that the offending chapter was removed: Reynolds refused and took the book elsewhere.)<sup>132</sup> Reynolds was particularly severe on the Edwardian vogue for inspection, which, he argued in 1911, 'means the judgment of one class by the standards of another'.<sup>133</sup> The investigator, from the point of view of the poor man under scrutiny, was much the same as the inspector. Such criticisms represented a direct challenge to the assumption that the lives of the poor could be meaningfully assessed by a 'scientific' investigation.

Moreover, some of the investigative techniques used by these early rural 'sociologists' were ethically questionable, and were challenged by representatives of the working classes. For example, both Davies and Rowntree talked to neighbours for their information on the families they studied. It was one thing to ask a member of the family about family income - always assuming that that member of the family was actually in a position to give an accurate answer, and was disposed to give a truthful one - but to ask a neighbour about the circumstances and habits of a particular family was a strategy likely to cause resentment. Sometimes investigators talked to children: in her work on School Care Committees Davies suggested that valuable insights into the habits of parents could be gained from asking schoolchildren about their home life. She recognised the moral questionability of such an approach; but this sort of investigation

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<sup>129</sup> *ibid.*, p. 256.

<sup>130</sup> *ibid.*, p. 257.

<sup>131</sup> Stephen Reynolds, *A Poor Man's House* (1909 [1st. ed. 1908]), pp. 88-95.

<sup>132</sup> C. Ernest Fayle (ed.), *Harold Wright: A Memoir* (Woking, 1934), p. 95.

<sup>133</sup> Stephen Reynolds, Bob Woolley & Tom Woolley, *Seems So!: A Working-Class View of Politics* (1913 [1st. ed. 1911]), p. 27.



was almost calculated to provoke resentment on the part of those who were subjected to it.<sup>134</sup> Although Rowntree and Kendall reported that their informants gave their time and information willingly, some of the reported conversations sound more like interrogations. 'Mrs. Abbott' from Oxfordshire, for example, was asked: 'How much does your husband get with piece-work and overtime? ... Still, you're well off compared with many ... Do you have to buy wood? ... How about the clothing? ... How much will shoes cost you a year? ... Are you very heavily in debt?'<sup>135</sup> Cross-examination was necessary to obtain a reasonably accurate budget, which the housewife had probably never kept in such minute detail before. However, the process entailed an unequal relationship. In addition to these problems, the publication of information about a family's circumstances could have repercussions: Davies's book caused much bad feeling in Corsley, as villagers were able to recognise themselves and neighbours in it.<sup>136</sup> Investigation was not a one-way process; and not only had information to be obtained without causing offence, but it also had to be used with care.

Investigators in this period were clearly conscious of new developments, of which they were a part, in the way society and social problems were perceived. Historians have concentrated on the major investigations such as Rowntree's survey of York and the Royal Commission on the Poor Law, without paying very much attention to the rural aspects of the social debate. The new concepts and methodologies were known to investigators of rural life, and not just to those who chose consciously to adopt new methods of studying poverty which they derived from urban theatres of investigation. The identification of reliable sources of information within the informant method of investigation remained an important aspect of the debate; but the respondent method and its associated problems were also being explored. Harold Mann's criticisms of the cruder forms of the 'census' approach are a good example. The poor at times felt themselves to be 'objects' rather than 'subjects' of inquiry, and responded accordingly, at times attempting to shape the investigative agenda themselves, and at other times

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<sup>134</sup> Davies, *School Care Committees*, p. 22.

<sup>135</sup> Rowntree & Kendall, *How the Labourer Lives*, pp. 262-5.

<sup>136</sup> Information supplied by John d'Arcy of the Wiltshire Record Office. In *Life in an English Village*, Davies pointed out that, in allocating a number to each household to preserve anonymity, she had been careful to avoid any sort of order which would enable residents to recognise themselves or others. (Davies, *English Village*, p. 103.) The strategy did not work.



reacting indignantly to the more intrusive techniques of social inquiry. In general, it is fair to argue that investigations in the Edwardian period tended to take a more 'democratic' approach - trusting the poor themselves to supply social knowledge unchallenged - but also to separate the functions of social knowledge and cultural understanding to allow the developing 'scientific' approaches to evolve unhindered by impressionistic evidence and sentimentalism.

Naturally, however, even the most 'scientific' and apparently 'objective' investigation was carried out within a set of moral and social preoccupations and an ideological framework which shaped the methodology and concepts that it employed. This was the framework within which the contestable concept of poverty was applied to rural life. Many of the preconceptions about rurality which had been inherited from the literary tradition survived into the Edwardian period and influenced the process of social investigation. It was at least perceived that different methods and approaches were applicable to different theatres of investigation. For all the interlinkage of urban and rural social problems, particularly depopulation and the associated fears of 'degeneration', 'deterioration' and 'deficiency', the rural remained culturally defined as a reservoir of strength and vigour in contrast to the health-sapping urban environment. Within this ideological construction, the 'survey' method of investigation, as pioneered in urban areas, was adapted for use in a rural context, and tentative if ultimately futile attempts were made to compare scientifically the standards of rural and urban life. The conflicts inherent in the investigative process thus took on an added dimension; and the problems of transmitting social knowledge were transferred to a new form of social investigation.



## **Chapter 8: 'The Challenge of Silence': cultural investigation in Edwardian rural England**

The investigators who form the subject-matter of this chapter lived in the midst of the rural poor and recorded their impressions, acting in the tradition of resident investigation of which Augustus Jessopp was the best-known late-nineteenth century representative. The chapter explores the activities of these investigators, showing in particular why, and how, they thought it necessary and difficult to get into close communion with their working-class neighbours; and how they attempted to overcome what seemed to be a rigid social barrier separating the rural working classes from their social superiors. It goes on to examine the limitations of the approach, some of which have already been explained in chapter 4. It will argue that these writers, however sympathetic with the rural poor, were limited in the degree of genuine social interaction they could achieve. However, it will go on to argue that, whatever their failings, this group of writers represented an important strand of Edwardian social investigation, and should be considered as equal in importance to the better-known surveys of Booth and Rowntree and their rural imitators who were analysed in chapter 7. Indeed, they were part of the same 'passion for inquiry' which produced the classic urban social surveys; and viewed themselves, in some respects at least, as fulfilling the same social need.

The 'scientific' approach to the investigation of the poor, though applied to some rural areas in this period, was developed as a method for investigating urban life. The large-scale social survey, using the respondent method, could not realistically be carried out in a rural area, as the population was too dispersed for such a venture to be viable. Investigations like Rider Haggard's may have covered a great deal of ground, but their conclusions rested on the testimony of a few individuals in each area, who may or may not have been typical of agriculturists in their county or district, and were not systematic like Booth's and Rowntree's studies. They remained the product of the informant method of social investigation. The respondent inquiry, as the previous chapter has shown, was carried out, but only on a small scale, which affected the nature of the investigation. What this period also saw, however, especially in rural areas but in towns as well, was a developing *genre* of social investigation in which the achievement of effective and meaningful communication with the poor became the prime



methodological concern. This was in many respects as significant to contemporaries as was the statistical survey. In the Edwardian period, it seemed that statistical and economic investigations, while demonstrating the extent of poverty, did not reveal its meanings. This required a different kind of social study. Sociology, as understood by the *avant-garde* of mathematical reductionism, was unable to penetrate below the surface of working-class life. However, a fledgling cultural sociology was also being practised in both town and country in the Edwardian period; and it is the purpose of this chapter to reclaim some of these writers for the historian of social investigation.

The best known of these writers was George Sturt (1863-1927). Sturt was a Farnham schoolmaster who, under the influence of Ruskin, took over his father's wheelwright's business in 1884, and learned the trade from his own workmen. In 1891 he moved to the Lower Bourne, a village just outside Farnham, engaging a foreman to run his wheelwright's business, and began to pursue his literary ambitions. Sturt published a succession of books on rural life: *The Bettesworth Book* (1901), consisting of discussions with his gardener, Bettesworth (in reality Frederick Grover); *Memoirs of a Surrey Labourer* (1907), which told of the last days of Bettesworth, his failing health and his struggle to avoid the workhouse; and *Change in the Village* (1912), which was a broad description of the Lower Bourne and the social changes and class tensions within it. These were all published under the pseudonym of 'George Bourne'. After the Great War, he wrote *The Wheelwright's Shop* (1923), a memoir of the period 1884-1891, which included detailed descriptions of the wheelwright's craft, and three other books dealing with the nineteenth century - *A Farmer's Life* (1922), *William Smith, Potter and Farmer* (1920) and *A Small Boy in the Sixties* (1927) - all under his real name. Sturt was highly praised by F. R. Leavis and Denys Thompson as the best example of a writer who chronicled the vanishing of the 'organic community' of rural pre-industrial life.<sup>1</sup> As recent commentators have emphasised, however, Sturt was not primarily a backward-looking writer; and his work is of value because of the completeness of the treatment it gave both to an individual - Bettesworth - and to a community - the Lower Bourne.

Stephen Reynolds fitted into the same tradition. Reynolds (1881-1919), the son

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<sup>1</sup> F. R. Leavis & Denys Thompson, *Culture and Environment: The Training of Critical Awareness* (1930); Denys Thompson, 'A Cure for Amnesia', *Scrutiny*, vol. II (1933), pp. 2-11.



of a businessman and gentleman farmer, was born in Devizes, Wiltshire, attended a private school and read chemistry at Owens College, Manchester. His literary ambitions took him to Paris for six months in 1903, and he corresponded regularly with Edward Garnett and Joseph Conrad among others. In the summer of 1903 he visited Sidmouth, a fishing village and developing seaside resort in Devon, partly because of a fascination with the sea derived from Conrad's stories. At Sidmouth he met Harold Wright, a Cambridge economics graduate, who introduced him to Bob Woolley, a fisherman, and his family. Reynolds stayed with the Woolleys intermittently during the next three years, while writing an unsuccessful novel, *The Holy Mountain*. In 1906, however, he moved in to the Woolleys' house permanently, and remained there until his death from influenza in 1919. His experiences among the Devon fishermen resulted in a string of books. *A Poor Man's House*, a record of his early Sidmouth experiences which has been called 'an almost Orwellian analysis' of the fishing family's life,<sup>2</sup> appeared in 1908, and was followed by *Alongshore* (1910), which comprised descriptions of fishing life, *Seems So! A Working-Class View of Politics* (1911), which was published under the joint authorship of Reynolds, Bob Woolley and his brother Tom, *The Lower Deck* (1912), an analysis of naval discontents, and *How 'Twas* (also 1912), a collection of short stories based largely on fishing life.

It might be objected that, alone among investigators considered in this thesis, Reynolds was not concerned with agricultural labourers; and indeed, it would be wrong to assume that all his conclusions would be applicable to them. However, it can equally be objected that, given the diversity of agricultural conditions across the country, the conclusions drawn by investigators in one part of the country were not necessarily applicable elsewhere. Fishermen were different from workers in agriculture, but the Norfolk labourer was just as different from the Dorset labourer or the Northumberland hind. In any case, Reynolds considered that the fisherman and labourer in agriculture were in some respects comparable. In his book on naval discontents, he compared the able seaman with the labourer: 'Like the agricultural labourer on the land, who belongs to the original stock of English industry, and on whom, in the end, we are all dependent

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<sup>2</sup> Stephen Reynolds, *A Poor Man's House* (London Magazine edition, 1980 [1st. ed. 1908]), introduction by J. D. Osborne, p. vii. Subsequent references will be to Stephen Reynolds, *A Poor Man's House* (1909 [1st. ed. 1908]) unless stated.



for food, he receives least recompense and esteem, I suppose for much the same reason, because his function is general and ancient, not new and specialised.’<sup>3</sup> To the seaman were attached cultural preconceptions similar to those pinned upon the agriculturist.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, Reynolds had an important influence on a number of investigators of rural life;<sup>5</sup> and contemporaries tended to bracket him with rural writers. The *Times Literary Supplement*, for example, reviewed *A Poor Man’s House* together with a book on the Devon countryside by Lady Rosalind Northcote;<sup>6</sup> and the Professor of English Literature at the University of Lahore delivered a lecture on Reynolds and Sturt,<sup>7</sup> rightly seeing many parallels between the two men, who also corresponded with each other intermittently.

This chapter will focus mainly on Sturt and Reynolds, but will also examine some other writers, who were more or less influenced by the two men, and fit into the rural side of a developing, if still somewhat naive, cultural sociology. One important work, published in 1913, was *Folk of the Furrow* by ‘Christopher Holdenby’, the pseudonym of the fruit farmer Ronald George Hatton. (Following most historians, I will refer to ‘Holdenby’ rather than Hatton.) Holdenby was a Balliol man, and was much exercised with the problem of actually understanding the outlook of the labouring classes. His book told the story of, and the conclusions drawn from, his experiences of dressing up as, and living the life of, a farm labourer. Another member of this group was R. L. Gales, vicar of Wanborough, near Guildford. Gales commented on rural life for a variety of journals, and contributed reviews of country books to the *Liberal Nation*. His main publications were two volumes of *Studies in Arcady* (1910 and 1912) - echoing Augustus Jessopp in his ironic comment on rustic life in his title - and *The Vanished Country Folk* (1914). His job involved visiting working-class homes on a

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<sup>3</sup> Stephen Reynolds, *The Lower Deck* (1912), p. 20.

<sup>4</sup> Alun Howkins has made this point with reference to the upper strata of society in his essay on Rider Haggard: for Haggard, ‘the gentleman had to be rural (unless he be a seaman). Urban life destroyed the soul and corrupted the mind via the contagion of commerce. It was the countryman who was the coloniser and the real bearer of Englishness; the townsman could only carry with him the corruption of urban life.’ (Alun Howkins, ‘Rider Haggard and Rural England: An Essay in Literature and History’, in Christopher Shaw & Malcolm Chase (eds.), *The Imagined Past: History ad Nostalgia* (Manchester, 1989), pp. 87-8.)

<sup>5</sup> J. D. Osborne has remarked that ‘Reynolds’ methods have so many parallels with such writers as W. H. Hudson, Walter Raymond and George Sturt that the inclusion of his name with theirs is unavoidable’. (J. D. Osborne, ‘Stephen Reynolds: A Biographical and Critical Study’, PhD thesis, University of London (1978), p. 263.)

<sup>6</sup> *Times Literary Supplement*, no. 371, 18/2/1909, p. 61.

<sup>7</sup> Reynolds to Maurice Macmillan, 10/1/1912, Macmillan archive, BL Add. Mss. 54965, f. 204.



regular basis, and from this experience he judged that he had some personal authority for commenting on the lives of the rural poor.

Such investigators presented a different kind of information from that obtainable from the social surveys. Ross McKibbin has contrasted the work of three female investigators at work in the 1890s and 1900s with the surveys of Booth and Rowntree.<sup>8</sup> He has argued that '[m]uch of what we understand by social and mental life cannot be examined by sampling techniques',<sup>9</sup> and has quoted Victor Branford's plea in 1914 for a more cultural type of survey:

While the Booth type of survey is admirable in giving a picture of the economic and material conditions of the family it remains deficient ... in the difficult task of describing the family's life of leisure, its spiritual condition ... Here the problem is to discover some method of observing and recording what the French call the *état-d'âme*, i.e. the thoughts and emotions, the habit of mind and life, of persons in their interior relations with their surroundings. The sort of question that this more intensive survey has to put before itself is - How can we decipher and record people's ideals, their characteristic ideas and culture, and the images and symbols which habitually occupy their minds?<sup>10</sup>

McKibbin has argued that Lady Bell, Helen Bosanquet and Martha Loane all tried to supply such an understanding of the lives of the (largely urban) poor, by taking a more anecdotal approach, and concentrating in their discussions of methodology on the difficulties of actually communicating meaningfully with the classes under investigation. He has shown how these women, in taking on the role of the cultural sociologist, offered the Edwardian reader a very different form of social study from that of Booth, Rowntree or Arthur Bowley; moreover, he argues that these works 'are in many ways more interesting to the historian than the work of, say, Bowley'.<sup>11</sup> Certainly the concerns of the modern social historian to understand the internal dynamics of the household and family, for example, or the attitudes of a particular working-class community to a political movement or institution, would normally be frustrated by a

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<sup>8</sup> Ross McKibbin, *The Ideologies of Class: Social Relations in Britain 1880-1950* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 169-96. See also Susan Cohen, 'The Life and Works of M. Loane', MPhil thesis, Middlesex University (1997); 'Miss Loane, Florence Nightingale, and District Nursing in Late Victorian Britain', *Nursing History Review*, vol. V (1997), pp. 83-103.

<sup>9</sup> McKibbin, *Ideologies of Class*, pp. 168-9.

<sup>10</sup> Victor Branford, *Interpretations and Forecasts: A Study of Survivals and Tendencies in Contemporary Society* (1914), pp. 71-2; most of this is quoted in McKibbin, *Ideologies of Class*, p. 169.

<sup>11</sup> McKibbin, *Ideologies of Class*, p. 188.



reliance on the 'Booth type of survey'. Thus Paul Johnson has argued that '[s]ocial surveys tell of the hierarchical structure of credit and thrift agencies in a particular community, and how they were used by different groups. Autobiographies and interviews reveal the way in which different types of saving and borrowing were carried on by individuals simultaneously to meet different problems.'<sup>12</sup>

It can be argued that, in reducing social analysis to almost entirely economic considerations, the social survey did not deal with the things that really mattered to those under investigation. Being poor had a material effect on people's lives, and naturally restricted their freedom; but other things were as important: family life, work, the public house, neighbours and friends. Olive Dunlop made the point that reports of social investigators often overstated the miseries of the labourer, on the grounds that 'much of human happiness lies in personal relationships, and even in the worst times the labourer had that source of happiness open to him'.<sup>13</sup> This level of the labourer's life might be presented by a 'micro' study, but the survey method reduced the complexity of the lives of the individuals investigated to a mass of economic and statistical aggregations. As Reynolds argued in his book on naval discontents, the reductionism of modern sociological methodology obscured the individuality of the objects of research: 'one of the vices of modern social and political thought [is that it] reduces the uncalculable to the bogus calculable, and proceeds to argue therefrom ... if it hasn't the facts, it invents them, and that which cannot be expressed in facts and figures, it ignores'.<sup>14</sup> There was always a danger that the social survey, while invaluable as a tool of the social reformer, could blind its readers with numbers. Furthermore, the poverty survey was a one-off static snapshot. As a means of illustrating processes it was clumsy;<sup>15</sup> and it gave little indication of the social relationships which lay behind the problem of poverty. Social relationships, and particularly class relationships, as this

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<sup>12</sup> Paul Johnson, *Saving and Spending: The Working-Class Economy in Britain 1870-1939* (Oxford, 1985), p. 5.

<sup>13</sup> Olive Jocelyn Dunlop, *The Farm Labourer: The History of a Modern Problem* (1913), p. 5.

<sup>14</sup> Reynolds, *Lower Deck*, pp. 73-4.

<sup>15</sup> See Beatrice Webb, *My Apprenticeship* (Harmondsworth, 1971 [1st. ed. 1926]), pp. 253, 256.

However, the poverty cycle concept did give an indication of social processes when Seebohm Rowntree introduced it in 1901. As the Edwardian period continued, other investigators took an increasingly sophisticated attitude to examining change over time. One good example was Maud Davies, who, under the influence of the Webbs, prefaced her survey with a long account of the history of the parish and its institutions.



thesis has argued throughout, lay behind the whole project of social inquiry, and the work of cultural sociologists tended to bring out the complexities of social relationships in a way which was not open to the investigator with largely economic preoccupations.

The cultural study was, naturally, open to criticism on methodological grounds. McKibbin has asked, '[w]as a cultural sociology a better way of "knowing" the working classes than the sociology begun by Booth and apparently completed by Bowley?'<sup>16</sup> and suggested the answer:

A cultural sociology ... obviously does produce the kind of evidence that no distributional study could do, and the evidence itself is probably not "untrue": that is to say, it is what the observers saw when they saw it. There are, however, three reasons for doubting ... its reliability. The first is its static nature. It consists of a series of social snapshots; people's attitudes and their mental life are indeed captured but in a frozen posture. The observation can never be dynamic, and it can incorporate social change (at best) only by reference to inter-generational development or to social imitation ... The second comes from the act of observing. [Bell, Bosanquet and Loane] were not participant observers as a modern sociologist might be; they were external observers and represented authority. It is very doubtful, therefore, whether they could ever see in the mental life of the poor anything else than a jumble of time and memory; if it had an internal coherence, which it almost certainly had to the poor, it is unlikely they would have noticed it. The third follows inevitably from the second. If, as they argued, social classes inhabit closed mental universes ... then it would seem, on their own grounds, methodologically almost impossible for any observer to "know" the working classes in the way they thought they did. The more limited quasi-statistical work of Booth and Rowntree and the more directly statistical work of Bowley are unquestionably less open to this criticism.<sup>17</sup>

The 'social snapshots' supplied by this kind of study were not necessarily as much of a problem in rural sociology of this kind, which tended to feature resident investigators who (it might be argued) were in a better position to analyse social processes. (However, Sturt was also particularly interested in inter-generational change, and devoted much of *Change in the Village* to an analysis of the changed circumstances of the social life of the Lower Bourne during the previous half-century.) The second and third reasons suggested by McKibbin certainly hold for the investigators dealt with in this chapter, although Reynolds in particular had a more intensive degree of contact with

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<sup>16</sup> McKibbin, *Ideologies of Class*, p. 195.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 195-6.



the working-class population than Bell, Bosanquet and Loane. The social position of these investigators within their own communities, this chapter will show, remained a substantial barrier to the effective investigation of the poor. The statistical survey, as McKibbin rightly notes, was less reliant on the kind of contact on which the cultural survey rested. However, as this chapter will argue, it follows from this that, being based on largely superficial contact, the classic social survey could not convey the same kind of information as the cultural sociological study of town or country.

Thus, as Susan Cohen and Clive Fleay have pointed out in their valuable introduction to a new edition of Martha Loane's *The Queen's Poor* (1905), the investigator whose contact with the poor was intensive and extended could discover things which would not be learned in a rapid and superficial inquiry. As they point out, Loane 'made critical assessments of their [the poor's] standard of living, and provided penetrating insights into their beliefs, attitudes, language and behaviour'.<sup>18</sup> She was able to describe the complexities of family income<sup>19</sup> (this was especially important in the countryside),<sup>20</sup> to empathise with the difficulties of married and parental life in cramped conditions and on an insufficient income,<sup>21</sup> and to identify a strong religious sense among the poor which, though not expressed in church attendance or other outward signs, was nonetheless reflected in a powerful belief in the efficacy of prayer.<sup>22</sup> Loane was also interested in the speech and language of the poor, and devoted much of her literary output to analysing the ways in which patterns of speech were changing over time.<sup>23</sup> Her work contained many valuable examples of the intricacies of the domestic economy of the poor;<sup>24</sup> and this kind of information was also relayed by many rural investigators.

The kinds of information conveyed by Loane's rural counterparts depended on the kind of contact they had with those under investigation. For example, George Sturt,

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<sup>18</sup> M. Loane, *The Queen's Poor: Life as They Find It in Town and Country* (with an introduction by Susan Cohen and Clive Fleay, 1998 [1st. ed. 1905]), p. viii.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*, pp. xxi-xxii.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 155-61.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*, pp. xxii-xxiv.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*, pp. xviii-xxix.

<sup>23</sup> See McKibbin, *Ideologies of Class*, pp. 182-4.

<sup>24</sup> Loane, *Queen's Poor*, pp. xxi-xxii, 11-15, 155-60; see above, p. 187.

in *Change in the Village*, was able to describe many of the social activities of the Lower Bourne, and analyse the 'temper' of the villagers.<sup>25</sup> He described their social interactions, their attitude to drinking, their sociability at work, their reading of newspapers, and so on; and while he despaired of some of the younger generation in the village, he advanced a strong argument that the countryman was the repository of a centuries-old folk-lore which bound him to the land. Christopher Holdenby's main achievement, perhaps, was also his depiction of work: he pointed in particular to the skilled nature of much farm labour, which many commentators did not recognise. Alun Howkins has seen this developing understanding of the skills required for agricultural labour as one of the factors behind the shifting perceptions of the labourer,<sup>26</sup> and Holdenby was one of those who advanced this understanding.<sup>27</sup> Stephen Reynolds, likewise, was able to describe with remarkable exactness many of the operations of the occupation in which he participated, as well as the home, the eating habits, the sleeping patterns, and so on, of the Woolley family. As will be seen below, he also paid great attention to the political opinions of the fishermen, repeatedly pointing out that many of the well-meaning Liberal social reforms of the Edwardian period were actually resented by those whom they were designed to help.

Gales, as a clergyman, did not share the labourers' work, but was able to confirm the non-receptiveness of the bulk of the labouring classes to religious doctrine and (on the other hand) their attachment to the church as a village institution; and as a regular house-visitor, could remark on cooking and eating, and, like Loane, on the speech of the labourers, which sounded to him 'joyless' and 'anaemic'.<sup>28</sup> (He was, again, echoing Augustus Jessopp on this point.)<sup>29</sup> He shared with Loane a refusal to condemn outright many of the ostensibly less endearing qualities of the working classes. In presenting a fragment of talk overheard at a labouring family's dinner table, which sounded callous and uncaring to the sensitive middle-class ear, Gales remarked on 'the grimness of the outlook of the labouring poor, the little room which the imperious necessity of getting

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<sup>25</sup> [George Sturt], *Change in the Village* (1984 [1st. ed. 1912]), ch. 7.

<sup>26</sup> Alun Howkins, 'From Hodge to Lob: Reconstructing the English Farm Labourer', in Malcolm Chase & Ian Dyck (eds.), *Living and Learning: Essays in Honour of J. F. C. Harrison* (Aldershot, 1996) pp. 226, 228-9.

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 228-9.

<sup>28</sup> R. L. Gales, *The Vanished Country Folk, and Other Studies in Arcady* (1914), p. 66.

<sup>29</sup> See above, p. 97.



food leaves for sentimental and humanitarian considerations'.<sup>30</sup> He refused to preach abstinence from alcohol, arguing that the poor could not in any case afford to drink very much, and that it enabled them 'to forget for an hour the wretched conditions of their life'.<sup>31</sup> Sturt, similarly, took a view rather sympathetic than otherwise to the drinking habits of both Bettesworth in particular and the community in general.<sup>32</sup> All the writers were attempting to understand the outlook of the poor.

What really united this group of writers was their obsession with class relationships. McKibbin has concluded from his study of Bell, Bosanquet and Loane that 'their observation was anchored to a central organizing theme - social class - which gives unity to a material which would otherwise appear antiquarian and discrete'.<sup>33</sup> They remarked on the social relationships which they observed, and as often as not played a part in these relationships themselves, in their capacity as house-visitor, charitable patron or nurse. The same was true for the rural writers. Faced with an apparently hostile set of subjects, they were methodologically preoccupied with surmounting social barriers; and this preoccupation translated into many of their findings. Thus they all devoted a large proportion of their output to explaining the hostility which existed among the working-class population to members of the middle classes interfering (in whatever way) in their lives. Reynolds, in particular, gained a reputation as the voice of a class which felt itself submerged both politically and socially by a middle-class bureaucratic monolith which it had no chance of surmounting. He made much of the Woolley brothers' resentment towards the air of superiority adopted by middle-class tourists who rode in their fishing boats at Sidmouth.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, Sturt echoed Bettesworth's bitterness at the inquisitiveness and patronising behaviour of middle-class visitors to Sturt's home.<sup>35</sup> It might well be argued that these writers were engaged in a kind of self-aggrandisement: they signalled themselves as the fortunate few with access to cultural understanding, and thought that only they could overcome the

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<sup>30</sup> R. L. Gales, *Studies in Arcady, and Other Essays from a Country Parsonage* (1910), p. 130. The family was discussing the recent birth of a deformed baby in the neighbourhood, and remarking that it would have been better for all concerned if the baby had been quietly smothered to death.

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*, p. 91.

<sup>32</sup> [George Sturt], *Memoirs of a Surrey Labourer: A Record of the Last Years of Frederick Bettesworth* (1930 [1st. ed. 1907]), p. 128; *Change in the Village*, pp. 45-50.

<sup>33</sup> McKibbin, *Ideologies of Class*, p. 189.

<sup>34</sup> Stephen Reynolds, *Alongshore: Where Man and the Sea Face One Another* (1910), ch. 10.

<sup>35</sup> Sturt, *Memoirs*, p. 77.

immense social barriers that they found. However, they were fulfilling what was seen as an urgent contemporary need, in their attempt to understand and overcome the alienation of the rural working classes from the middle-class-dominated society in which they lived. This alienation was in itself a barrier to investigation; circuitously, it was also the finding of much of it.

The intensive approach was also the key to the identification of a kind of 'poverty' which was not simply or even primarily economic. As chapter 4 has argued, the resident investigator was in a good position to contrast the fulfilling nature of his own life with the apparently uninteresting lifestyles of the poor. Whether this was a fair reflection of the life of the village is another question. There was, however, a cultural preoccupation among many investigators of this kind; and the literature of the period is full of examples of how the life of the poor - both urban and rural - was devoid of the opportunity for fulfilling cultural self-expression. Thus Lady Bell and Maud Pember Reeves, concentrating on women in Middlesbrough and Lambeth respectively, both remarked on the dullness of the existence of the average working-class housewife (whether living in poverty or not).<sup>36</sup> Alexander Paterson, another resident investigator, concentrating on south London, remarked on the emptiness and drabness of everyday life 'across the bridges'.<sup>37</sup> In the countryside, this kind of poverty was often approached from a point of view more directly related to the decline of organic social relations. The concern for this aspect of the rural scene was reflected in C. F. G. Masterman's account, which lamented the 'vanishing life' of the countryside; the end of 'a life which had once stood for the bedrock life of England'; and 'the silence that broods over a doomed and departing race'.<sup>38</sup> Not only was this a cause for romantic sadness, as urban cultural influences appeared to swamp the more wholesome recreational and social life of the countryside, but the passing of an old way of life was also linked to a crucial political concern. The social relations of the countryside appeared to be under increasing strain, as the organic life of earlier years gave way to intensified class conflict; and this made the project of re-establishing personal contact between members of different social

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<sup>36</sup> Lady Bell, *At the Works: A Study of a Manufacturing Town* (1907), chs. 8-9; Maud Pember Reeves, *Round About a Pound a Week* (1913), esp. ch. 11.

<sup>37</sup> Alexander Paterson, *Across the Bridges, or Life by the South London Riverside* (1911).

<sup>38</sup> C. F. G. Masterman, *The Condition of England* (1909), pp. 195, 199, 201.



classes in the countryside more urgent. In this context, cultural investigation took on an added importance.

George Sturt is a valuable example of the culturally-minded investigator of working-class life. His antiquarian interests were typical of the rural literary tradition; and his obsession with social relations, both at a village level and in his own personal life, locate him firmly in the tradition of the resident investigator. Sturt gave much thought to methods of inquiry; and it is clear that he was aware of the range of approaches to studying the poor. In one interesting passage in his journal, written in September 1907, he identified the difference between two contrasting methods:

From speculating how the world looks to [labourers], I have come to discern that there are two quite diverse modes of studying them. One - an "objective" method - views them with biologist eyes, as though they were animals whose ways were to be observed wholly from the outside; and this method seeks all explanation of their condition and behaviour in the formative influences of environment. How does bodily fatigue affect them; or their privation from luxuries? What are the results upon them, of their weekly tenancy of their cottages, of their employment by the hour; of the division of labour which makes them mere drudges; of the absence of economic relations with one another; of class distinctions and the fact that they wear peculiar clothes? These, and such as these, are the questions asked by the enquirer who studies the labouring folk "objectively". [NP] The "subjective" method on the other hand would seek in the labourer himself and his emotional life the chief formative influence - thwarted, of course, by the conditions enumerated, yet in spite of them preserving its essential characters. What are his hopes and ambitions? What his ideas of momentary happiness, or of life-long success? Upon what does he pride himself; and what are his views for his children? are some of the directions along which the "subjective" student of labour would push his investigation.<sup>39</sup>

This language is reminiscent of that used by Victor Branford in 1914. W. J. Keith has identified *The Bettesworth Book* as a 'subjective' study; and by way of contrast he cites Richard Jefferies's letters to the *Times* in 1872 as an example of the 'objective' approach.<sup>40</sup> The difference, for Keith, would seem to be that Sturt had the fundamental quality of sympathy with the plight of the rural poor; and although this did not actually mean very much in terms of being able to comment on their lives with authority, it did

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<sup>39</sup> George Sturt, *The Journals of George Sturt 1890-1927: A Selection* (ed. & introduced by E. D. Mackerness, 2 vols., Cambridge, 1967), vol. II, pp. 540-1.

<sup>40</sup> W. J. Keith, *The Rural Tradition: William Cobbett, Gilbert White, and Other Non-fiction Prose Writers of the English Countryside* (Toronto, 1975), p. 156.

give him access to a number of insights into village life which would elude the 'objective' investigator. Thus, for example, he was able to contrast the boldness and cheekiness of the middle-class village children with the 'timorousness' of their working-class counterparts.<sup>41</sup> The sensationalist literary tastes of the adults were also remarked upon and analysed.<sup>42</sup> In his conclusion to *Change in the Village*, Sturt commented on three particular features of village life ('opportunities', as he optimistically called them):<sup>43</sup> the influence of the Church of England and its civilising effects on the villagers; the spread of newspapers, which, as other observers had remarked, contributed to the labourer's broadening horizons; and a developing political awareness, based on the Edwardian debates on the social problem and on the issue of Tariff Reform. (Stephen Reynolds also indicated the importance of the Tariff Reform debate in driving the working classes to involve themselves in thinking about politics.)<sup>44</sup> Sturt was, therefore, in a position to describe from experience a greater variety of facets of rural life than the non-resident investigator.

Having these methodological concerns, Sturt was highly conscious of the barriers between him and those about whom he wrote, and of the problem of achieving some sort of intimacy with the rural poor. Writing to his friend Arnold Bennett in 1898, having lived in the Lower Bourne for seven years, he expressed his frustration in terms reminiscent of the 'Darkest England' school of social observation: 'But, by Jingo! if one could get down to understand village life! I have reached that initiatory stage in which one is convinced of ignorance ... It were almost as easy to write of the Chinese.'<sup>45</sup> It became clear to Sturt, much as it had done to Augustus Jessopp in the 1880s, that patience was the key to the achievement of any meaningful intercourse with the villagers, tainted as little as possible with notions of class suspicion on either side: 'Once you can persuade the villagers that you are not too superior to be talked to, you will find that the whole countryside is alive with a minute and pettifogging activity of practical observation.'<sup>46</sup> Perhaps the best way to do this was to watch people work - or better still

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<sup>41</sup> Sturt, *Change in the Village*, ch. 12.

<sup>42</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 179-80.

<sup>43</sup> *ibid.*, p. 196.

<sup>44</sup> Stephen Reynolds, Bob Woolley & Tom Woolley, *Seems So! A Working-Class View of Politics* (1913 [1st. ed. 1911]), ch. 15.

<sup>45</sup> Arnold Bennett's preface to George Sturt, *A Small Boy in the Sixties* (1927), p. ix.

<sup>46</sup> Sturt, *Lucy Bettesworth*, p. 234.



to work with them, as Sturt did in his garden with Bettesworth and in the shop with the wheelwrights. As David Gervais has argued, '[a]s the master of a wheelwright's shop himself he enjoyed much closer daily contact with countrymen and women than other writers could hope for.'<sup>47</sup>

It is interesting, therefore, to compare two examples of his perception of his own role as an employer. The first concerns his memories of the period 1884-91, when he was working in the wheelwright's shop in Farnham. Firstly, in *The Wheelwright's Shop*, written in the 1920's but relating to the period 1884-1891, he described his relations with George Cook, one of his workmen. Cook, in addition to being skilled in the wheelwright's trade, was 'accomplished in genial rustic arts',<sup>48</sup> and he and Sturt were on friendly terms. Sturt remembered that, over time, a social gulf seemed to open up between the two men: 'Each of us had slipped a little nearer to the ignominious class division of these present times - I to the employer's side, he to the disregarded workman's. The mutual respect was decreasing.'<sup>49</sup> It will be noted that this example comes from a memoir harking back over thirty years, and that it was written after the Great War, which may have altered Sturt's perspective somewhat (he certainly seems to have become more nostalgic in this period, spurred on by his own ill health); but his explanation of it is central to an understanding of his own position. The advance of the competitive spirit had fundamentally altered the relative positions of master and man; and in *Change in the Village* Sturt described the process and the outcome of such a change for the village as a whole, relating it to the rural economy of the nation. He was concerned about the widening gulf between employer and employed, and described it as a class division, which had emerged during the previous thirty years.<sup>50</sup> Socially, this division was deepened by the influx of villa-dwellers, turning the Lower Bourne into an extension of middle-class suburbia. The class dimension which Sturt identified gave the social divisions in rural life a more fundamental and potent aspect. Sturt aimed at surmounting this social barrier, and attached his reliability as a conveyor of cultural understanding to his relationship with those he investigated.

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<sup>47</sup> David Gervais, 'Late Witness: George Sturt and Village England', in *Cambridge Quarterly*, vol. XX, no. 1 (1991), p. 24.

<sup>48</sup> George Sturt, *The Wheelwright's Shop* (Cambridge, 1923), p. 110.

<sup>49</sup> *ibid.*, p. 113.

<sup>50</sup> Sturt, *Change in the Village*, pp. 101-2.

The second example of his role as an employer comes from *The Bettesworth Book*, in which Sturt recorded the long conversations he had while working with his gardener. The intimacy he enjoyed with Bettesworth were, he thought, unusual because the 'relative positions of master and man are not generally conducive to friendly intercourse'.<sup>51</sup> In his particular case, however, he argued that because his relationship with Bettesworth was not one of capitalist exploitation - Sturt's garden was not a profit-making enterprise - no 'false inequality' sprang up between the two men.<sup>52</sup> In the sequel to this book Sturt described the 'intimacies' that sprung up, almost subconsciously, when working together in the garden.<sup>53</sup> In a sense the usual social positions were reversed: Sturt was not an expert in the work he was doing, and was forced to learn it from Bettesworth.

If Sturt's intimacy with Bettesworth was unusual, it may well be asked how far he was qualified to comment on the general life of the his village. *Change in the Village* was certainly a widely-read and thought-provoking account of the life of the Lower Bourne, chronicling the social and cultural developments he experienced. Sturt described the old and young labourers, their relations with the other classes of the village, and some of the institutions of village social life, with which he was himself involved. It might be asked, however, how close Sturt really came to penetrating the lives of the local people. Bettesworth may have been a special case: as a regular companion of the gardener's, Sturt was in a privileged position, and able to set up a friendship. Karen Sayer has seen Bettesworth as Sturt's point of access for the rest of the community. As she points out, '[t]he social distance between Bettesworth and rural men and women was much less than that between [Sturt] and his country case studies, therefore the gardener constantly pointed out things to his employer that the latter had missed entirely.'<sup>54</sup> Once death had removed Bettesworth from the scene (in 1905), and thus severed Sturt's closest connection with labouring life, it could be argued that he

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<sup>51</sup> [George Sturt], *The Bettesworth Book: Talks with a Surrey Peasant* (2nd. ed., 1902 [1st. ed. 1901]), p. 5.

<sup>52</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 5-6.

<sup>53</sup> Sturt, *Memoirs*, pp. 234-5.

<sup>54</sup> Karen Sayer, *Women of the Fields: Representations of Rural Women in the Nineteenth Century* (Manchester, 1995), p. 150.



became once more a middle-class villager, differing from the other villa-dwellers only in his political convictions and his Ruskinian temper. Socially involved in village activities, he was hampered by his social status.

He certainly became less convinced of the possibility of achieving a genuine cultural understanding of labouring life. By September 1907 his conclusions, as expressed in his journal (on the day on which he set down his thoughts about the 'objective' and 'subjective' methods), were pessimistic:

No one knows the labourer. Nor is it easy to conceive such a true intimacy being set up. For my own part, at least, I find it more and more difficult to get upon terms of *cameraderie* with my working-class neighbours. Between my mind and theirs a great gulf widens ... my brain activity is of a dissimilar order...<sup>55</sup>

Anthony Lister has argued that 'these lines serve to emphasise the difficulty of any observer in comprehending how a person so very different from himself feels and thinks. The difference of outlook between himself and his neighbours extends much deeper than to factual discussions ... and makes Sturt's assumptions on the sensitivity of the labourer all the more suspect.'<sup>56</sup> As a member of the local social elite, however well-liked, Sturt was in a position to which suspicion was likely to be directed. He was at least a participant in the everyday life of the village, which gave him a longer-term and more intensive perspective than would be possible for the fleeting visitor, but his work must be read in conjunction with an awareness of the position he occupied within rural society. Furthermore, Sturt was less successful in his penetration into the home lives of the villagers: Lucy Bettesworth, for example, the wife of his gardener, remained a shadowy figure for him even after he had written a long essay about her life.<sup>57</sup> Sturt's work resulted on the one hand from his personal interaction with Bettesworth, and on the other from his involvement in village institutions, which were male-dominated and showed him only one side of labouring life.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Sturt, *Journals*, vol. II, p. 540; also quoted in Anthony Lister, 'George Sturt: A Study of His Development as a Writer and His Conception of Village Life', MA thesis, University of Manchester (1961), p. 176.

<sup>56</sup> Lister, 'George Sturt', pp. 176-7.

<sup>57</sup> Thus he despaired of knowing very much about her: 'One or two incidents, one or two chance allusions to her by her husband - that is all the foundation one has on which to build up an account of her life.' ([George Sturt], *Lucy Bettesworth* (1913), p. 6.)

<sup>58</sup> However, he was able to point to some of the complexities of the domestic economies of the poor. See

Stephen Reynolds, it might be argued, was in a better position than Sturt. While Sturt's illustrations of the home lives of the Lower Bourne poor are limited; Reynolds shared both the work and the domestic life of the Woolley family. As John Fraser has argued, 'Reynolds can write even more from the inside than Sturt - from the kitchen as well as from the garden (i.e. boat)'.<sup>59</sup> He lived with the Woolley family, ate, slept and worked with them, experiencing every aspect of their lives. He was able to describe their domestic habits in such great detail as to justify amply Peter Keating's categorisation of him as an anthropologist.<sup>60</sup> His intensive approach and detailed personal knowledge of his subjects enabled him to portray their lives as being full of interest, which other observers, in town and country, found harder to do. Although much of the colour of the fishermen's lives came from their adventures on the sea,<sup>61</sup> the intricacies of the personal relationships that Reynolds observed and experienced were described with a literary style which many contemporaries, notably Joseph Conrad, admired.<sup>62</sup> Most importantly, his work demonstrates the continuing presence of rigid psychological class barriers, which existed in every area of working-class life, and posed almost insoluble problems for those who would communicate with the poor, entailing an effacement of one's middle-class identity if any real understanding of the outlook of the working classes was to be achieved. As Eileen Yeo has recognised,<sup>63</sup> Reynolds's books, especially *Seems So!*, provide an insight into working-class attitudes to social investigation, giving glimpses into the way sociologists - as well as politicians, inspectors and officials - were viewed 'from below'.

The main charge to which Reynolds's work, like Sturt's, lay open was that of generalising from the particular, and, in his case, the unusual. His experience of working-class life was confined to a limited geographical area (Sidmouth) and an

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Sturt, *Change in the Village*, ch. 6.

<sup>59</sup> John Fraser, 'George Sturt ("George Bourne") and Rural Labouring Life', PhD thesis, University of Minnesota (1961), p. 224.

<sup>60</sup> Peter Keating (ed.), *Into Unknown England 1866-1913: Selections from the Social Explorers* (Manchester, 1976), pp. 29-30. See also Osborne, 'Stephen Reynolds', pp. 259-60.

<sup>61</sup> Fraser, 'George Sturt', p. 255.

<sup>62</sup> See the correspondence between Conrad and Reynolds, and remarks made by Conrad about Reynolds in letters to other correspondents, in *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad* (ed. by Frederick R. Karl & Laurence Davies, 5 vols., Cambridge, 1983), vols. III, IV, V; Osborne, 'Stephen Reynolds', appendix.

<sup>63</sup> Eileen Janes Yeo, *The Contest for Social Science: Relations and Representations of Gender and Class* (1996), pp. 242-5.



atypical occupation (fishing). His Devonians had certain special qualities of independence, intensified no doubt by their self-employment and unusually dangerous occupation. In both *A Poor Man's House* and *Seems So!* Reynolds anticipated some criticism on this score. In the latter, he suggested that there were two possible ways to approach the poor: the extensive and the intensive. The former was analogous to scratching the surface of a field; while the latter was like digging a hole in just one part of the field, in order to obtain a truer idea of the soil that lay beneath.<sup>64</sup> Reynolds saw himself as part of a group of writers, in different parts of the country, who commented with the authority of long association and sympathy on the thoughts and outlook of the poor in their midst. He was particularly impressed by the work of George Sturt and Martha Loane.<sup>65</sup> In a letter to G. W. Prothero, the editor of the *Quarterly Review*, he was pleased to note that other writers tended to corroborate the substance of his own conclusions:

It has very much pleased me in reading the books you have sent down (Bourne's Bettesworth books are wonderful), to find that so much of what I've said of "the poor" I know is said, sometimes in almost the same words but in different dialects, by other writers of those they know. One of the criticisms levelled at me [with reference to *A Poor Man's House*] was that I didn't know enough poor in sufficiently separate parts of the country. But 'tis apparently the intimacy with which one knows some typical "poor" that really matters.<sup>66</sup>

Sturt certainly concurred with this view, seeing Bettesworth as 'a type of his class', albeit one whose individuality was fully expressed in his conversation.<sup>67</sup> Reynolds's defence of the typicality of his section of the working classes did not satisfy everybody, however. The reviewer of *Seems So!* in the *Times Literary Supplement*, for example, found Reynolds unconvincing on this point, remarking that 'Mr. Reynolds would be the first to admit that he and his friends are investigators in one corner of the field only, whose conclusions are liable to modification in view of results obtained elsewhere.'<sup>68</sup>

What Reynolds's work lacked in coverage it made up for in intensiveness of

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<sup>64</sup> Reynolds *et al*, *Seems So!*, pp. xiv-xv.

<sup>65</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 297, 301-12.

<sup>66</sup> Reynolds to Prothero, 5/10/1909, in *The Letters of Stephen Reynolds* (ed. by Harold Wright, 1923), pp. 126-7.

<sup>67</sup> Sturt, *Bettesworth Book*, p. 7.

<sup>68</sup> *Times Literary Supplement*, no. 515, 23/11/1911, p. 474.

contact. Some of his descriptions of his slow progress towards being 'accepted' by the Sidmouth fishermen contain interesting anthropological insights. In *A Poor Man's House*, the difficulties of communicating with the poor on a practical level were amply demonstrated. Reynolds reinforced the 'two nations' theme early on, pointing out that 'Under Town', the area of Sidmouth where the Woolleys and the other fishermen lived, was hidden away from public view: visitors to Sidmouth would hardly know that it existed.<sup>69</sup> Like the slums of London, it had to be sought out. Once there, lodging at the Woolleys' home, Reynolds was frustrated at the early difficulties in being admitted to a share in their lives. He was disappointed when not invited to share their breakfast: Mrs. Woolley served his in a separate room.<sup>70</sup> He found it quite easy to win the confidence of the children, simply by participating in one of their games;<sup>71</sup> but the adult world was harder to enter. They were reluctant to receive the 'gen'leman' into their lives without a show of respectfulness which hampered intercourse on an equal footing: 'They know intuitively ... that one is thinking more than one gives voice to; putting two and two together; which keeps alive a lingering involuntary distrust and a certain amount, however little, of ill-grounded respectfulness.'<sup>72</sup> The barriers to intercourse could be overcome only with a long association on grounds of equality. By working with the fishermen, day in day out, Reynolds found that some of these barriers were lowered.<sup>73</sup> Reynolds confirmed Sturt's impressions of the villagers' wariness of speaking to a stranger from a different class. In one of his best-known lines he expressed the class divide as it existed for the social investigator in terms even more effective than Martha Loane's: 'There is not one high wall, but two high walls between the classes and the masses, so-called, and that erected in self-defence by the exploited is the higher and more difficult to climb.'<sup>74</sup>

*A Poor Man's House* provides a virtually unrivalled portrait and analysis of the tensions inherent in any personal relationship between rich and poor. In *Seems So!*, however, Reynolds attempted to put his own experiences into a wider theoretical

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<sup>69</sup> Reynolds, *Poor Man's House*, pp. 14-15.

<sup>70</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 12-13.

<sup>71</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 17-18.

<sup>72</sup> *ibid.*, p. 80.

<sup>73</sup> *ibid.*, p. 75; Reynolds *et al*, *Seems So!*, p. 190.

<sup>74</sup> Reynolds, *Poor Man's House*, p. 81.



context. In his provoking remarks on 'Labour and Brainwork', he described the conflicting social positions attached to each kind of work:

in the need for personal experience of both brain work and labour, we are met by this difficulty: it is rare enough for a man to do both kinds of work, as work, day after day; but it is far rarer for a man to occupy at once the two social positions corresponding with the two kinds of work ... Everybody unites to drive him into the one social position or the other. It is astonishing how strong and persistent those forces are.<sup>75</sup>

Reynolds, then, was arguing that a dual process - economic on the one hand, social on the other - sundered manual from non-manual workers. Reynolds considered that he, unusually, had the dual experience necessary to understand fully the labourer's life and grievances, and indeed thereby to gain a fresh perspective on *middle-class* life. In this his attitude is reminiscent of C. F. G. Masterman's. Masterman, by 'dropping out' of middle-class society, if only temporarily, gained the experiences which fuelled his book *From the Abyss*, and helped to shape the ideas which bore fruit in the classic statement of Edwardian radical Liberalism, *The Condition of England*. In a rural context, Reynolds's theories were particularly significant. Cross-class empathy and cultural understanding, such as Reynolds claimed to have achieved, was the route towards a reknitting of the social fabric.

One way to achieve this empathy was to adopt clandestine techniques of investigation, much as Richard Jefferies had done in his preparation for writing *Hodge and his Masters*. The tradition of dressing up as a tramp, to experience the workhouse casual ward and the open road, was a long-standing one.<sup>76</sup> Christopher Holdenby employed these techniques of participant observation. Faced with the 'Challenge of Silence',<sup>77</sup> presented by the rural workers, and the difficulty of 'penetrat[ing] below the surfaces',<sup>78</sup> Holdenby 'determined to get as near to the labourers as possible - to become one of themselves'.<sup>79</sup> Working together, as Reynolds found, was the quickest way to break down the social barrier which existed between him and them. Holdenby believed

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<sup>75</sup> Reynolds, *Seems So!*, pp. 191-2.

<sup>76</sup> For Edwardian examples see Everard Wyrall, *The Spike* (1909); Jack London, *The People of the Abyss* (New York 1903); Mary Higgs, *Glimpses into the Abyss* (1906).

<sup>77</sup> Christopher Holdenby, *Folk of the Furrow* (1913), ch. 1.

<sup>78</sup> *ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>79</sup> *ibid.*, p. 15.

that, 'to a very large extent, one can only really get to know the countryman by working with him, week in, week out. Then the reserve and suspicion gradually die, and class is forgotten. The countryman is willing to forgive class if one can meet him across the plank of "work".'<sup>80</sup> Holdenby was no Socialist: an employer himself, he reminded his readers that the men respected a generous landlord or farmer with a human face,<sup>81</sup> and certainly did not consider conflict an inevitable feature of rural social relations.<sup>82</sup> However, he found himself in a position similar to Reynolds's, able to identify and explain much of the resentment felt among the labouring classes to investigation from outside. Parsons, deeply suspected by the villagers as it was, made matters worse by visiting cottages infrequently and at inconvenient times.<sup>83</sup> (Flora Thompson's recollections of the visits of the parson and his daughter to her Oxfordshire cottage of the 1890s certainly seem to bear out Holdenby's remarks.)<sup>84</sup> The perspective of the village elite could only be denied through a conscious shedding of the investigator's identity as part of that social elite, and this is what Holdenby and Reynolds appear to have gone some way towards achieving.

These investigators were certainly influential. As one of the best-respected country writers of the period, Sturt's work in particular - especially *The Bettesworth Book* and *Memoirs of a Surrey Labourer* - was an influence on a number of country books which appeared in the years before the Great War, which purported to give a true picture of the vanishing country people, and whose authors were keen to stress their intensive personal contact with those whose stories they were reporting. Many of the characters represented are reminiscent of Bettesworth. Their chroniclers illustrate the preoccupations among a certain group of people who, however crudely, attempted to convey rural working-class life and its meanings through the medium of literature. John Fraser has analysed many of these writers in detail.<sup>85</sup> Here it is sufficient to note that long-forgotten names such as L. P. Jacks (who wrote a somewhat embellished account of a shepherd of his acquaintance, 'Snarley Bob')<sup>86</sup> and Major Gambier-Parry (a

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<sup>80</sup> *ibid.*, p. 138.

<sup>81</sup> *ibid.*, p. 226.

<sup>82</sup> *ibid.*, p. 139.

<sup>83</sup> *ibid.*, p. 217.

<sup>84</sup> Flora Thompson, *Lark Rise to Candleford* (Harmondsworth, 1973 [1st. ed. 1945]), pp. 220-2.

<sup>85</sup> Fraser, 'George Sturt', ch. 6.

<sup>86</sup> L. P. Jacks, *Mad Shepherds, and Other Human Studies* (1910).



Gloucestershire man who claimed an almost unrivalled intimacy with the elderly poor of his district)<sup>87</sup> were clearly influenced by Sturt, as was W. H. Hudson, known more for his nature writing than his representations of labourers, but whose influence in on Edwardian perceptions of country life should not be underestimated.<sup>88</sup> Like Sturt, Reynolds influenced these writers: both Hudson and Gambier-Parry visited the beach at Sidmouth, no doubt attracted by the fame of the author of *A Poor Man's House*.<sup>89</sup>

R. L. Gales was another admirer of Reynolds. Gales was conscious of the importance of crossing the gulf which lay between him and his working-class parishioners. He thought the country clergyman was in about the best position to communicate effectively with the rural poor.<sup>90</sup> However, he admitted that the really close association which Reynolds had achieved was denied to him.<sup>91</sup> Gales approved of Sturt, recommending both *Memoirs of a Surrey Labourer*<sup>92</sup> and *Lucy Bettesworth*.<sup>93</sup> However, Reynolds was better still. Reviewing Reynolds's *How 'Twas in the Nation*, Gales enthused:

Mr. Reynolds is, in fact, the one living English writer who shows us working-class life from the inside. This is a very different thing to the writing of those who are, indeed, in close touch with working-class life, but, after all, remain outside it. Anyone, so to speak - at least anyone with some power of observation and sympathy - can get into close touch with working people, and then come away and, in an altogether different atmosphere, record his impressions; but Mr. Reynolds appears to have merged himself in the life of the working classes. Hence, one looks upon him with the somewhat uncomfortable veneration with which one regards a mystic. Mr. Bourne comes nearest to him; but Mr. Bourne lives in a Surrey village, and writes about the people - with admirable discernment and sympathy, no doubt - while Mr. Reynolds lives in a Devon village, amid fishermen, and lives the life of the people. He shares their work and food.<sup>94</sup>

Gales was also quick to praise his fellow clergyman P. H. Ditchfield, whose stream of

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<sup>87</sup> Major Gambier-Parry, *Allegories of the Land* (1912); *The Spirit of the Old Folk* (1913).

<sup>88</sup> See especially W. H. Hudson, *The Land's End: A Naturalist's Impressions in West Cornwall* (1908); *Afoot in England* (1909); *A Shepherd's Life* (1910).

<sup>89</sup> Reynolds to Sir Frederick Macmillan, 20/1/1911, and to George Macmillan, 26/9/1912, Macmillan archive, BL Add. Mss. 54965, ff. 169, 259.

<sup>90</sup> Gales, *Studies in Arcady*, p. 71.

<sup>91</sup> *Nation*, vol. XI, no. 15 (13/7/1912), p. 553; Gales, *Vanished Country Folk*, p. 105.

<sup>92</sup> R. L. Gales, *Studies in Arcady, and Other Essays from a Country Parsonage, Second Series* (1912), p. 59.

<sup>93</sup> Gales, *Vanished Country Folk*, pp. 11ff.

<sup>94</sup> *Nation*, vol. XI, no. 15 (13/7/1912), p. 552; Gales, *Vanished Country Folk*, pp. 96-7.

books on rural life were generally of more immediate interest to the antiquarian than to the sociologist.<sup>95</sup> (Strangely, he thought L. P. Jacks ‘sees further into the life of the rustic poor’ than even Sturt or Reynolds.)<sup>96</sup> These judgements illustrate a preoccupation among commentators on rural life at this time. Gales’s assessments were based on the degree of first-hand contact his contemporaries had with the labouring population. The efforts of these investigators to establish their credentials for commenting on the rural poor by describing the intricacies of their social interaction with them demonstrate a respect for any view of ‘the poor man’s country’ which appeared to come from the inside. Reviewing each other’s work and referring to each other regularly, these writers, for all their differences, represent a distinctive group active within the Edwardian investigative culture.

Even these investigators, however, for all their sympathetic attitudes, approached the poor from an elevated social position, and were ultimately unable wholly to shed their middle-class identity. Furthermore, while it is easy to contrast them with, say, Rider Haggard, they entered their projects with just as many preconceptions as he did. Indeed, these preconceptions were often of a very similar order. The Swindon hammerman and folklorist Alfred Williams, in particular, shared with his fellow Wiltshireman Richard Jefferies a conception of rural life as morally superior to the town life of which he also had experience.<sup>97</sup> C. F. G. Masterman also subscribed to aspects of this idealisation of country life: reviewing *A Poor Man’s House*, in the *Nation*, he remarked that Reynolds would probably find fewer of the virtues he so admired among the poor ‘in the difficult darkness of the cities, where Fear, rather than Courage, is the driving force of common humanity’.<sup>98</sup> Both Reynolds and Holdenby had a healthy respect for the ruggedness of rural and seafaring life, which gave their descriptions of their working-class friends a hagiographic quality that can on occasions detract from the representations of working-class life which make their works valuable.<sup>99</sup> Reynolds, for example, came out with one rather risible and self-deluding remark: ‘I am often asked

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<sup>95</sup> Gales, *Studies in Arcady*, pp. 101-2.

<sup>96</sup> *ibid.*, p. 111.

<sup>97</sup> Alfred Williams, *A Wiltshire Village* (1912), esp. pp. viii-xi, 130-1, 148-9, 162-4.

<sup>98</sup> *Nation*, vol. IV, no. 7 (14/11/1908), p. 249; Masterman, *Condition of England*, p. 117.

<sup>99</sup> A good example is Reynolds, *Alongshore*, pp. 5-6, the descriptions of ‘Benjie’ which recur throughout, and the long dedication to ‘Uncle Sam’.



why I have ... made my home among "rough uneducated" people ... The briefest answer is, that it is good to live among those who, on the whole, are one's superiors.'<sup>100</sup> Reynolds, Holdenby and Sturt all portrayed the rural working classes as the bearers of a folk wisdom which was somehow superior to the values of the urban middle classes from which they themselves came. 'Hodge' was disappearing from the vocabulary of investigators like these (although as chapter 9 will illustrate, many vestiges of the old view of country life which this stereotype engendered did persist in the social discourse of the period); and the labourer was now worthy of respect for the part he played in national life. These investigators, then, were still acting in the 'survey' tradition by imposing a view of country life on their subjects. The investigated people had to bear a new burden of expectation, as the repositories of racial hardihood and national strength. None of these writers shared the eugenic visions of many Edwardians; but their attitude to the agricultural labourer and the fisherman was shaped on not wholly dissimilar lines.

It is easy to deride the more fanciful notions of these investigators, however; and a more constructive approach would be to examine what they actually contributed to the investigative culture of Edwardian Britain. Their impressionistic studies, valuable as a human corrective to the reductive approaches of the new social-scientific community and the large-scale official or unofficial inquiries, also illustrate certain features of the investigative process which could only be shown at the 'micro' level. In accounts of particular conversations with individuals, the personal investigator was in a unique position to describe the interface of social investigation. These studies, however, Reynolds's in particular, give valuable examples of working-class attitudes to investigation of other kinds, and to the efforts of middle-class bureaucracy in general. That such studies were carried out on such a small scale as to bypass any official working-class representation (which was rarely vocal in the countryside in any case) gives them an added importance in this respect. As Eileen Yeo has argued, '[t]he biggest challenge to the historian is to get beyond the organized working class and tap the reservoir of sensibility of working people who never joined an organisation, in order to sample their reaction to the middle-class professional social scientific offensive.'<sup>101</sup> She relies on Stephen Reynolds's work for her necessarily brief analysis of this reaction.

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<sup>100</sup> Reynolds, *Poor Man's House*, p. 314.

<sup>101</sup> Yeo, *Contest*, p. 242.

Reynolds showed how much of the agenda of social research might be challenged by the working-class populations who felt the burden of investigation; and was able to identify an active strategy of non-cooperation with the efforts of social investigators.<sup>102</sup> This strategy was linked to a more general resentment of officialdom and dislike of what they saw as intrusion into their private and domestic lives.

Sturt, Gales and Holdenby were also open to such criticism. For all their sympathy with the villagers among whom they lived, Sturt and Holdenby, as local employers, and Gales as a country parson, were identifiably members of village elites. The problem for the historian who wishes to assess the responses of the investigated populations is that the evidence available to him is invariably one-sided, as it comes from the investigators themselves. Thus Gales's conversations with his parishioners exist for the historian only in his own reports of them, and come accompanied by his own comments. Furthermore, we are left with only those about whom he chose to write. We have only his word that intimacy was established with those whose views he purported to represent. There is little evidence from within the working classes on issues of cross-class communication: it is almost always filtered through the perceptions of others. This is where evidence such as that given by Stephen Reynolds, though problematic in itself, takes on particular importance.

What Reynolds obtained was an understanding of the thoughts and opinions of the Sidmouth fishing families, and in conveying some of this understanding he was plugging a gap in contemporary sociological knowledge. In the age of mass democracy, when working-class opinion (at any rate male working-class opinion) could actually have a direct effect on the way the nation was governed, it became of interest to understand how the labourer approached politics. Some investigators in the 1880s and 1890s tackled this question, in the wake of the extension of the franchise to the agricultural labourer, but all found it a troublesome problem to address. As Anderson Graham explained in 1892, '[t]o get at the real political thoughts and aspirations of the agricultural labourer is very difficult ... he is naturally secretive and takes full advantage of the Ballot Act.'<sup>103</sup> *Seems So!*, subtitled 'A Working-Class View of Politics', was one

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<sup>102</sup> Reynolds, *Seems So!*, p. 288.

<sup>103</sup> P. Anderson Graham, *The Rural Exodus: The Problem of the Village and the Town* (1892), p. 84.



of the best attempts to express political opinions from the point of view of the working-class electors themselves. Reynolds strongly defended his role as an 'amanuensis' for his fishermen, believing that the direct and sympathetic approach was essential to a genuine understanding. Traditional channels of information were inadequate: 'no means exist of gathering together working-class opinions. Neither elections nor newspapers do it.'<sup>104</sup> Elections polled the opinions of the working classes within a political framework created by the political parties, and did not allow the poor to set their own agenda. This point may be made as forcefully for the more traditional forms of social investigation against which Reynolds was rebelling. Reynolds's research revealed a 'poor man's country' in which the barriers of class took on added dimensions; and a fundamental chasm between the classes was discerned, whose breadth only the conscientious and imaginative investigator could perceive.

Thus in his series of 'Seems So!' articles, which appeared in various periodicals including the *Spectator* and the *Nation*, Reynolds attacked a number of social institutions and pieces of Liberal legislation which, while well-meaning on the part of the governing classes, caused resentment among those with whose lives they were felt to interfere. The police and magistracy were targeted, as were the reports of the Poor Law commissioners, the 'Children's Charter', the licensing laws and, most controversially of all, the system of education. The regular complaint of the fictionalised characters in the articles was that the government and sociologists were setting an agenda which treated the working classes as *objects* of legislation or inquiry rather than as subjects in their own right. The Fabian Society and other 'intellectuals' - memorably characterised as 'so well-intentioned, so merely logical, so cruel'<sup>105</sup> - were a particular target for criticism. Sociological inquiry, for Reynolds, dehumanised the investigated population: 'Sociology and efficiency are right enough in their places, but for actual dealing with human beings, patience and charity are still of more avail.'<sup>106</sup> Reynolds had little patience with the traditional informant method of investigation, arguing that for a realistic picture of conditions one should consult the poor themselves or, at least, those closest to them. Thus in his forceful conclusion to *Seems So!* he quoted Martha Loane's memorable

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<sup>104</sup> Reynolds *et al*, *Seems So!*, p. 22.

<sup>105</sup> *ibid.*, p. xxv.

<sup>106</sup> *ibid.*, p. 29.

exhortation from her book *The Queen's Poor*: 'Is it reasonable to ask the club doctor if the lower classes are healthy, to ask the coroner if they are sober and know how to feed their children, the police magistrate if they are honest and truthful, the relieving officer if they are thrifty, the labour master if they are industrious, the highly orthodox clergyman if they are religious, and then call the replies received, KNOWLEDGE OF THE POOR?'<sup>107</sup> Reynolds added the comment: 'Yet such, of course, has been the usual procedure!'<sup>108</sup> His own approach was deliberately different: an attempt to shape a new agenda for social research, in which the poor themselves played a more direct role.

However, some of these sympathetic commentators found that even their agenda was not necessarily shared by their working-class neighbours. The resident investigator himself was not immune from a hostile response. Sturt pointed out that he was careful to hide from Bettesworth the fact that he had been made the subject of a book;<sup>109</sup> and there are also indications in Sturt's books that his relationship with the old gardener was the source of some comment and even resentment in the Lower Bourne.<sup>110</sup> Reynolds himself was reluctant to let the Woolley family know that they featured in *A Poor Man's House* until close to the date of publication;<sup>111</sup> and he actually fell out with Tom Woolley over the contents of the book.<sup>112</sup> Tom Woolley found himself the victim of a physical attack by a group of Sidmouth men who disapproved of the contents of *Seems So!*, on the title page of which his name appeared.<sup>113</sup>

Similarly, Gales, aware of the delicacy of his position as a clerical house-visitor and a social investigator, believed that many of the Wanborough poor, rightly suspicious of his intentions, had 'a dim inkling that "copy" may be made of their remarks'.<sup>114</sup> This was occasionally borne out when the rumours of unflattering representations in the press or literature reached villagers. An excellent example of a village's response to a literary portrayal is available. It concerns Eleanor Hayden, a vicar's daughter from Berkshire,

<sup>107</sup> *ibid.*, p. 290; Loane, *Queen's Poor*, p. 26.

<sup>108</sup> Reynolds *et al*, *Seems So!*, p. 290.

<sup>109</sup> Sturt, *Memoirs*, p. vii.

<sup>110</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 126-7.

<sup>111</sup> Osborne, introduction to Reynolds, *Poor Man's House* (1980), p. xiii.

<sup>112</sup> Osborne, 'Stephen Reynolds', pp. 125-6.

<sup>113</sup> Reynolds to George Macmillan, 3/12/1911, Macmillan archive, BL Add. Mss. 54965, f. 196.

<sup>114</sup> R. L. Gales, *Studies in Arcady... Second Series*, pp. 22-3.



who while not really a social investigator - she painted a generally romanticised picture of village life in her country books, and modelled herself on Miss Mitford - did at least comment on the difficulties that investigators may encounter in the villages. In her *Travels Round Our Village* (1901) she told the personal stories of some of the villagers who appear to have confided in her and accepted her sympathy. Her authorial talents notwithstanding, the book seems to have aroused some resentment in the village, as P. H. Ditchfield, one of her neighbours, explained:

A whisper somehow reached the villagers that "parson's daughter" had been writing about them. The book was an expensive one - the price was about seven and sixpence, if I remember rightly - and no labourer could afford to pay half a week's wages for a book. However, one old woman, more enterprising than her neighbours, bought a copy, and let it out to the villagers at threepence a night. It was read and re-read. They talked about it at the village inn, over the gates, at their work, and when they went to market; and they were not pleased about it. The result was tragic. The talented authoress, as she walked along the village street, was hissed and hooted, and she heard a youth calling, "'Ere cooms yon graäde big lee-er!"<sup>115</sup>

This was a salutary lesson to investigators to think carefully before making 'copy' of things told them, in confidence or otherwise, especially in their own villages. A consciousness of the 'fierce light' which Lady Bell described as shining on working-class life, 'revealing much that in more prosperous quarters is not seen, but is probably there all the same',<sup>116</sup> could give labouring populations, urban and rural, a grievance which could on occasions be brought back to bear on those who investigated them without an appropriate measure of empathy with the problems they had to face.

The rural poor, conscious of their status as objects of inquiry, were often alive to the investigative spirit of the Edwardian middle classes. They were rarely viewed as equal partners in the research process. In recent years, by contrast, some sociologists have begun to alter their approach. In his work on 'Research from the Underside', Bob Holman suggests an approach to 'Investigating the Privileged', arguing that, in social research, 'for the top-down model to be completely reversed, the socially deprived should study the rich ... why should not the poor examine the habits and conditions of

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<sup>115</sup> P. H. Ditchfield, *The Parson's Pleasance* (1910), pp. 217-18.

<sup>116</sup> Bell, *At the Works*, p. 270.

the powerful, of cabinet ministers, business executives, barristers?’<sup>117</sup> This represents a subversion of traditional models of social investigation; and proposes an egalitarian political agenda within the context of social research. Holman’s own work seems to support Catherine Marsh’s description of a transition in the twentieth century towards a ‘citizen’ model of investigation, to replace the informant and respondent approaches of earlier years. This option, however, was not generally open to working-class communities in the period under discussion.

The only real response the working classes had was satire. Thus Peter Keating has described ‘social exploration’ as ‘a distinctive branch of modern literature in which a representative of one class consciously sets out to explore, analyse, and report upon, the life of another class lower in the social scale than his own: the reverse procedure being, of course, not really possible, except in satire’.<sup>118</sup> As F. E. Green suggested, ‘when the poor begin to write about the manners of the upper classes, we should have satire of a new and wonderful order’.<sup>119</sup> It is not the purpose of this thesis to examine working-class satirical representations of social elites; but it is important to point out that the usual investigative process was sometimes challenged. Stephen Reynolds made a point of contrasting the standards applied to middle- and working-class people;<sup>120</sup> and he occasionally satirised middle-class people from a working-class point of view. A tempting comparison is with Robert Tressell, like Reynolds a resident of a small town on the south coast (Hastings). Tressell’s vicious accounts of the activities of the ‘Mugsborough’ middle classes are as damning as the satirical treatment of middle-class habits and manners in Reynolds’s work.<sup>121</sup> Reynolds’s first and only novel, *The Holy Mountain*, was a biting satire on the small-town mentality of the elites of his home town, Devizes. Other investigators sometimes provide an illuminating comment on the unfairness of the standards applied to the rural working classes by turning the same standards against the investigating class. Thus F. E. Green, another investigator who was impressed by Reynolds,<sup>122</sup> was critical of the insistence of official investigators and

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<sup>117</sup> Bob Holman, ‘Research from the Underside’, *British Journal of Social Work*, vol. XVII (1987), p. 682.

<sup>118</sup> Keating, *Into Unknown England*, p. 13.

<sup>119</sup> F. E. Green, *The Awakening of England* (1912), p. 304.

<sup>120</sup> Reynolds *et al*, *Seems So!*, ch. 10 (about policemen), pp. 294-5. See also Bell, *At the Works*, esp. pp. 270-1.

<sup>121</sup> Robert Tressell, *The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists* (1965 [1st. complete ed. 1955; 1st. ed. 1914]).

<sup>122</sup> Green, *Awakening*, p. 303.



others upon the inclusion of every aspect of non-monetary remuneration in their agricultural wage statistics:

Surely only a middle-class bureaucracy could be mean enough to take into account a gallon or two of beer, a truss or two of straw, a bag of potatoes, a bucket of separated milk, or a bundle or two of faggots - often a gift of charity on the part of the farmer - as part payment of a labourer's wage. Imagine a schedule being drawn up of the average earnings of managing directors of city companies in which invitations to a champagne lunch, a box of expensive cigars, a barrel of oysters, a first-class season ticket, a first-class cabin on an ocean liner, all given for business purposes, were taken into account!<sup>123</sup>

As an investigator whose political sympathies lay unashamedly in the camp of the labourers rather than any other class of rural society, Green was inclined to be sensitive to such matters, and, although an investigator himself, he shared Stephen Reynolds's suspicion of the middle-class inquisitive spirit. In general, however, voices like these were exceptions in the Edwardian period, and the more routine subversion of the class relationships inherent in the process of social investigation had to wait for a more 'democratic' age.

The accounts of working-class life which have been examined in this chapter were primarily anthropological in spirit and literary in ambition, but within the culture of Edwardian social investigation and commentary, such studies were accorded as much respect as the social survey. Sociology was a fledgling discipline; and its boundaries (external and internal) were not yet clearly defined. Investigators like George Sturt saw themselves as engaged in the same process as Booth and Rowntree: the transmission of information about the poor, but they were content to approach the task from a different perspective. W. J. Keith has applied to accounts of rural life an analysis similar to McKibbin's, arguing that *Change in the Village* 'contains the personal experience and understanding denied to an official "Blue Book" or a sociological monograph'.<sup>124</sup> Sturt himself, however, fully recognised the value of the new kinds of sociological study. In *Change in the Village* he raised the subject of the difference between a 'scientific' study and one like his own, suggesting that they were appropriate to different aspects of working-class life. Thus on the matter of domestic income and expenditure, he admitted

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<sup>123</sup> F. E. Green, *The Tyranny of the Countryside* (1913), p. 227.

<sup>124</sup> Keith, *Rural Tradition*, p. 160.

that his random and haphazard account could do the subject little justice:

Before going farther I must try to give some account of the ways and means of the villagers, although, obviously, in a population so heterogenous, nothing short of a scientific survey on the lines pursued by Sir Charles Booth or Mr. Rowntree could be of much value in this direction. The observations to be offered here pretend to no such authority. They have been collected at random, and subjected to no tests...<sup>125</sup>

On the other hand, in his next chapter, on 'Good Temper', he identified among the villagers 'a quiet and cheery humour, far indeed from gaiety, but farther still from wretchedness' and added that 'in matters like this one's senses are not deceived'.<sup>126</sup> The intensive explorer had the opportunity of using his senses to explore the daily life around him, which eluded the 'scientific' investigator. A similar distinction was drawn by Horace Plunkett, in his introduction to Holdenby's *Folk of the Furrow* in 1913:

The main purpose of the book is to reveal to us the heart and mind of the folk who provide the cities with their food and their best blood, who give to the nation more than their share of its fighting strength, who conduct the greatest, and, if our poets see straight, the most ennobling of the nation's industries. Mr. Holdenby's literary sense adorns but does not obscure the analysis he makes of the labourers' activities, and his study has a true kinship with Mr. Rowntree's survey of their domestic economy.<sup>127</sup>

While one set of investigators examined the material and economic features of working-class life, another took a more cultural and impressionistic approach. The notion that different kinds of social study - the sociological and the anthropological, as they might be characterised - had a 'true kinship' is valuable. It is true that the literary works of P. H. Ditchfield, L. P. Jacks and W. H. Hudson may be somewhat further removed from the poverty survey than were more socially aware ventures such as Sturt's *Change in the Village*; but the work of Lt-Col. D. C. Pedder, for example, another resident commentator who contributed to the Fabian Society's influential pamphlet on *Socialism and Agriculture*, was respected as social analysis, largely untainted by romantic nostalgia. The concern of at least some of the investigators considered in this chapter to position themselves with regard to Booth and Rowntree is an important indicator of how

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<sup>125</sup> Sturt, *Change in the Village*, p. 52.

<sup>126</sup> *ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>127</sup> Holdenby, *Folk of the Furrow*, p. x.



they perceived their activities.

Contemporaries did not draw a rigid distinction between the scientific and the impressionistic inquiry. The social survey was one way of presenting social knowledge to the middle-class reading public; the literary description was another. In the 'sociology' of the period there was room for both these approaches: the social survey did not replace the journalistic method, and was not the only method considered valid by investigators. Reginald Bray, himself an investigator of some repute,<sup>128</sup> reviewing *A Poor Man's House*, defended Stephen Reynolds's inclusion in the sociological canon:

WE are in an age which desires exact knowledge; and that desire, in its craving after satisfaction, takes many forms. It may find its fulfilment in long columns of statistics; it may see itself realised in an intricate chain of reasoning; or it may win its goal in a series of impressionist studies ... Any one of these deserves the epithet scientific, provided the result is an accurate picture of facts...<sup>129</sup>

This endorsement was forthcoming despite Reynolds's own insistence that he should not be considered as an investigator.<sup>130</sup> Reynolds's approach may best be characterised as literary rather than sociological,<sup>131</sup> but however it is classed it had a relationship with the social surveys of the period.<sup>132</sup> It should be added that the techniques of intensive and participant observation remain a part of sociological method today; and thus to concentrate excessively on the history of the social survey is, for the sociologist, a form of denial of other sections of his intellectual ancestry.

This chapter has tried to show a number of things: that there was a significant diversity of representations of the lives of the rural (and seafaring) poor; that at least one class of investigators was methodologically exercised by the problem of achieving cultural understanding; that the political and social views of the countryman were sought as well as merely information about his condition; that a long and intimate association

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<sup>128</sup> Reginald A. Bray, *The Town Child* (1907).

<sup>129</sup> *Sociological Review*, vol. II (1909), p. 196.

<sup>130</sup> He reminded his readers that he lived among the poor 'neither as parson, philanthropist, politician, inspector, sociologist nor statistician'. (Reynolds, *Poor Man's House*, p. x.)

<sup>131</sup> J. D. Osborne has taken this approach. See Osborne, 'Stephen Reynolds', esp. pp. 257, 260, 270.

<sup>132</sup> David Englander and Rosemary O'Day appear to have recognised this in the inclusion of *Seems So!* in their bibliography to *Retrieved Riches: Social Investigation in Britain 1840-1914* (Aldershot, 1995), although no mention of Reynolds occurs anywhere in the text of the collection.

with the class under investigation was considered the best way to achieve such an understanding; and that even the most sympathetic investigator was constrained by a certain conception or series of conceptions about country life which set a peculiarly rural framework for the representations of working-class life which resulted. The seemingly all-pervading nature of notions of decline, among both conservative and radical commentators, allied to a construction of rurality which emphasised health, vigour and strength, gave a certain unity to the *genre* of writers described in this chapter. As investigators, they found themselves in a more ambiguous position; and perhaps the most interesting aspect of their work is the pattern of social relationships which shaped it. The same processes of representation and communication were present in the activities of any investigator, but intensive studies like these show the processes, as it were, in close-up; much as a micro-historical study would illustrate aspects of a subject that an historical survey would miss.<sup>133</sup> That Sturt, Gales and others were themselves members of village elites is itself important given the models adopted for this thesis: theirs was the 'survey' approach in the sense of coming socially from above, and they were the sort of people who might well figure as sources of information within the 'informant' structure of social investigation. In their quests for cultural understanding, and for access to the mindset of the rural poor, they represent an important, and neglected, strand of Edwardian social thought.

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<sup>133</sup> See Barry Reay, *Microhistories: Demography, Society and Culture in Rural England 1800-1930* (Cambridge, 1996), ch. 9, for an eloquent assertion of the value of micro-studies in the analysis of rural society.



## **Chapter 9: Continuing contests: housing, wages, poverty, land and the Land Enquiry Committee**

This chapter shows how some of the older approaches to social investigation lingered on into the Edwardian period, and how the new political concerns of the time shaped the contests inherent in the investigative process. Three issues in particular will be considered: the problem of rural housing; the investigation of agricultural wages; and the land question. None of these issues was new; however, they were debated within what was in many respects a new framework. Rural politics had moved on, and gained a new place in the national consciousness. New forms of investigation changed the way rural society was viewed. However, despite the publication of methodologically rigorous investigations like Mann's and Davies's, the old contests could still be played out, partly because of the immense variety within English (and more so within British) agricultural conditions, and partly because of the continuing preponderance of issues other than measurable material poverty. Special correspondents still roamed around the countryside, and official investigations, especially Arthur Wilson Fox's wage inquiries for the Board of Trade, remained subject to methodological challenges. The interest in rural life culminated in 1912-13 in what F. E. Green called the 'rural literary Renaissance': a flurry of books and articles which represented a culmination of the previous forty years of investigative energy.<sup>1</sup> In this period, when the Liberal government was in conflict with the House of Lords over the taxation of land values, the vast reports of the Land Enquiry Committee were published: an extensive semi-official investigation of urban and rural life, commissioned by David Lloyd George as Chancellor of the Exchequer. This chapter will examine these diverse investigations, which brought new life into old debates, and end with a more detailed discussion of the rural aspects of the Liberal land inquiry.

The importance of land reform to the architects of the 'New Liberalism' gave a new and important dimension to the debate on rural England, of which the stirrings had been visible in the 1890s. The land question seemed to unite the concerns of 'national efficiency', as articulated most forcefully by Rider Haggard, and the 'condition of

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<sup>1</sup> F. E. Green, *A History of the English Agricultural Labourer 1870-1920* (1920), p. 178.

England', as explored by radical social commentators such as C. F. G. Masterman, and to merge them together in a distinctive approach to social reform. Behind the programmes of social legislation and land reform adopted by the Liberal governments of Campbell-Bannerman and Asquith lay a tradition of rural social inquiry, which had peaked in the early years of the century. The concentration of many of the investigators of the time on social relations emphasised the link between landownership and economic and social deprivation. This was an important counterpart to the urban investigations of Booth and Rowntree, which supplied the background to many of the other social reforms of the period.

If the predominance of the land question was new, it should be remembered that the period was notable for a continued awareness of the inheritance of the tradition of rural inquiry. Social investigators such as Masterman, considered below, whose attitudes to urban social investigation were derived from Charles Booth and more recent figures, were certainly aware of the longer-standing traditions of investigating rural life. A crop of histories of the agricultural labourer were written in this period, mostly based on the accounts of Young, Cobbett, the Employment Commissioners of 1867, and so on.<sup>2</sup> The historians were generally agreed that the labourer's history consisted of a long period of proletarianisation and depression of living standards over the first half of the nineteenth century, followed by an improvement during the agricultural depression, when wages and the general standard of living rose markedly. All were agreed that depopulation was the issue which overshadowed the most recent period of the labourer's history. Furthermore, the developments during the last three decades of the nineteenth century, themselves powerfully influenced by many of the earlier traditions, were by now sufficiently well entrenched in the social discourse of the age as to have become part of the conventional wisdom on rural society. Thus the approach of the new rural historians, empirically grounded in the 'Swing' riots and the agricultural trade unionism of the 1870s, was one which emphasised conflict and protest. The new challenges of

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<sup>2</sup> See for example O. Jocelyn Dunlop, *The Farm Labourer: The History of a Modern Problem* (1913); Gilbert Slater, *The English Peasantry and the Enclosure of the Common Fields* (1907); J. L. & Barbara Hammond, *The Village Labourer 1760-1832: A Study of the Government of England Before the Reform Bill* (1911); R. E. Prothero, *English Farming Past and Present* (1912); W. H. R. Curtler, *A Short History of English Agriculture* (Oxford, 1909). The period also saw the first English translation of Wilhelm Hasbach, *A History of the English Agricultural Labourer* (1908 [1st. German ed. 1894]).



the Edwardian age, therefore, were met by a combination of old and new approaches.

During this period, the tradition of the agricultural investigator, given prominence by Rider Haggard, remained a feature of social inquiry. Some investigators set out on tours similar to Haggard's, the most notable example being A. D. - later Sir Daniel - Hall, whose 'Pilgrimage of British Farming' articles in the *Times* in 1910, 1911 and 1912 gave an exhaustive account of farming practices. Although Hall admitted that the condition of the agricultural labourer across much of Britain was not as enviable as that of the urban worker,<sup>3</sup> he generally advanced a defence of the practices of farmers in paying their men. For example, in Sussex, 'even the day labourers should make a pound a week on the average of the year',<sup>4</sup> and in Leicestershire high wages were accompanied by a free cottage, 'which was reckoned at 2s. a week, though from what we saw of them their economic rent must have been at least 5s.'<sup>5</sup> In general, for Hall, labour was a commodity, and his remarks usually referred to its availability and cost; and even the quality of cottages was directly related to the labour supply.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Edwin Pratt's books on agriculture were based on the evidence of farmers and landowners.<sup>7</sup> Often the same informant would appear in several inquiries. Thus John Idiens of Evesham was interviewed by both Haggard and Pratt;<sup>8</sup> as was Mr. A. Jermyn, honorary secretary of the Norfolk Small Holdings Association.<sup>9</sup> Pratt also quoted the evidence to the Departmental Committee on the Fruit Industry by John Chivers of Histon,<sup>10</sup> another of Haggard's interviewees.<sup>11</sup> A group of reliable, respected farming informants was being identified; and a group of agricultural investigators kept alive the tradition of Arthur Young and James Caird.

Another feature which should be noted is the reappearance of familiar investigators of rural life, taking their final bow. Thomas Kebbel wrote a fourth edition

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<sup>3</sup> A D. Hall, *A Pilgrimage of British Farming 1910-1912* (1913), p. 443.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, p. 416.

<sup>6</sup> For example, *ibid.*, pp. 98, 266.

<sup>7</sup> See for example Edwin A. Pratt, *The Organization of Agriculture* (1904); *The Transition in Agriculture* (1906).

<sup>8</sup> H. Rider Haggard, *Rural England, Being an Account of Agricultural and Social Researches Carried Out in 1901 and 1902* (2 vols., 1902), vol. I, pp. 357-9; Pratt, *Transition*, p. 135.

<sup>9</sup> Haggard, *Rural England*, vol. II, p. 506; Pratt, *Transition*, p. 287.

<sup>10</sup> Pratt, *Transition*, p. 42.

<sup>11</sup> Haggard, *Rural England*, vol. II, p. 51.

of *The Agricultural Labourer*, published in 1907, 37 years after its first appearance; and Francis Heath made his last contribution to the subject with the authoritative *British Rural Life and Labour* in 1911. Both took a backward-looking approach, and Heath in particular continually harked back to the time of Canon Girdlestone and Joseph Arch. Heath based his account of the Edwardian labourers largely on the reports of official investigators, and considered the structure of agricultural earnings in great detail. Unlike his inquiries of the 1870s, which took an approach deliberately different from that of the official investigations of the time, Heath's final book was more concerned to present the results of government research in more accessible form. Kebbel, by contrast, took very much his own line, considering first the perennial question of wages, and then some of the urgent problems of the period. While education and gang labour had informed his work in 1870, depopulation and the decline of village life were the concerns he approached in 1907. Interestingly, he made more explicit his adoption of the informant approach in this inquiry, pointing out that his information was 'derived ... from personal correspondence with landlords, farmers, clergymen, and, in one or two instances, day-labourers'.<sup>12</sup> Labourers, then, were a relatively insignificant feature of Kebbel's informant structure; and thus he signalled himself as an investigator who remained distinctly within the Conservative tradition: a tradition which had been steadily undermined during the previous forty years and was subject to new challenges in the Edwardian period.

The first group of investigators I want to consider in depth is the large number who investigated rural housing in the later 1890s and 1900s. This was a subject that never lay far from the concerns of social investigators, and its political dimension was undeniable. Francis Heath had not been the first journalist to expose the evils of rural housing; and the subject had long been thoroughly investigated on a regular basis by Medical Officers of Health. However, the cottage question was given a new importance by the acceleration of rural depopulation, which many observers blamed in part on poor housing. The quality of cottages was bad; and even after the progress of depopulation had emptied much of the countryside there was a chronic housing shortage in many places. The assistant commissioners of the Royal Commission on Labour had

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<sup>12</sup> T. E. Kebbel, *The Agricultural Labourer: A Summary of His Position* (4th ed., abridged, 1907), p. v.



repeatedly drawn attention to poor rural housing. A variety of investigative methods were brought to bear on the subject. The most visible investigators were the special correspondents: in 1899 Clement Edwards and George Haw, the latest in an illustrious line of *Daily News* reporters, presented a series of articles on the housing problem, Haw exploring London and Edwards the rural south-west. In 1900 Haw claimed credit for the *Daily News* in making the housing question 'the chief social question of the hour': 'Not only in London, where the need for reform is greatest, but in country villages and provincial towns, there has been a great awakening to the want of room to live.'<sup>13</sup> It was once more being emphasised that housing was often as bad in rural as in urban districts: an investigation in 1897 of 4179 cottages in 78 villages found that a quarter were 'bad' or 'extremely bad', and another study of 240 different villages found 'bad' cottages in half of them.<sup>14</sup>

The old notion that the attractive exteriors of cottages fooled the observer into thinking that conditions inside must be equally idyllic remained powerful. Most investigators made this point at some time. The period was one in which the charm of rural England was being fêted in country literature as never before. The urban reader was assailed by works such as Walter Raymond's *English Country Life*, which painted a charming picture of rustic contentment, and Helen Allingham's famous sketches.<sup>15</sup> These idealised representations of country life hid the social realities and political conflicts that lay beneath. E. N. Bennett remarked that '[t]he casual visitor to our rural districts is frequently led by the picturesque exteriors of our country cottages to ignore the existence of the damp and squalid accommodation within. Mrs. Allingham's charming sketches ... must not blind us to the fact that the general standard of rural housing is disgracefully low.'<sup>16</sup> Others, such as Clement Edwards, pointed out that the worst cottages were often those at some distance from the main road, which might fool the visitor who was unfamiliar with a district.<sup>17</sup> Christopher Holdenby also remarked on

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<sup>13</sup> George Haw, *No Room to Live: The Complaint of Overcrowded London* (2nd. ed., 1900), p. viii.

<sup>14</sup> W. Walter Crotch, *The Cottage Homes of England: The Case Against the Housing System in Rural Districts* (2nd. ed., 1901), pp. 7-8.

<sup>15</sup> Walter Raymond, *English Country Life* (1910); Helen Allingham & Stewart Dick, *The Cottage Homes of England* (1984 [1st. ed. 1909]).

<sup>16</sup> E. N. Bennett, *Problems of Village Life* (1914), p. 70.

<sup>17</sup> Clement Edwards, 'Bad Housing in Rural Districts', in *The House Famine and How to Relieve it* (1900, Fabian Tract no. 101), pp. 4-5.

this feature of rural housing.<sup>18</sup> Hugh Aronson, a Hertfordshire barrister and journalist, contrasted the 'village from without' - 'the delightful old village that we rush through on our modern contrivances of petrol or of steam'<sup>19</sup> - and the 'village from within', where the reports of inspectors were testament to the poor quality of country homes.<sup>20</sup> The rural location of this poor housing still had an ideological power to undermine efforts at reform. In the context of depopulation, this was especially important. William G. Savage, Medical Officer of Health for Somerset, well aware of the poor standards of cottage accommodation and the inadequacy of existing laws for the purpose of remedying them, still pointed out (in 1915) that urban populations were on the whole less healthy than the rural,<sup>21</sup> and that migration to towns was a cause of 'national ill-health'.<sup>22</sup>

The subject had another political dimension: the tied-cottage system, whereby the labourer lived in a cottage owned by his employer, and was thus subject to eviction from his home if he left or was dismissed from his employment, was criticised by many Liberal, Radical and Socialist commentators. Furthermore, the report of the Royal Commission on the Housing of the Working Classes had pointed out that security of cottage tenure was more important to the labourers than the physical surroundings of the home.<sup>23</sup> Even where the labourer's cottage was rented from a local landlord rather than from a farmer, the politics of rural life came into play in housing investigations. Complaining about the conditions in which they lived was difficult for labouring families. Tied cottages created a political barrier to the discovery of the truth about housing conditions. F. E. Green, a land reformer who concerned himself particularly with the 'tyranny' of the tied-cottage system, inspected cottages in his own Surrey village and found that he had to visit at night so the local farmers and landlords could not see that their tenants were revealing to him the inadequacy of their accommodation.<sup>24</sup> Green's efforts at reform were thwarted by the opposition of local

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<sup>18</sup> Christopher Holdenby, *Folk of the Furrow* (1913), pp. 48-50.

<sup>19</sup> Hugh Aronson, *Our Village Homes: Present Conditions and Suggested Remedies* (1913), p. 5.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*, ch. 2.

<sup>21</sup> William G. Savage, *Rural Housing* (1915), p. 245.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*, p. 268.

<sup>23</sup> John Burnett, *A Social History of Housing 1815-1985* (1986 [1st. ed. 1978]), p. 133.

<sup>24</sup> F. E. Green, *The Tyranny of the Countryside* (1913), p. 30; *The Awakening of England* (1912), p. 271.



farmers on the parish council.<sup>25</sup> Clement Edwards made a point of speaking to labourers about the tied-cottage system, finding that they condemned it and the insecurity of tenure that it gave them.<sup>26</sup> Another contributor to the turn-of-the-century literature on rural housing, the campaigning journalist Walter Crotch, suggested that even medical officers of health, supposedly the most independent of investigators, could be subject to pressures from vested interests in the countryside. They had private practices in addition to their public duties, and Crotch claimed that he had 'known of cases where the fear of losing a valuable part of an income from a big country magnate has induced an officer to see fewer gross insanitary evils on that person's estate than actually existed'.<sup>27</sup> One investigator in an unnamed southern village, who gave information to a Fabian Society committee of investigation, found that whereas the clerk of the Union offices condemned the houses as 'disgraceful',<sup>28</sup> the local Medical Officer of Health was reluctant to criticise the landlord's housing, 'being dependent upon him, and living in one of his houses'.<sup>29</sup>

There was an official structure of housing investigation, to which, theoretically, everyone had access. The restructuring of local government in 1888 and 1894, along with the Housing of the Working Classes Act of 1890, had created a process by which complaints about the quality or supply of housing in a particular district could lead to an official inquiry with a view to the construction of cottages by the local authority. These official inquiries, no less than those of freelance investigators such as Green, were scenes of conflict. There were substantial pressures on the labourers housed in squalid conditions to refrain from complaining about their condition to official inquiries. Hugh Aronson, writing in 1913, described a local inquiry held near his home village of Chipperfield in Hertfordshire under the provisions of the Housing of the Working Classes Act of 1890. Very many of the villagers 'would not attend to make their voices heard for very fear';<sup>30</sup> and one expert witness, a sympathetic parish councillor, said that people were afraid to give him information, in the belief that it would find its way back

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<sup>25</sup> Green, *Tyranny*, pp. 30-1; *The Surrey Hills* (1915), pp. 23-4.

<sup>26</sup> Edwards, 'Bad Housing', p. 5.

<sup>27</sup> Crotch, *Cottage Homes*, p. 153.

<sup>28</sup> Henry D. Harben, *The Rural Problem* (1913), p. 130.

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*, p. 129.

<sup>30</sup> Aronson, *Village Homes*, p. 15.

to their landlords and make trouble for them.<sup>31</sup> The obstacles in the way of building houses under the provisions of the Act were in any case immense: the erection of just six cottages at Penshurst in Kent in 1899, for example, was the result of four separate inquiries held over a period of three years.<sup>32</sup> At the colliery village of Wales in Yorkshire, despite 'overwhelming' evidence of the need for new cottages at an inquiry in 1898, the local inquiry had to be adjourned for six months in order to ascertain the willingness of landowners in the area to cooperate.<sup>33</sup> Vested interests were invariably lined up against the labourers, who if fortunate were assisted by well-meaning social reformers, such as Jane Escombe at Penshurst or Walter Crotch and Lionel Hawkins at Wales. Only through the efforts of sympathetic investigators such as these could the politically constructed veil of misinformation that surrounded village life be effectively lifted.

One investigator who was particularly interested in the cottage question was Constance Cochrane of Huntingdonshire. Cochrane explored cottages herself, and also carried out a large-scale investigation in which she sent a circular to nearly 3000 potential informants, of which over 500 were returned, and sent deputies to inspect 70 villages in 13 different counties.<sup>34</sup> Of 141 returns which gave sufficient details to judge from, 96 described 'bad' or 'very bad' cottages, 25 'fair' and only 20 'good'.<sup>35</sup> Cochrane found that her findings were borne out by the reports of medical officers of health, local government reports and 'blue books'.<sup>36</sup> There is little evidence of the social make-up of her informant base, but in a report prepared for the Fabian Society in 1900 she cited returns from three parish councillors, a rural district councillor, a clergyman, a clergyman's wife, a sanitary inspector, a labourer and, curiously, a baker.<sup>37</sup> The new organs of local government had created a new class of supposedly trustworthy informants. While vested interests were disproportionately represented on rural district and parish councils, those consulted were presumably relatively sympathetic towards the

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<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>32</sup> Crotch, *Cottage Homes*, ch. IX.

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>34</sup> Constance Cochrane, *Papers on Rural Housing: The Present Condition of the Cottage Home of the Agricultural Labourer* (St. Neots, 1901), pp. 12-13.

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>37</sup> Constance Cochrane, 'Laborers' Cottages', in *The House Famine and How to Relieve it* (1900, Fabian Tract no. 101), pp. 7-8.



labourers' discontents, as their reports bore out Cochrane's views on rural housing. This probably helps to explain the high non-response rate in this investigation: farmers and others who sat on councils would not respond if they disapproved of Cochrane's cause. Cochrane showed Rider Haggard around some poor cottages at Eltisley in Huntingdonshire in 1901, and followed this up with a letter to her cousin Arthur Cochrane, which explained the difficulties inherent in this kind of work:

I want just once more to impress upon you & Mr. Haggard the great difficulty of finding out the truth about the cottages when you are in different villages. The outside appearance is a most unsafe & misleading guide. The people themselves will oftener than not tell any amount of untruths to a stranger, for fear of being "turned out", or because they have been threatened with high rents if they complain. The farmers will hardly ever tell the truth, as many of them are on Rural District Councils, & are afraid of the rates. ... Owners very often do not know, & oftener do not care & they do not hear the truth from their agents. If Mr. Haggard had been taken to Eltisley by anyone about here except me, he wd. not have been able to gain any idea of the conditions of the cottages & san. arrangements except where they looked bad from the outside.<sup>38</sup>

Local vested interests, then were not only obstacles in the way of reform, but also barriers to social investigation. Cochrane emphasised the need for personal knowledge of an area, and the winning of confidence among the cottagers themselves: they needed to be sure that their complaints would not result in eviction or other forms of victimisation.

While the problems of rural housing formed one aspect of the social investigation of the period, the debate on the rural wage also continued unabated. The old contest between the informant and respondent approaches remained very much in evidence. It is unnecessary to explore this in great detail here, as the main themes of the debate were those which had been central in earlier decades; some points, however, should be noted. Many of the older, well-known figures reappeared. Arthur Wilson Fox carried out two investigations for the Board of Trade in 1900 and 1905, around which the debate coalesced.<sup>39</sup> These were followed in 1910 by George Askwith's report

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<sup>38</sup> Constance Cochrane to Arthur Cochrane, 18/5/1901, in Norwich Record Office, MS4692/25 (Cambs.). The ordering of this archival material is explained in chapter 6.

<sup>39</sup> *Report by Mr. Wilson Fox on the Wages and Earnings of Agricultural Labourers in the United Kingdom, with Statistical Tables and Charts*, PP 1900, Cd. 346; *Second Report by Mr. Wilson Fox on the Wages and Earnings of Agricultural Labourers in the United Kingdom, with Statistical Tables and*

on the earnings and hours of labour in agriculture, which formed one part of the Board of Trade's 'wage census', referring to the year 1907, and were carried out along the same lines as, though on a larger scale than, Wilson Fox's reports.<sup>40</sup> A vigorous contest was played out in the footnotes of official reports and social commentaries, in which the methodology of the investigation of the rural wage was debated. Wilson Fox was commissioned by the Board of Trade, which, as E. P. Hennock has pointed out,<sup>41</sup> was active in social investigation in the Edwardian period to a degree often overlooked by historians, to find the average cash wages and weekly earnings in each of the counties of England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland, and also to describe the conditions of employment, such as the terms of hiring. Wilson Fox also attempted to gain some insight into the domestic economy of labouring families, and describe their patterns of consumption. The influence of Rowntree lay behind some of these inquiries, especially the report of 1905; however, nowhere was Rowntree explicitly cited. The following discussion will focus on the report of 1905: the report of 1900 was carried out on very similar lines.

The information of wages for England was obtained in the following way. Information on weekly cash wage rates was taken from the chairmen of Rural District Councils, who had regularly supplied figures to the Labour Department of the Board of Trade since 1894, from about 300 farmers who were also regular contacts of the Board, and from 'a large number' of farmers who sent the rate of wages they paid in 1902.<sup>42</sup> In 1900 Wilson Fox pointed out that some of the council chairmen had brought the Board of Trade inquiry to the attention of a council meeting, and that others who were not themselves directly involved in agriculture had consulted 'representative farmers' in their districts.<sup>43</sup> In order to obtain information on earnings, including extra cash payments and allowances in kind, Wilson Fox sent forms out to about 10,500 farmers in 1903, of which about 3,200 were returned and useable: these related to about 28,000

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*Charts*, PP 1905, Cd. 2376.

<sup>40</sup> *Report of an Enquiry by the Board of Trade into the Earnings and Hours of Labour of Workpeople of the United Kingdom - V: Agriculture in 1907*, PP 1910, Cd. 5460.

<sup>41</sup> E. P. Hennock, 'The Measurement of Urban Poverty: From the Metropolis to the Nation 1880-1920', *Economic History Review*, 2nd. series, vol. XL (1987), pp. 216-19.

<sup>42</sup> PP 1905, p. 7. In Scotland, where there were no Rural District Councils, the investigation was even more heavily reliant on farming informants.

<sup>43</sup> PP 1900, p. 4.



labourers, including those who were absent from work for part of the year, but excluding casual labourers.<sup>44</sup> Wilson Fox also examined certain farms in detail - eight in Lincolnshire, two in Herefordshire, and one in each of Northumberland, Cumberland, Northamptonshire, Suffolk, Sussex, Wiltshire and Somerset - again using information chiefly supplied by the employers.<sup>45</sup>

One of the clearest features to emerge from Wilson Fox's reports was the wide regional diversity in the pay and conditions of agricultural labourers, a long-standing feature of the rural labour problem.<sup>46</sup> The highest average earnings in England in 1902 were 22s. 2d. in Durham, and the lowest 14s. 6d. in Oxfordshire.<sup>47</sup> Not only did earnings vary markedly from place to place, but the structure of remuneration also differed widely. Thus the excess of earnings (as calculated by employers) over wages varied from 4s. in Hampshire to just 1s. 7d. in Leicestershire and Rutland.<sup>48</sup> In some counties, there was a lot of piece-work available, which improved the labourer's earning potential; in some counties free cottages and potato ground were common, and in other counties free cider or beer was given. (Payments in kind were more common to labourers in charge of animals.) No one county could be taken as typical. The emphasis on regional variations was illustrative of the perennial problem facing the investigator of rural life: to attain a wide geographical spread was essential if the charge of generalising from the particular and atypical was to be avoided. Only an investigator with the benefits of an official machinery such as Wilson Fox, or with a substantial financial backing such as Rider Haggard, could realistically investigate agricultural conditions nation-wide. As Francis Heath pointed out, '[o]nly the resources of a great Government department ... with its army of correspondents in all parts of the kingdom, could enable us to give a rapid survey, which would be at the same time simultaneous.'<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> PP 1905, p. 7. The inquiry of 1900 received usable replies from 1,857 farmers, relating to 18,069 labourers; and George Askwith's inquiry was based on nearly 15,800 referring to over 78,000 labourers. It may be remarked that the returns received for 1907 seem to represent smaller farmers: the average employed on each farm was just over five, whereas for Wilson Fox's report in 1900 it was nearly ten, and for 1905 the figure was just under nine. The implications of these discrepancies require further investigation.

<sup>45</sup> PP 1905, pp. 46-64.

<sup>46</sup> See above, pp. 33-4. See also E. H. Hunt, *Regional Wage Variations in Britain 1850-1914* (Oxford, 1973); J. D. Chambers & G. E. Mingay, *The Agricultural Revolution 1750-1880* (1966), pp. 136-42, 190; Alan Armstrong, *Farmworkers: A Social and Economic History 1770-1980* (1988), pp. 66, 85, 91.

<sup>47</sup> PP 1905, pp. 28-9.

<sup>48</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 28-9, 34.

<sup>49</sup> F. G. Heath, *British Rural Life and Labour* (1911), p. 56.

Wilson Fox's personal preference was generally for the informant method of inquiry. In his official investigations his choice of method was probably limited, but he took a similar approach in a much smaller-scale inquiry, the results of which he read to Royal Statistical Society in 1903. The object was to describe the movement of agricultural wages during the previous fifty years. He collected information from 125 farmers on which to base his analysis.<sup>50</sup> The historical material was taken from investigations such as the Poor Law Commission of 1843, which took evidence from 'reliable witnesses such as medical men and the clergy'.<sup>51</sup> Wilson Fox also cited James Caird's and Frederick Clifford's inquiries:<sup>52</sup> writing in such respectable organs as the *Times* and the *Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society of England*, these men were respected authorities on the condition of the labourer.

Having said this, Wilson Fox was interested in more than simply the remuneration of the agricultural labourer, and in both this inquiry and his investigation of 1905 (though not in 1900) he attempted to describe the domestic economy of labouring families. He was interested in what labourers ate; and in the course of pursuing this inquiry he took information from a variety of correspondents, including 'landowners, Local Government Board inspectors, members of Local Authorities, farmers, clergymen, relieving officers, village tradesmen, and labourers'.<sup>53</sup> He also met some labourers during his six-month personal investigation which supplemented this correspondence.<sup>54</sup> In general, however, the labourer was not very visible in Wilson Fox's investigations; and this left his findings vulnerable to criticism.

The figures published in the reports were certainly open to dispute. Wilson Fox found that average wages in agricultural employment in 1900 were 15s. 5d., including payments in kind; but Harold Mann, in his brief contribution to the debate, argued that Wilson Fox's estimate was too high, as he had overestimated the numbers of the 'higher

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<sup>50</sup> Arthur Wilson Fox, 'Agricultural Wages in England and Wales During the Last Fifty Years', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, vol. LXVI (1903), p. 273.

<sup>51</sup> *ibid.*, p. 301.

<sup>52</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 303, 314.

<sup>53</sup> *ibid.*, p. 274.

<sup>54</sup> *ibid.*, p. 289n23.



grades' of labourers.<sup>55</sup> Furthermore, as Mann suggested, the figures for Bedfordshire did not take account of variations within the county; and while money wages in Ridgmount were higher than Wilson Fox's estimate of the money wages in Bedfordshire as a whole, the position was reversed when extras were included in the figures.<sup>56</sup> E. N. Bennett added that Wilson Fox did not allow for deductions made for wet weather and short-time working.<sup>57</sup> The debate retained its political dimension, especially important given the revival of agricultural trade unionism in some areas in the years before the Great War.<sup>58</sup> George Edwards, the Secretary of the National Agricultural Labourers' and Rural Workers' Union, and a former labourer himself, asserted that '[h]undreds' of labourers in Northamptonshire and Oxfordshire took home only 8s. per week in the winter.<sup>59</sup> Wilson Fox, on the other hand, took a different example in 1905: he showed that the total earnings of a family of six adults in Northumberland could be as much as £207 8s.<sup>60</sup> All such information was dependent on the source of information and the selection of evidence.

The primacy of rural elites in the informant structure of Wilson Fox's inquiries prompted criticism from many sources. Hugh Aronson, for example, commenting on the second Board of Trade report, was sure that the figures given erred on the high side: 'the information was obtained solely from employers, and there is no doubt that they estimated the value of allowances at a higher figure than was justified and considerably higher than the men would have valued them at had they been consulted'.<sup>61</sup> In the English translation of his monumental history of the agricultural labourer, which first appeared in 1908, Wilhelm Hasbach argued that 'too much faith must not be rested on [Wilson Fox's] data, seeing that they mostly come from farmers, though some, and in particular the figures for the money-wages, are from the chairmen of Rural District Councils'.<sup>62</sup> The latter were seen as a more neutral group of witnesses; however, many

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<sup>55</sup> H. H. Mann, 'Life in an Agricultural Village in England', *Sociological Papers*, vol. I (1905), p. 192.

<sup>56</sup> *ibid.*, p. 191.

<sup>57</sup> Bennett, *Problems of Village Life*, p. 158.

<sup>58</sup> See especially Alun Howkins, *Poor Labouring Men: Rural Radicalism in Norfolk 1872-1923* (1985), which has a readable account of the strike at St. Faith's in Norfolk in 1910; George Edwards, *From Crow-Scaring to Westminster* (1922).

<sup>59</sup> Quoted in Bennett, *Problems of Village Life*, p. 158.

<sup>60</sup> PP 1905, p. 32.

<sup>61</sup> Hugh Aronson, *The Land and the Labourer* (1914), p. 53n1.

<sup>62</sup> Wilhelm Hasbach, *A History of the English Agricultural Labourer* (1908 [1st. German ed. 1894]), p. 317.

were farmers themselves, and they did not comment very much on the really contentious aspects of the rural wage structure. F. E. Green also put little faith in Wilson Fox's figures, noting that his averages did not include the earnings of casual workers in agriculture, and that payments in kind were of 'very doubtful cash value' and would probably be overvalued by employers who paid them:

It is only human nature that all farmers, desiring to appear as generous as possible, should put down sums against allowances in kind which are very far from being accurate. Indeed, I doubt whether Farmer Giles, who perhaps has never had an account book to keep during his whole life, would retain anything like accurate figures in his head as to the cash equivalent of many of these "allowances."<sup>63</sup>

E. N. Bennett thought that Wilson Fox's 'careful statistics ... would have been even more reliable had they not been based so largely on returns made by employers'.<sup>64</sup> Bennett, writing in 1914, calculated agricultural wage rates *excluding* overtime and allowances, arguing that the allowance system, used by farmers as an excuse to pay low wages, concealed the 'economic facts of village life' from observers.<sup>65</sup> Francis Heath, writing in 1911 with Wilson Fox's reports as his main source of information, remarked on the inferiority of the cider supplied to labourers in lieu of wages in the west of England, and thought its value 'rather over-estimated' by employers.<sup>66</sup>

Even if the potential for farmers to exaggerate their labourers' real earnings was overstated - and it is worth bearing in mind that Wilson Fox pointed out that payments in kind, which had the most contestable cash value, were relatively rare and formed only a small proportion of the total earnings<sup>67</sup> - the informant structure posed another problem. As the Fabian investigator Henry Harben pointed out, the figures in official reports were

calculated from information supplied by a small and picked minority of employers, under whom conditions of labour are probably most free from

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<sup>63</sup> Green, *Tyranny*, p. 226. It is worth remarking here that Green did not share the belief of many investigators that the labourer was inclined to undervalue his earnings. Rather, he considered that the opposite was true: the labourer, when questioned by a respectable inquirer such as Green, would be embarrassed to disclose the true extent of his impoverishment, and would, like the farmer, overvalue his remuneration (Green, *History*, p. 105).

<sup>64</sup> Bennett, *Problems of Village Life*, p. 9.

<sup>65</sup> *ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>66</sup> Heath, *British Rural Life and Labour*, p. 35.

<sup>67</sup> PP 1905, pp. 22-3.



reproach. The method employed has been to send schedules to farmers who are known to the Department and to the Local Authority; all of these are employers who would have least reason to avoid answering questions about their workpeople.<sup>68</sup>

Employers whose labourers were poorly paid and worked in bad conditions were less likely to respond to the questionnaire sent out by an official investigation. This is another illustration of how the condition of the agricultural labourer could be hidden from view: like the sweated trades of London, agriculture was difficult to penetrate, and even the superficially simple question of wages was difficult to address with any authority.

It is noteworthy that, forty years after the initial explosion of interest in rural social conditions caused by the activities of the Arch union, the same problems were still constantly being identified. F. E. Green, remarking in 1920 on the variety of books on the condition and history of the agricultural labourer in the years before the Great War, noticed that '[t]he crop [of books on rural life] was a big one, yet it was significant that every investigator's hand had found its way to the one upstanding thistle which he grasped with unpleasant prickings, and that was the lowness of the labourers' [*sic*] wage'.<sup>69</sup> There were, however other issues which investigators felt the need to explore. As in previous decades, the non-wage aspects of rural social problems were examined, often in some detail; and social relations were analysed with increasing rigour and passion. The most striking feature of the investigation of rural social problems in the later 1900s and early 1910s was that they were almost invariably related in one way or another to the land question.

The growing prominence of the land question in the years before the Great War is, as Asa Briggs has remarked, a feature much overlooked by historians of the period.<sup>70</sup> Its centrality to the national framework of political debate in the Edwardian period, however, gives it a crucial significance in the context of the present study. In the nineteenth century, land reformers were beginning to relate social problems directly to

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<sup>68</sup> Harben, *Rural Problem*, p. 8.

<sup>69</sup> Green, *History*, p. 178.

<sup>70</sup> Asa Briggs, *Social Thought and Social Action: A Study of the Work of Seebohm Rowntree* (1960), p. 67.

landownership. As H. J. Perkin has explained:

There was scarcely a social problem, from rural hovels and village pauperism to the slums, drunkenness and moral degradation of town life, which reformers did not place at the landlords' door. The landlords had driven the people from the soil, and therefore they were responsible for the consequences: the loss of prosperity and self-respect, the dependence on an insecure wage, the lack of steps in the form of allotments and smallholdings by which the landless man could climb to a farm, and [what the land reformer James Beal called] "all the vast and unnumbered social sores connected with pauperism and rural degradation."<sup>71</sup>

The political divisions over land in the 1890s were intensified in the following years,<sup>72</sup> and the link with rural social problems firmly established in the investigative community. By 1908 the Fabian investigator D. C. Pedder, of Ogbourne St. George in Wiltshire, could write of 'the great plea of LABOUR *versus* LAND which is now going on in our midst'.<sup>73</sup> The issue was also related to questions of national efficiency. Thus Rider Haggard and other Conservatives<sup>74</sup> came to support smallholdings as the basis for a re-creation of the old yeoman class; and on the other side of the party divide, Henry Campbell-Bannerman, in a speech at the Albert Hall during the general election campaign of 1905-6, expressed his party's desire 'to colonise our own country': 'We wish to make the land less of a pleasure-ground for the rich, and more of a treasure-house for the nation.'<sup>75</sup> This close relationship between land reform and social reform<sup>76</sup> gave the agricultural labourer an important place in the nation's political consciousness in the years before the Great War.

The issue was reflected in the preoccupations of special correspondents. Journalistic investigators found themselves increasingly politically polarised around the land question. A good example of the contestability of the morality of the landholding system and its effects on the labouring population is to be found in the differing

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<sup>71</sup> H. J. Perkin, 'Land Reform and Class Conflict in Victorian Britain', in J. Butt & I. F. Clarke (eds.), *The Victorians and Social Protest: A Symposium* (Newton Abbot, 1973), p. 188.

<sup>72</sup> See Roy Douglas, *Land, People and Politics: A History of the Land Question in the United Kingdom 1878-1952* (1976), esp. chs. 8-9.

<sup>73</sup> D. C. Pedder, *Where Men Decay: A Survey of Present Rural Conditions* (1908), p. v.

<sup>74</sup> For example, Henry Chaplin, Lord Salisbury's President of the Board of Agriculture. See Douglas, *Land, People and Politics*, p. 105.

<sup>75</sup> Quoted in Douglas, *Land, People and Politics*, p. 135.

<sup>76</sup> See the brief mention of land reform in G. R. Searle, *The Quest for National Efficiency: A Study in British Politics and Political Thought 1899-1914* (1990 [1st. ed. Oxford, 1971]), p. 172.



responses of special correspondents to their visits to Lord Salisbury's estates in Hertfordshire. In 1901, while Salisbury was still Prime Minister, Rider Haggard and the *Express* remarked on 'The Lucky Fortune of Those who Chance to be Tenants of Lord Salisbury', and described the good cottages, built by workmen on the estate.<sup>77</sup> When Robert Outhwaite, a correspondent of a very different political complexion - he was a prominent land reformer and won the Hanley by-election for the Liberals in 1912 - visited Hatfield in 1909, he compared the conditions unfavourably with a London slum. Under the headline 'Hatfield and the Hovels', he recognised that the worst cottages were not actually owned by Lord Salisbury (the Premier's successor to the title), but argued that 'his ownership of almost every vacant acre is the cause of such conditions existing'.<sup>78</sup> Similarly, in 1912 Harold Spender, a noted journalist and lecturer - reported for the *Daily News and Leader* on 'Landlord-Ridden Cornwall',<sup>79</sup> and in a series of articles laid the blame for poor housing firmly at the door of the land monopolists.<sup>80</sup> Another example was W. B. Hodgson, yet another *Daily News* special correspondent, who in the mid-1900s began a tour of Devon and the west, which was completed after his death by C. F. G. Masterman.

The informant base remained an important question for all these correspondents. Masterman, for example, obtained useful information from Mr. Weaver, Chairman of Castle Morton Parish Council in the Malverns, 'a sturdy Radical yeoman of the old school'.<sup>81</sup> Outhwaite spoke to an artisan at Petworth in Sussex (Lord Leconfield's land), who was fearful of reprisals if he was caught talking to a Liberal correspondent.<sup>82</sup> In the north of Scotland, Outhwaite travelled across the Duke of Sutherland's estate: Sutherland, he pointed out, was a prominent Tory, president of the Tariff Reform League, but Outhwaite took as his guide Mr. Joseph McLeod, organising secretary of the Inverness Liberal Association, and long active in the Highland Land Reform movement.<sup>83</sup> Unsurprisingly, the views expressed in his columns reflect those of McLeod (who still bore a grudge against the landlord because his grandfather had been

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<sup>77</sup> *Daily Express*, 26/7/1901, p. 4.

<sup>78</sup> R. L. Outhwaite, *Peer or Peasant? The Ruin of Rural England and the Remedy* (1909), p. 25.

<sup>79</sup> *Daily News and Leader*, 19/9/1912, p. 4.

<sup>80</sup> *Daily News and Leader*, 30/9/1912, p. 7; 1/10/1912, p. 7; 2/10/1912, p. 7.

<sup>81</sup> C. F. G. Masterman, W. B. Hodgson & others, *To Colonise England: A Plea for a Policy* (1907), p. 76.

<sup>82</sup> Outhwaite, *Peer or Peasant?*, p. 11.

<sup>83</sup> R. L. Outhwaite, *Deer and Desolation: The Scottish Land Problem* (n.d. [1912]), pp. 24-5.

evicted over a century earlier), as well as the natural political sympathies of a *Daily News* journalist. Hodgson talked to a Norfolk landowner, who told him that the labourers could get cottages, but that they were not given them because their children were dirty and prone to break windows.<sup>84</sup> From the other point of view, Mr. Weaver told Masterman that they were fortunate to have no resident landlord at Castle Morton,<sup>85</sup> and Masterman compared the open 'free' village with the closed 'feudal' village.<sup>86</sup> The labourer in the 'free' village was independent, and not subject to the 'tyranny' of parson and squire. The special correspondents' investigations reflected their political preoccupations: as these men were Liberals, they leaned towards the evidence of the labourers and Dissenters. Outhwaite found the perfect witness in the Vale of Aylesbury: Mr. Foat, 'a member of the Aylesbury Board of Guardians, a man of independent means, a leader of Primitive Methodism, and so knowing the life of the villages, and not afraid to speak his mind'.<sup>87</sup> Foat was a respectable man, in positions of authority, but also in close touch with the villagers, who gave him much of his information. He believed that the labourers only stayed on the land at all because of allotments; and that farmers on the Small Holdings Committee of the County Council frightened the labourers out of applying for access to the land.<sup>88</sup> The special correspondent, then, in this period, was increasingly concerned with the politics of the land question, adopted his concerns and techniques accordingly, and interacted with rural life through an informant structure which, as in earlier decades, tended to reflect his political standpoint.<sup>89</sup>

The problems of landownership and the social relations of villages gave rise to a conception of rural life which accentuated the non-material features of the labourer's existence. Poverty was as much a social and spiritual as an economic condition.

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<sup>84</sup> Masterman *et al*, *To Colonise England*, p. 54.

<sup>85</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 75, 80.

<sup>86</sup> *ibid.*, p. 91.

<sup>87</sup> Outhwaite, *Peer or Peasant?*, pp. 20-1.

<sup>88</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 21-2.

<sup>89</sup> One other interesting feature of the special correspondents in the Edwardian countryside was their use of the motor car, a new device which facilitated the exploration of a wider area in a shorter space of time. The car, however, could be quite conspicuous. At Nordelph in Norfolk, Masterman travelled in his car with Richard Winfrey, the local Member of Parliament, and a little crowd gathered around them, looking at the car, which was something of a novelty in that remote area. (Masterman *et al*, *To Colonise England*, p. 104.) The motorist was a man from a different world in a way that the man who travelled on foot was not. This reminds one of Cobbett's exhortation to the social investigator of rural life to travel, where possible, on foot. See also Outhwaite, *Peer or Peasant?*, pp. 42-7.



Augustus Jessopp had pointed to the hopelessness and drabness of the life of the young Norfolk 'Hodge'; and this was a theme repeated in the 1900s. The monotony of rural life could be blamed on two conflicting causes. The Liberal commentator would generally blame the hopelessness of the labourer and the absence of a healthy village social life on the persistence of privileged landownership, and on the role of the country parson in village life. The Conservative, on the other hand, could point to the decline of traditional social relations, the pernicious influence of the cash-nexus and the embitterment of class relations in a countryside which had previously been a haven of social peace. Despite the contrasting approaches to the problem - whether the proposed solution was better access to the land for agricultural labourers, a more inclusive social life in which local elites played a leading role, or a greater role for the institutions of village democracy - the social diagnosis was the same. The agenda, in the modern terminology, was one of social exclusion.

The backward-looking mentality which characterised most of the literature on contemporary rural social problems had its influence in this respect. The decline of the organic community and its associated communal recreations was an aspect of the spiritual poverty of the countryside which had been adduced as one reason for the 'rural exodus' in the 1890s. The themes were reiterated in the Edwardian years. Parish Councils had given rural villagers the chance to shape their own local social lives, but the chance was only infrequently grasped. George Sturt was involved in the promotion of village social activities in the Lower Bourne, and commented on the lack of interest in village life. Spiritual poverty was generational: for Sturt, the old men of the village, still versed in the traditional country crafts, had a fuller inner life than the younger generations, whose minds were less lively and active. In a sense, these young men and women were corrupted by urban influences, and had lost touch with the land which had given them birth. P. H. Ditchfield, who took a keen antiquarian interest in the history and customs of rural England, came to the conclusion that depopulation would be decelerated by the revival of old village sports and pastimes. Ditchfield thought a knowledge of local history would add interest to the lives of the rustics, which were in danger of becoming debauched by new vulgar entertainments: 'The death of the old social customs which added such diversity to the lives of our forefathers tends to render

the countryman's life one continuous round of labour unrelieved by pleasant pastime, and if innocent pleasures are not indulged in, the tendency is to seek for gratification in amusements that are not innocent or wholesome.'<sup>90</sup> Ditchfield harked back to the old village communities of Tudor and Stuart England,<sup>91</sup> and derived some of his information on the mid-nineteenth century from Miss Mitford, citing for example her descriptions of village cricket matches.<sup>92</sup> The decline of organic village life, especially for men like Ditchfield, was a recent phenomenon, whose passing was chronicled in the works of, for example, Thomas Hardy. However dubious the evidence for a rustic 'golden age', it was a widely-shared notion.

Other observers, from a different political perspective, linked the dullness of village life to the continuing 'tyranny' of parson and squire, and the lack of opportunity for the labourer to develop his independence through access to the land. D. C. Pedder, who thought the decline of the old village gentry had done a lot towards making village life duller,<sup>93</sup> and lamented the increasingly embittered relations between employers and labourers in the countryside,<sup>94</sup> nevertheless agreed with Henry George that land monopoly was the root cause of poverty.<sup>95</sup> Like many others, Pedder advocated the creation of a class of small independent cultivators, who would have a personal attachment to the land.<sup>96</sup> On a smaller scale, investigators like Pedder and F. E. Green thought the allotment was a morally beneficial resource, though Henry Harben pointed out that many were not of good quality and often situated a long way from the labourer's home.<sup>97</sup> Pigs and poultry were also a source of money and interest to the labourer, and, for Pedder, had an educative value.<sup>98</sup> Allied to the lack of land and independence was a social position not far from serfdom. Harben pointed to the monotony and absence of ambition in the labourer's life, as well as the tied-cottage system which put him in a position of 'servility and dependence'.<sup>99</sup> The changes that were beginning to take place -

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<sup>90</sup> P. H. Ditchfield, *Vanishing England* (1910), p. 375.

<sup>91</sup> P. H. Ditchfield, *Old Village Life, or Glimpses of Village Life Through All Ages* (1920), pp. vii-viii.

<sup>92</sup> P. H. Ditchfield, *The Cottages and the Village Life of Rural England* (1912), p. 147.

<sup>93</sup> Pedder, *Where Men Decay*, ch. 1; *The Secret of Rural Depopulation* (1904, Fabian Tract no. 118), p. 13.

<sup>94</sup> Pedder, *Where Men Decay*, ch. 1, pp. 32-7.

<sup>95</sup> D. C. Pedder, *Henry George and His Gospel* (1908), p. 86.

<sup>96</sup> Pedder, *Secret*, pp. 17-19.

<sup>97</sup> Harben, *Rural Problem*, p. 12.

<sup>98</sup> Pedder, *Where Men Decay*, pp. 41-2.

<sup>99</sup> Harben, *Rural Problem*, pp. 4-5.



the broadening horizons of the labourer, and his flickerings of independence - were the result, more than anything else, of education and increased contact with the outside world.<sup>100</sup> The labourer, however, still had little opportunity to participate in any form of organised village social life and little improvement to look forward to in his material condition as long as he remained on the land. Whether the remedy proposed was feudal, cooperative or socialistic in ambition, the notion of rural life as a socially and intellectually stultified backwater played an important part in perceptions of rural poverty.

It could be argued that such views of village life were the views of social elites, and therefore did not reflect the way that the rural working classes perceived themselves. Rowntree, for example, talked to a schoolmaster, who complained that '[t]he problem ... is not one of destitution, but of the general monotony and dreariness. These people have so little to live for. I am in the village myself, and I seldom leave it, but I have the world of books, they have not.'<sup>101</sup> The 'world of books', however, was not one to which the labourers aspired: they had the world of the public house to enjoy. They understandably resented being judged by the standards of another class, which were as often as not unattainable from a position at the margins of poverty. Similarly, the agricultural labourer's view of his own ancestry was likely to be different from that of the social commentator, who was well-read in the literature of the subject. The labourer himself did not yearn for a return to the old customs and traditions of rural life: his own concerns were more immediate, constrained more by the realities of day-to-day existence than by the ideological constructions of country life.

The issues discussed in this chapter all provided a background to the report of the Land Enquiry Committee, which deserves extended consideration as one of the most interesting large-scale investigative ventures of the period. The inquiry can be seen as marking a culmination of the various developing trends of social investigation that have run through both this chapter and the thesis as a whole. Although the methods adopted were very different from those of Arthur Young and his contemporaries over a century earlier, their shadow still hung over the Committee's work. As will be seen, however,

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<sup>100</sup> See for example Pedder, *Secret*, p. 8.

<sup>101</sup> B. S. Rowntree, *The Labourer and the Land* (1914), p. 24.

the inquiry, especially the rural part, was influenced by the growing tendency to consult the labourers first-hand, rather than to rely on supposedly trustworthy informants in official positions, or on the testimony of farmers. As a cross between an official and an unofficial inquiry, the Committee was in some respects unique, and its reports illustrate the complexities of the contests which lay behind any attempts to investigate rural life. The Committee was appointed by the Chancellor, David Lloyd George, in 1912, and had a membership of twelve. The Chairman was Arthur Acland, and the Honorary Secretary Charles Roden Buxton. The Head Organiser of the Rural Enquiry was R. L. Reiss, and the Committee also included Richard Winfrey, Liberal M.P. for South-West Norfolk from 1906<sup>102</sup> (who had assisted C. F. G. Masterman on his tour of Norfolk) and Seebohm Rowntree. It was thus rather unfair of two prominent detractors of the Committee to suggest that the Chairman was 'the only member who could claim any knowledge of agriculture'.<sup>103</sup> Rowntree's exhaustive investigations of Belgian agricultural conditions, at any rate, gave him some authority as a rural investigator. Having said this, it must also be borne in mind that the very fact of these investigators having a substantial prior knowledge of agriculture and the land question meant that they came to the task with a very definite predetermined agenda. Lloyd George's own agenda, which shaped the appointment of the Committee, was one of radical land reform.<sup>104</sup> The scale of the investigation was impressive: it employed seventy people,<sup>105</sup> and one of the Committee's most active members, Seebohm Rowntree, regularly spent four days a week over a two-year period working on the inquiry in London.<sup>106</sup> The Committee reported in two stages: the rural volume of its report was published in 1913, and the urban volume in 1914. While the urban inquiry was concerned only occasionally with conditions of working-class life in towns, the rural investigation

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<sup>102</sup> Winfrey was also directly involved in the smallholdings movement as chairman of the Lincolnshire Norfolk Small Holdings Association Ltd.; and was Parliamentary Secretary to the Board of Agriculture between 1916 and 1918.

<sup>103</sup> Charles Adeane & Edwin Savill, *The Land Retort: A Study of the Land Question with an Answer to the Report of the Secret Enquiry Committee* (1914), p. ix.

<sup>104</sup> See Chris Wrigley, *Lloyd George* (Oxford, 1992), pp. 26-7, 44-6, 48, 54-6; Bentley Brinkerhoff Gilbert, *David Lloyd George, A Political Life, Volume II: Organizer of Victory 1912-1916* (Columbus, Ohio, 1992), pp. 55-66, 81-93. Lloyd George's famous Limehouse speech on 30th July 1909 turned the full venom of the orator onto the landlord class: 'No country, however rich, can permanently afford to have quartered upon its revenue a class which declines to do the duty which it was called upon to perform since the beginning.' (Speech at Limehouse, in David Lloyd George, *Better Times: Speeches by the Right Hon. D. Lloyd George M.P., Chancellor of the Exchequer* (1910), pp. 155-6.)

<sup>105</sup> Briggs, *Seebohm Rowntree*, p. 65.

<sup>106</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 65-6.



analysed the position of the agricultural labourer in some depth.

The structure of the rural inquiry deserves detailed consideration. England and Wales were divided into twelve districts, and a Head Investigator was appointed for each. Schedules of questions were sent out to informants selected by the Head Investigators. Schedule A, of which 2,759 were received, was mainly concerned with wages and conditions of labour, housing and allotments, 'and related to matters of fact rather than of opinion'.<sup>107</sup> Schedule B dealt with more directly agricultural matters, and 866 of these were filled in.<sup>108</sup> Anonymity was assured for informants, another aspect of the inquiry which provided grounds for criticism.<sup>109</sup> Other information was obtained from the reports of independent investigators, including Rowntree, Harold Mann and Maud Davies,<sup>110</sup> and two opponents of the Liberal government, Daniel Hall<sup>111</sup> and Rider Haggard.<sup>112</sup> Official inquiries were freely quoted throughout the report. Thomas Hardy's evidence to Haggard's inquiry was cited in the section on tied cottages.<sup>113</sup> The Committee's rural report, then, is a good example of the intermingling of different aspects of social investigation in this period, and was a means of drawing different kinds of evidence together.

The informant structure of the investigation was one to which the Committee appear to have devoted much thought. It was stressed that as broad a range of people as possible were consulted. Schedule A was filled in by 'men of all classes, including landowners, large farmers, shopkeepers, labourers, small holders, clergy and ministers of all denominations', and occasionally by a local committee formed for the purpose.<sup>114</sup> Schedule B was necessarily filled in mainly by farmers, landowners and land agents, and sometimes by the Head Investigator himself after cross-examining a witness.<sup>115</sup> The urban inquiry tended to use solicitors, architects, surveyors and others with direct

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<sup>107</sup> Land Enquiry Committee, *The Land: The Report of the Land Enquiry Committee, Vol. I: Rural* (1913), p. xiv.

<sup>108</sup> *ibid.*, pp. xv-xvi.

<sup>109</sup> Adeane and Savill, *Land Retort*, p. x.

<sup>110</sup> Land Enquiry Committee, *The Land, vol. I*, pp. xliii, 23-9.

<sup>111</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 39, 160, 231, 233-5.

<sup>112</sup> *ibid.*, pp. xxxii, xlvii-l, 138, 150.

<sup>113</sup> *ibid.*, p. 150.

<sup>114</sup> *ibid.*, p. xvi.

<sup>115</sup> *ibid.*, p. xvi.

experience of urban land problems.<sup>116</sup> In this sense the rural inquiry was probably more 'democratic' in outlook than the urban one. Of 33 rural informants whose information to the urban inquiry on the subject of the farmer and the rating of improvements was quoted, 18 were farmers (two of them County Councillors), and there were also three 'yeoman farmer[s]', two builders, one 'tenant farmer', one 'gentleman farmer', one County Councillor, one rate collector, one landowner, one willow merchant, one overseer, one surveyor and one 'Chamber of Agriculture'.<sup>117</sup> On the other hand, when the rural inquiry came to consider the question of objections to tied cottages, a subject on which it was not to be expected that farmers would give views which were shared by the Liberal investigators, the evidence used was supplied by a variety of informants including a mason, a boot repairer, a shopkeeper, a railwayman, a postman and a number of labourers.<sup>118</sup> Some farmers were quoted on the subject, but only those who agreed with the Committee's criticisms of the system.<sup>119</sup> (In any case, it is unlikely that many farmers who disagreed with the objects of the inquiry would have agreed to fill in the schedules). The use of evidence from tradesmen was criticised by Charles Adeane and Edwin Savill, whose *Land Retort* followed hot on the heels of the Committee's report: 'Selected evidence from Landowners and farmers cannot be accepted as having any weight, and when on agricultural matters it is given by grocers, barbers, chemists, chauffeurs, schoolmasters, signalmen, fellmongers, cycle agents, still less are agriculturists likely to receive it with any respect.'<sup>120</sup>

The Committee had a clearly stated aim to take evidence from lower down the social scale than official inquiries had done in the past. The choice was between the methods of Booth and Rowntree - that is, employing investigators to take information personally - and the Royal Commission method of cross-examining witnesses at a headquarters in London. In general, the Booth-Rowntree approach was adopted, and the report explained:

Royal Commissions are ... apt to hear only the bigger people. Thus, the witnesses

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<sup>116</sup> Land Enquiry Committee, *The Land: The Report of the Land Enquiry Committee, vol. II: Urban* (1914), vol. II, p. xxiv.

<sup>117</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 525-30. One informant's background was not stated.

<sup>118</sup> Land Enquiry Committee, *The Land, vol. I*, pp. 138-42.

<sup>119</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 148-9.

<sup>120</sup> Adeane & Savill, *Land Retort*, p. x.



before the Commissions on Agriculture were mainly large farmers, landlords and agents, the small farmer and the labourers, speaking generally, did not appear before them. Moreover, cross-examination by a Committee is more of an ordeal to the small man. He is less expert at putting his case, and the knowledge that his name, as well as a verbatim report of all he says, will be published, must inevitably prevent him, very frequently, from referring to matters which intimately affect him, and regarding which it is essential to learn his true opinion. It is true that some Royal Commissions have appointed assistant commissioners to visit and report on specific areas. These assistant commissioners obtained information from the smaller men, but they gave only their own reports to the Commission, with the result that no first-hand information was available from the small farmers and labourers.<sup>121</sup>

The Chairman of the Committee, Arthur Acland, recognised the possible conflicts between different grades of informant. He identified two possible points of view - the 'social' and the 'economic' - which were apt to polarise debate on the condition of agriculture and rural life in general.<sup>122</sup> The employer and the landowner thought in terms of their own self-interest, which necessitated the adoption, generally, of the 'economic' point of view, while the social reformer was liable to overlook this perspective in favour of his more directly social concerns. This division clearly had implications for the methods of investigation that were to be adopted; and Acland argued that neither approach, uncritically adopted, could really solve the immense problems that were facing rural life.<sup>123</sup> Thus the labourer, it was argued, needed access to land 'from a social point of view',<sup>124</sup> but smallholdings were also 'extremely desirable from an economic point of view'.<sup>125</sup> The Committee repeatedly attempted to justify their proposals on both social and economic grounds: thus, for example, they argued that labour was cheaper where better-paid.<sup>126</sup> It might be argued that the concept of potentially conflicting economic and social imperatives was paralleled in the conflicts between the informant and respondent methods of inquiry.

There was certainly room for dissent on the methods and conclusions of the Committee's report. It was, perhaps, unsurprising that, in trying to justify radical

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<sup>121</sup> Land Enquiry Committee, *The Land*, vol. I, p. xiv.

<sup>122</sup> *ibid.*, pp. xxiv-xxv.

<sup>123</sup> *ibid.*, pp. li-liv, lvii.

<sup>124</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 169, 193

<sup>125</sup> *ibid.*, p. 194.

<sup>126</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 56-60, 67.

proposals on the grounds that they would suit everyone, the Committee found itself the subject of criticism. Adeane and Savill, for example, referring like the Committee to Wilson Fox's reports for the Board of Trade, pointed out that payments in kind, 'of which such a pother is made', formed on average only 10d. of the labourer's wage, and in no county more than 1s. 2d.<sup>127</sup> They also disputed the Committee's findings on the hours of labour,<sup>128</sup> and defended the system of tied cottages.<sup>129</sup> They pointed out that many farmers allowed old and infirm labourers to stay on rent-free in a tied cottage.<sup>130</sup> Such attacks on the Committee were along lines very similar to those pursued forty years earlier by farming spokesmen during the agricultural upheavals of the early 1870s.

In general, the report of the Land Enquiry Committee, as far as the rural aspects were concerned, concurred with most Liberal contributions to the debate on rural life of the period. The report pointed to the lowness of agricultural wages and the fact that perquisites were often of doubtful value, to the poor cottage accommodation and the housing shortage, to the tied-cottage system and to the economic and social usefulness of gardens and allotments. To this last point was added a plea for an extension of smallholding and with it more opportunities for the labourer to rise from his position. The Committee also shared the view that urban and rural problems were interlinked: in the urban volume of its report, it pointed to the effects of the rural housing shortage in urban areas, taking Cambridge, Durham, Henley-on-Thames, Kendal and Pontefract as examples.<sup>131</sup> Arthur Acland, in his introduction to the report, pointed to the importance of solving rural problems from a 'national efficiency' point of view.<sup>132</sup> In the urban volume, the report of the Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration was cited as evidence of the link between overcrowding and intemperance;<sup>133</sup> and in the rural volume reports from Medical Officers of Health were used to illustrate the physical and moral effects of bad housing on the population.<sup>134</sup> The rural was still viewed as a potential reservoir of health and strength for the nation.

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<sup>127</sup> Adeane & Savill, *Land Retort*, p. 10.

<sup>128</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 11-13.

<sup>129</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 19-21, 49-50.

<sup>130</sup> *ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>131</sup> Land Enquiry Committee, *The Land*, vol. II, pp. 77-8.

<sup>132</sup> Land Enquiry Committee, *The Land*, vol. I, pp. xxxix-xl.

<sup>133</sup> Land Enquiry Committee, *The Land*, vol. II, p. 34n.

<sup>134</sup> Land Enquiry Committee, *The Land*, vol. I, pp. 92-107.



The report of the Land Enquiry Committee, then, is an appropriate subject with which to end the body of this thesis. It represented a vast effort at investigating the conditions of life on the land, and if the bulk of the report was not directly related to labouring life, enough contentious issues were dealt with to prompt debates on its methodology and conclusions. In adopting aspects of the informant method, the Committee shows the continued vitality of this form of inquiry, and yet it was also keen to allow the voice of the agricultural labourer to be heard. In presenting a typical diagnosis of the problems of rural life, with an awareness of the contestable features of such a venture, and in involving those such as Buxton and Rowntree who had prior experience of investigating rural matters, it is good evidence of the state of rural social investigation on the eve of the Great War. It forms a good conclusion to this chapter, as epitomising the various contests which were played out in the rural theatre of investigation, which were also to be seen in the reports of housing reporters and investigators of the rural wage. It is remarkable how many of the old problems of rural life were still being identified in this period: this is testament either to the lack of success of social reformers' efforts to solve them, or to the continuing vigour of the political and social conflicts in the countryside, or probably to both. In the Edwardian period, information and interpretation from investigators like these, from the new rural sociologists such as Mann and Davies, and from personal commentators with a deeply-rooted experience of country life, all intermingled to shape urban perceptions of rural conditions, and all demonstrate the continuing contests that shaped the processes of social investigation in the countryside.

## Chapter 10: Conclusion

Introducing his book on *The Revival of English Agriculture* in 1899, Anderson Graham remarked that the broadness of his informant structure was one of the chief joys of carrying out his kind of social investigation: 'After listening to the talk of a nobleman ... it is like turning the handle of a kaleidoscope to get into familiar converse with a labourer.'<sup>1</sup> Graham's simile is as appropriate to the variety of investigations of rural life which this thesis has considered: the official inquiry, the agricultural tourist, the systematic sociologist and the resident investigator all offered different methods and approaches to representing the lives of the agricultural labouring classes. It is like turning the handle of a kaleidoscope to move from Rider Haggard's inquiry to Stephen Reynolds's books, for example. As such any wide conclusions - about rural life in general or social investigation in particular - that may be drawn from such disparate investigative activity may be open to a charge of unwarrantable generalisation. Having said this, certain themes have repeatedly emerged throughout the analyses offered in this thesis, and therefore it will be appropriate for this final chapter to identify some tendencies in the field of social inquiry during the period 1870-1914 which may assist in advancing a broader understanding of the social trends of the period. This conclusion, then, will rehearse these major themes, and identify some of the particular conceptual and methodological difficulties which beset the investigator of rural life. It has been repeatedly emphasised that rural conditions posed particular problems, and were frequently surrounded by particular political controversies, which meant that efforts to investigate labouring life and to document rural poverty met with some difficulties that were not present in urban areas. The role of social conflict will be emphasised. Finally, this conclusion will assess the potential lessons of this study for the historian of the late-Victorian and Edwardian era.

The first theme which has emerged very strongly is the awareness among almost all the investigators considered of the methodological difficulties which faced them. Whether the investigation was a statistical and primarily economic survey, such as Maud Davies's study of Corsley, or a more sustained effort to communicate and represent the

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<sup>1</sup> P. Anderson Graham, *The Revival of English Agriculture* (1899), p. 15.



poor such as Stephen Reynolds's association with the Woolley brothers, there was a clear awareness on the part of the investigator - even if he did not conceive himself as an investigator as such - of the particular difficulties he faced. Like Mayhew, many investigators are done a disservice if they are dismissed as merely journalists who lacked an investigative methodology. The special correspondent's role in communicating the rural world to a metropolitan readership was an important one; and while the journalistic method may have been less rigorous and was certainly less 'scientific' than the methods employed by Booth, Rowntree, Mann and Davies, it was a method nonetheless. Like Mayhew, men like Anderson Graham were well aware of the different kinds of information that were available from different informants. Rider Haggard, though he took Arthur Young as his main inspiration, was nevertheless influenced by the development of the interview as a tool of social research. The rural social surveys of the Edwardian period, deriving their approach from urban investigations, nevertheless employed techniques that were shaped by the particularly rural aspects of the problem of poverty.

One particular feature of rural poverty was that it was hidden from view in a way that urban poverty was not. The rural population was not concentrated in an urban slum, but remote from centres of population, and often scattered across a wide area; and the worst conditions were often to be found not in villages themselves but in remote corners of sprawling parishes. Little was known about rural housing in the mid-nineteenth century, for example, and one of the main features of the outbursts of investigative energy in the 1870s was a rediscovery of the poor cottage accommodation in rural areas. Rural poverty was simply less visible, and had to be sought out more deliberately than the destitution which lay at the urban investigator's doorstep. In his analysis of regional wage variations in Britain in this period, E. H. Hunt has suggested that historians have followed the fashions of the period and overemphasised urban distress:

London's distress, compared with that of other areas, and especially when compared with conditions in the rural south, was less than the amount of attention it has attracted since the 1880s might suggest. No large town was free of distress; the problem was probably more pressing in London than in most, but, as today, nowhere was better placed to catch the eye of politicians, the press, and

sociologists.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, as Hunt points out, the sweated trades of the metropolis received a disproportionate share of investigators' attention in this period. Hunt, though, also reminds his readers that agriculture 'was more frequently and more thoroughly investigated than any other nineteenth-century occupation'.<sup>3</sup> Conditions among agricultural employees were less well known and less easily observed, and therefore *needed* more and deeper investigation. A consciousness existed, however, among those concerned with rural life, that less attention was paid to distress in rural areas. In much the same way that explorers of London slums complained of the relative ignorance of conditions therein compared with those in outposts of Empire - 'Darkest England' was a direct response to Stanley's 'Darkest Africa' - commentators in rural areas made the same point with regard to the attention given to urban slums.

Not only were rural areas geographically separate, but there were fewer points of access within the traditional structure of social inquiry to information about the rural community. Whereas in towns, however, the investigator could draw on a variety of medical, philanthropic and religious opinion, the views of employers, and also in many cases trade unionists to represent the views of at least a section of the workers, the investigator of the rural poor was more circumscribed in his choice. There was, particularly, a lack of independent philanthropic activity in rural areas: the Charity Organisation Society, for example, with a strong moral predilection for the rural way of life, concentrated its efforts on the alleviation of urban poverty, and few of its members were qualified to comment on rural conditions. The nearest equivalent in rural areas was usually the country parson and his family, or possibly the dissenting minister, in a given village or parish, and investigators often turned to these people for information. Much of the information on rural life available to the reader was reliant on the evidence of parsons, landowners and farmers. When investigators turned their attention to the labourers themselves, the practice of investigating the rural poor became subject to an intense debate which reflected many of the conflicts within rural life itself.

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<sup>2</sup> E. H. Hunt, *Regional Wage Variations in Britain 1850-1914* (Oxford, 1973), pp. 11-12.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 66.



Thus the central theme of this thesis has been social conflict in the countryside, and the ways in which these conflicts within country life imposed themselves on investigators' agendas and approaches. Eileen Yeo's point that the information available from different sources gave very different pictures of urban working-class life also holds true for rural life and conditions.<sup>4</sup> Chapters 3, 5 and 6 have illustrated the complexities of investigating rural conditions through different channels of information. The general argument is that the investigator who relied on farming informants - of whom Rider Haggard was probably the best example - would gain a picture of labouring conditions which differed substantially from that painted by the investigator who drew on labourers themselves for his information, such as Archibald Forbes or Francis Heath. As rural life became increasingly politicised around the issues of agricultural trade unionism, depopulation, land and poverty, the methodological conflicts intensified. The complexity of the separation of the 'orders' of the agricultural population (as revealed by social investigators) necessitates a more sophisticated analysis of the social structure of agricultural communities. While the urban working-class population was hidden geographically from middle-class view - the result of the spatial stratification of the Victorian city - the rural poor, often less geographically isolated within their own communities, were psychologically hidden, both from urban observers and, more seriously perhaps, from their own local social elites.

The masking of rural poverty took two forms. Firstly, the social distance between the farming and labouring communities had expanded in the nineteenth century - this was, at any rate, the opinion of almost every informed observer - and this left a deficit of social knowledge within the rural community which investigators saw it as their task to make up. Thus Henry Moule, the tireless campaigner for improved sanitary conditions in rural housing, complained in 1868 that '[n]umbers will ... collect for the London City Mission Society, or contribute to its funds, who will make no attempt to rescue from ignorance or unbelief the many or the few in their own town or village.'<sup>5</sup> The country was hidden from the view of the town; but Moule's point also stresses the apparent ignorance of many upper- and middle-class country-dwellers of the condition of

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<sup>4</sup> Eileen Janes Yeo, 'The Social Survey in Social Perspective', in Martin Bulmer, Kevin Bales and K. K. Sklar (eds.), *The Social Survey in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge, 1991), p. 53.

<sup>5</sup> Rev. Henry Moule, *Our Home Heathen: How Can the Church of England Get at Them?* (1868), p. 16.

the poor in their midst. For social investigators, especially Canon Girdlestone and the Liberal journalists of the 1870s, one of their functions was to bridge the social separation within the agricultural community.

Secondly, rural poverty and squalor were hidden from the urban observer behind a series of romantic conceptions of rural life derived from the literary tradition which proved highly resistant to efforts to explode them, and which were being renewed in the Edwardian period just as popular awareness of rural poverty was reaching a new peak. Social knowledge, therefore, lay hidden behind, on the one hand, a cleavage in rural society and, on the other, a constructed definition of the rural as a source of romantic inspiration, and, later, of national strength. The transition in urban perceptions of the agricultural labourer from 'Hodge', the stupid but contented clodhopper, to 'Lob', the epitome of racial hardihood and the repository of lore, as traced by Alun Howkins,<sup>6</sup> may have changed the way the rural population was viewed but did little to develop an understanding of its way of life. As a subject of investigation, the labourer bore a double burden: not trusted on the one hand to supply information, yet idealised as a racial model, with much to live up to, on the other.

The theme of rural superiority was reflected in the frequency with which commentators in this period allied their work on the rural poor with nature-writing. Richard Jefferies is the supreme example, being a leading figure in late-Victorian nature-spiritualism, and producing a vast collection of nature essays and notes during his short life; but many of the other writers considered in this thesis also made their way to the labourers via the flora and fauna of the area they investigated. Francis Heath, Anderson Graham, George Sturt, Rider Haggard and F. E. Green are examples. The naturalist's standpoint was one which could trap the unwary investigator into a falsely romanticised portrayal of country life. A more socially aware commentator like Francis Heath would be more likely to express the contrasts between the beauty of the countryside and the poverty of its inhabitants; while men as diverse as Jefferies and Haggard were concerned that the labourer did not appreciate the natural surroundings in

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<sup>6</sup> Alun Howkins, 'From Hodge to Lob: Reconstructing the English Farm Labourer, 1870-1914', in Malcolm Chase & Ian Dyck (eds.), *Living and Learning: Essays in Honour of J. F. C. Harrison* (Aldershot, 1996), pp. 218-35.



which he was fortunate enough to live. This theme was crucial to the shaping of perceptions of the labourer and his condition. The pleasant surroundings of country life made it harder to conceptualise poverty in a rural context: materially straightened circumstances were counterbalanced by health-giving surroundings. There were some practical realities behind this conception: Thomas Kebbel, for example, pointed to the longevity of many labourers; and infant mortality figures were lower in rural districts than in the towns.<sup>7</sup> As chapter 7 has shown, these features should not in fact be taken as evidence of economic well-being; however, in the period with which we are concerned they were potent symbols of the superiority of country life. That agricultural labourers often did not seem to appreciate the non-pecuniary benefits of rural life was a source of serious concern to many middle-class commentators in this period: the observers and the observed, it is clear, wanted different things from rural life.

It is within this context that the contests inherent in the quest for social knowledge about the rural population should be viewed. All social knowledge was contestable, but the peculiar nature of the rural community, and the perceived changes within it from the late eighteenth century onwards, made the investigation of rural life a particularly challenging exercise. The moral, historical and cultural preconceptions attached to a rustic existence could easily obscure the view of the most fair-minded observer. An understanding of the particular problems of rural life, and their histories, were essential to a balanced treatment by the investigator. It is noteworthy how much of the literature on the agricultural labourer in the late nineteenth century was devoted to a comparison of his contemporary condition with that of previous years. The classics of social inquiry were continually referred back to: Arthur Young, William Cobbett, the Poor Law Commissioners of 1843 and James Caird. (Few referred to the *Morning Chronicle* investigators: like Mayhew, they were largely forgotten in their lifetimes.) Even J. A. Spender, a radical young journalist working for Charles Booth, a man who did more than most to develop new techniques of social investigation, found the tradition of rural investigation impossible to escape, as the plan of his lost book on the village labourer shows.<sup>8</sup> What was different in the later Victorian period, and especially after

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<sup>7</sup> T. E. Kebbel, *The Agricultural Labourer: A Short Summary of His Position* (1870), p. 223. See above, pp. 188-9.

<sup>8</sup> See above, p. 143, and Appendix III.

1872, was a growing awareness of the conflicts within rural society that could affect the knowledge gained by the investigator.

The 'awakening' of the labourer in 1872, viewed as a pivotal point in rural history by all commentators down to 1914 - and a major reference-point for historians of the agricultural labourer and rural social protest - prompted a series of investigations of his condition; more fundamentally, however, it caused investigators to begin to take more account of what the labourer had to say. This was not a new development - earlier, Canon Girdlestone and others had realised the value of a more direct communication with the agricultural labourers - but it was accelerated in the 1870s. The stated aim of the investigators of the 1870s was to obtain facts unadorned by sentiment and prejudice; however, it was clear that facts could not exist outside the framework of sentiment and prejudice that surrounded country life. Even the inquiry based on the trustworthy evidence of traditional sources of information, such as Francis Heath's of 1880 or Thomas Kebbel's of 1887, which appeared to give a more reliable account than the unsystematic explorations of special correspondents, was carried out within a particular set of preconceptions, held by both the investigator and his informants. The methodology of the informant inquiry, whether it took the form of a journalistic 'jaunt' or a Royal Commission, was debated from the 1870s onwards, and the conflicts continued into the 1890s and beyond. It is fair to argue, however, that, with certain notable exceptions, the trend during the period covered by this thesis was for investigators to become increasingly dependent on the evidence of the labouring classes; and thus Catherine Marsh's model of a gradual transition from an informant approach to a respondent one is confirmed.

There was, however, a second aspect to this transition on which Marsh has not touched, and which has in general been overlooked by historians, Ross McKibbin's work and Susan Cohen's recent thesis on Martha Loane being the most significant exceptions.<sup>9</sup> The quest for social knowledge was accompanied by a search for cultural understanding. This bore fruit in the flood of books on working-class life which peaked in the Edwardian period; and this development paralleled the rise of the amateur social survey.

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<sup>9</sup> Ross McKibbin, *The Ideologies of Class: Social Relations in Britain 1880-1950* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 169-96; Susan Cohen, 'The Life and Works of M. Loane', MPhil thesis, Middlesex University (1997).



Observers such as Augustus Jessopp and Richard Jefferies in the 1880s were attempting to transmit cultural understanding, although their success may be questioned; and their influence lasted through the 1890s and into the 1900s, when George Sturt and others, whose work achieved much notice and some popularity, often on the back of the nature-loving revival, took a similar approach to the description of country life. These writers had an even more complex inheritance than other investigators. They would all have been aware of Young, Cobbett and Caird: indeed F. E. Green directly compared Sturt with Cobbett.<sup>10</sup> However, they could also be located within the tradition of country books which had reached its zenith in Miss Mitford's *Our Village* in the 1830s. Miss Mitford's influence is traceable even in some of the books of the Edwardian period whose contents are most clearly grounded in fact. The literary backgrounds of many of the factual commentators had their influence on this strand of investigation, and are reflected in the attempts to come to grips with the personalities of the agricultural labourers who appear in these books.

Cultural understanding is hard to define, but it is clear that these writers were in quest of a deeper knowledge of the realities of working-class life, and some insight into the processes of thought and action which ruled the lives of the poor. In this respect, they were 'travellers in the poor man's country',<sup>11</sup> exploring the alien world of the poor just as much as slum journalists, 'amateur casuals', agricultural tourists and sociological investigators.<sup>12</sup> Chapters 4 and 8 have discussed the consciousness of such commentators of a methodology of cultural understanding, which was the descendant of the approach of Charles Kingsley and the Christian Socialists, refined by the Charity Organisation Society and district nurses such as Martha Loane. Within the literary tradition, a tendency parallel to that charted by Catherine Marsh within the sociological tradition can be identified. It is the difference between Mitford's *Our Village* and Sturt's *Change in the Village*: the informant as opposed to the respondent inquiry. The information contained in these books, and in the latter case often directly supplied by the villagers, was of a different order to that contained in social surveys such as Maud

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<sup>10</sup> F. E. Green, *The Surrey Hills* (1915), pp. 251-2.

<sup>11</sup> Anne Humpherys, *Travels in the Poor Man's Country: The Work of Henry Mayhew* (Firle, Sussex, 1977).

<sup>12</sup> Peter Keating, *Into Unknown England: Selections from the Social Explorers* (Manchester, 1976).

Davies's or social monographs such as Thomas Kebbel's. It was also collected less systematically. However, the transition in the *attitude* of investigators of this ilk was paralleled by the development of the 'respondent' method among more systematic and rigorous inquirers into the condition of the poor. The social sympathies of the resident commentators had descended, and in so doing had given their work greater sociological value: the recognition of the value, or at least the significance, of the new approaches to social investigation gave writers like Sturt and Reynolds a new conceptual framework within which to present their more literary analyses of village life.

The small-scale investigation of a community was perhaps more appropriate to rural life. The condition and lifestyle of the labourer varied from region to region, county to county, and even parish to parish; and as such widespread generalisations were often meaningless. Furthermore, there was a difference in the scope of the social problems under investigation. The sheer size of the problem of poverty in urban Britain seemed to prompt a larger-scale investigation - of millions of people in London or thousands in York, albeit supplemented by particular case studies - than was warranted by the more dispersed social problems of the countryside. It would be impractical to undertake a rural survey on the same scale as Booth's or even Rowntree's. The manageable size of the rural community enabled the investigator to observe it more intensively. And the more intensive the portrait that could be drawn, the more effectively could cultural understanding be conveyed. This may have been why investigators of rural life often took the lead in presenting more cultural studies of working-class life. In towns, intensive pictures of communities could only be drawn when a particular segment was segregated in order to create a sample of a manageable size. Thus Maud Pember Reeves and the Fabian Women's Group, in investigating women with babies and infants in London, confined themselves to a very small area of Lambeth.<sup>13</sup> Other effective studies which achieved an intensive perspective often dealt with institutions such as workhouses, the physical boundaries of which were quite clear, or with one particular section of the population or social problem: the life of children, for example, was particularly fully studied in the Edwardian period.<sup>14</sup> Vagrants were

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<sup>13</sup> Maud Pember Reeves, *Round About a Pound a Week* (1913).

<sup>14</sup> See for example R. A. Bray, *The Town Child* (1907).



another frequently-investigated group.<sup>15</sup> The alternative was a method which could only be anecdotal, such as Martha Loane's. The approach of Augustus Jessopp and George Sturt was likewise anecdotal, but they had what the town-based Martha Loane lacked: an intensive perspective which enabled them to describe and analyse a community in terms of its whole rather than just a more or less random sample of its parts.

Another feature of the investigation of rural life, allied to questions of scope, was the close portrayal of individuals. This approach was closely allied with the conception of the countryside as the home of face-to-face social relations. Thus Charles Booth thought the individual approach was appropriate in the villages in a way that it was not in the towns.<sup>16</sup> As Stewart Dick asserted, '[o]ne finds the genuinely human [in the countryside], with less disguise than in the cities, where men conceal their individualities under a mask of uniformity.'<sup>17</sup> This conception translated into detailed literary descriptions of individuals by resident investigators. George Sturt, with his 'Bettesworth' books, was the best example, but we also have an intensive personal portrait of Bob Woolley the fisherman from Reynolds, and of Ben Harris the foreman from Holdenby. Urban investigators took the individual approach as well: once again Martha Loane is a very good example, describing in *The Queen's Poor* various characters she had met in the course of her work as a district nurse. 'Bettesworth', however, survives in more detail than any other non-fictional working-class character of his generation. There are two reasons for this feature of rural investigations. Firstly, the reason already alluded to for the appropriateness of the 'micro' approach to investigating rural life: the personal contact with neighbours, for the resident investigator, enabled a deeper and more meaningful penetration of the lives of the poor. Secondly, the importance of the literary tradition in the background to investigations of rural life prompted a certain approach. The rustic personalities described in the novels of Thomas Hardy had their echoes in non-fictional portrayals. The fact that the country was supposedly the home of 'characters' made the description of the rural population a more entertaining exercise. Certainly such investigative ventures, in aiming to communicate

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<sup>15</sup> Everard Wyrall, *The Spike* (1909); Jack London, *The People of the Abyss* (New York 1903); Mary Higgs, *Glimpses into the Abyss* (1906).

<sup>16</sup> See above, pp. 113-14.

<sup>17</sup> Helen Allingham & Stewart Dick, *The Cottage Homes of England* (1984 [1st. ed. 1909]), p. 238.

cultural understanding, were far removed from the dry and practical approach of the official inquiry or the investigation with a practical reforming purpose.

The Edwardian age was also a time when social relations were the subject of intense debate: the Labour Party was finding its parliamentary feet, trade unions were taking on a new importance, and the class structure of England was under rigorous analysis and facing new challenges. Many investigators were inspired by a consciousness that social relations in the countryside were in an ailing state. Insofar as social relations are the product of cultural formations as much as economic circumstances, a detailed understanding of the processes of conflict in a given village or parish required a more intensive understanding than could be obtained by a fleeting visit to an area or a large-scale statistical or 'scientific' study. A 'feeling' for the local situation had to be gained. For this reason, it was often residents who commented on class relations: particularly good examples treated in this thesis are Augustus Jessopp and George Sturt. In his thesis on George Sturt, John Fraser has remarked that the period 1900-14 saw 'a marked increase both in a concern with the interior life of the labouring population and the mechanics of their relationships with other classes, and in an awareness of how these things could best be conveyed to the reader'.<sup>18</sup> Certainly many writers, particularly those praised by Fraser in his thesis who took an 'intensive' approach to the lives of the poor, were concerned with the social relationships of the poor, and were aware of their own social position *vis-à-vis* the population they were investigating. This serves as a valuable reminder that what this thesis is ultimately concerned with is the relationships inherent in the practice of the investigation of one class by another.

The representation of these relationships, however, was shaped by the investigators themselves; thus the evidence that remains to the historian is one-sided. The attitude epitomised by the 'survey' approach was one which did not accord equality to the investigated population, even where the method was a respondent one. This attitude explains much of the contest which this thesis has identified. Evidence from the other side of the relationship is sparse. Thus Stephen Reynolds's work was valuable

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<sup>18</sup> John Fraser, 'George Sturt ("George Bourne") and Rural Labouring Life', PhD thesis, University of Minnesota (1961), p. 193.



because it challenged the preconceptions of the age of investigation: 'The most open-minded interest in [the poor] is called exploration by those interested. By the poor themselves it is more often called curiosity, an impertinence...'<sup>19</sup> Other observers remarked on the difficulty of overcoming the mistrust that existed among working-class populations. Martha Loane, with her long experience as a Queen's Nurse, observed that '[s]uspiciousness is an inconveniently common quality among even the most respectable of the poor',<sup>20</sup> and added: 'I fear that if the rich knew the estimation in which they are held by the poor, they would hardly have the moral courage to go among them.'<sup>21</sup> The enormity of the class divide was impossible to perceive without direct experience of it. Thus George Millin, a non-resident investigator himself, quoted one informant who thought that '[u]nless you have lived among them [the rural poor] ... you can have no idea of the gulf that separates the two classes.'<sup>22</sup> Some of the glimpses that we get of the more spectacular working-class responses to investigation - Tom Stone's reception at the hands of the St. Neots labourers<sup>23</sup> and the reaction of the Berkshire rustics to Eleanor Hayden's book,<sup>24</sup> for example - suggest that a great deal more resentment lay beneath the surface of labouring life than we can identify. This resentment and suspicion caused another aspect of the social investigation process to be subject to a contest.

These contests have their echoes for today's social historian. The approaches of different investigators mirror the approaches of historians. In a key essay which signposted the new social history in 1975, Raphael Samuel argued that the traditional source base of social historiography was limited in its usefulness by its class-construction: '[i]t is remarkable', he asserted, 'how much history has been written from the vantage point of those who have had the charge of running - or attempting to run - other people's lives, and how little from the life experience of the people themselves.'<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Stephen Reynolds, Bob Woolley & Tom Woolley, *Seems So! A Working-Class View of Politics* (1913 [1st. ed. 1911]), p. 286.

<sup>20</sup> M. Loane, *The Queen's Poor: Life as They Find it in Town and Country* (1998 [1st. ed. 1905]), p. 129.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*, p. 130.

<sup>22</sup> [Millin, G. F.], *Life in Our Villages, by the Special Commissioner of the Daily News, being a Series of Letters Written to that Paper in the Autumn of 1891* (3rd. ed., 1891 [1st. ed. 1891]), p. 41. This informant was actually his driver in Suffolk, who appears from internal evidence to have been partially, but not wholly, aware of Millin's purpose in the area.

<sup>23</sup> See above, p. 171, and Appendix VI.

<sup>24</sup> See above, pp. 231-2.

<sup>25</sup> Samuel, Raphael (ed.), *Village Life and Labour* (1982 [1st. ed. 1975]), p. xiii.

The rural historians in the History Workshop group, such as Jennie Kitteringham, used traditional sources, such as Royal Commission reports, with great care, and were quick to turn to literary and other evidence, using oral history and personal recollections wherever possible. Samuel's warning about the construction of the traditional source is an important reminder to the historian of social investigation, and thus highly pertinent to the present study. Samuel argued that 'Blue Books', the printed reports of parliamentary investigations, are

invidious, because they encourage the historian to rely on second- and third-hand opinion - heavily class biased - whose worth he cannot begin to assess unless he has primary material to use as a yardstick. Poverty inquiries ... are in many ways the most treacherous to use: their question and answer form and the fact that the witnesses were outsiders - sanitary reformers, temperance advocates, chief constables, chairmen of boards of guardians, philanthropists, clergymen, "lady" visitors - make it questionable whether they should be treated as primary sources at all (except for the appendices). There is an enormous amount of value to be gleaned from the Blue Books, but only if the historian works against the grain of the material, refusing to accept the witnesses' categories as his own, ruthlessly winnowing out opinion and harvesting the residue of fact however small.<sup>26</sup>

Overcrowding, for example, is seen in these reports through the eyes of the nineteenth-century sanitary reformer rather than the sufferers themselves. The role of the new social historian, as defined by Samuel and developed by a new generation of historians, is to recreate the *experience* of the working classes rather than simply explain their condition. The historian, Samuel has argued, is himself like the nineteenth-century administrator, observing the poor in the past from his middle-class social position. Samuel's portrait of the typical historian of working-class life captures the essence of the 'survey' approach: '[h]is vocation, as an historian, places him far above the madding crowd; he surveys them, retrospectively, from a height, as objects of reform rather than as the active agents - or subjects - of change. He may feel sympathy for the mass, but hardly solidarity.'<sup>27</sup>

It is not only the value of 'Blue Books' that is challenged. The debate on the value of the 'survey' method in general continues. For example, Sarah C. Williams has explained the futility of using Charles Booth's observations of working-class religious

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<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*, p. xvi.

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*, pp. xvi-xvii.



life in London to assess the 'meanings' of popular religious rituals and customs for the participants themselves.<sup>28</sup> She neatly sums up the one-sidedness of the observation approach, which she has identified in both the published and unpublished notes on 'religious influences':

The Booth collection, for example, contains numerous descriptions of certain types of action among non-church-attending sections of the working class. Their failure to attend church on a Sunday is frequently noted, while their occasional conformity to church rituals such as baptism, churching, the watchnight service, marriages and funerals are highlighted. Similarly, their selective use of mission halls, church savings banks, Sunday Schools and Mothers' meetings are often described in graphic detail by socio-religious observers. The meanings which such actions held for the actors and the extent to which they were symptomatic of religious "belief", however, is often hard to interpret and cannot merely be extrapolated from the meanings attributed to them by the observers.<sup>29</sup>

Williams argues that oral history can help to overcome some of these problems, by providing an alternative perspective to that of the external observer. She argues, citing Victor Branford,<sup>30</sup> that much can be learnt from an attempt 'to explore the value of oral testimonies in considering how the actor constructs and creates meaning and to look at how the text reveals the symbols and images through which reality is communicated'.<sup>31</sup> This was, in a cruder and less theoretically sophisticated way, the approach of the resident investigators of the rural poor. They were, naturally, removed from the subjects of their work by their social position; but, equally, Williams's interviewees are removed from the subjects of their testimonies by time, and Williams herself from them by age, class and occupation. For all their faults, the participant observers and intensive explorers of working-class life in the late-Victorian and Edwardian period tell us something different from Charles Booth or the Royal Commissions of the period. It is not surprising that Paul Thompson has identified Stephen Reynolds and other participant observers of the Edwardian period<sup>32</sup> as antecedents of the modern oral historian.<sup>33</sup> Brian

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<sup>28</sup> Sarah C. Williams, 'The Problem of Belief: The Place of Oral History in the Study of Popular Religion', *Oral History*, vol.24, no. 2 (Autumn 1996), pp. 27-34.

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>32</sup> Such as Robert Sherard, who employed clandestine techniques to investigate factory conditions. See Robert Sherard, *The White Slaves of England* (1897); *The Cry of the Poor* (1901); *The Child Slaves of Britain* (1905).

<sup>33</sup> Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* (Oxford, 1988 [1st. ed. Oxford, 1978]), pp. 40-1.

Harrison has argued that the official inquiry 'could never produce the wealth of information collected by investigators who "dropped out" and engaged in participant observation',<sup>34</sup> such as Jack London and George Orwell.

Having said this, it is important to recognise, as Williams does, the equally one-sided nature of oral testimony and evidence from within the working classes. Not only is any intensive study likely to be localised and open to charges of untypicality - Williams's work is based on just 29 interviews, for example, and Jessopp, Jefferies and Reynolds have all met with doubts from contemporaries and historians as to how far generalisations about working-class experience can be made from their work - but the problem of class-biased information exists as much with one class as with another. Williams emphasises that her interviewing was used in conjunction with the Booth material and other sources, 'to validate or challenge the descriptions given, through a process of cross-verification'.<sup>35</sup> The kinds of information obtainable from the 'survey' method and the more intensive method differ but, as chapter 8 has argued, should be viewed as complementary: both methods were seen as part of the sociological project in the Edwardian years.

Through these new developments in the historiography, much of the old social history has come under attack. Reviewing Barry Reay's *Microhistories*, Andrew Hinde has pointed to a serious fault in the kind of social history written from a reductively demographic and wage-bound approach:

much extant rural history fails to engage with the day-to-day lives and perceptions of the working classes. The labourers are seen through the eyes of farmers; "condition of the labourer" is discussed in much the same style as would be the condition of a used car. The family economics of poor households are oversimplified, being analysed in terms of adult male wages and household expenditure budgets, to the neglect of the income generated by the work of women and children and of the enormously complex and devious stratagems to which poor families resorted in order to make ends meet.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Brian Harrison, *Peaceable Kingdom: Stability and Change in Modern Britain* (Oxford, 1982), p. 288.

<sup>35</sup> Williams, 'Problem of Belief', p. 29

<sup>36</sup> In an electronic review: Institute of Historical Research, *Reviews in History*, sent Monday 6th October 1997.



Reay's own work contains a passionate defence of his 'microhistorical' approach, in which he has argued that the only way to engage with the sources in sufficient depth to produce an effective study of the lived experience of the rural working classes is to write local history. This seems to mark a new stage in the rehabilitation of local history from the unflattering accusations of antiquarianism with which it was previously associated. Once again, the divisions among the social investigators of the late Victorian and Edwardian period are reflected in the modern historical community.

The sources used in this thesis demonstrate quite clearly that social investigation was a broad field in this period, and that its history was by no means characterised by the unilinear progression towards statistical sophistication that has often been suggested by historians. These historians have been guilty of choosing their sources selectively - Mayhew, Booth, the urban Rowntree<sup>37</sup> and A. L. Bowley have dominated the field - and more particularly of ignoring the work that was done in rural areas. Commentators such as Richard Jefferies and George Sturt have been well-known to literary scholars but not to historians, except to those who use the occasional excerpt from, say, *Hodge and His Masters* or *Change in the Village* to illustrate a particular point about rural life, or to bring a little colour to an otherwise dry analysis of the rural economy and society. The investigator's job was not simply to count; nor to travel and to report. An important trend in the period was a developing perception of a need to communicate with the poor themselves, and a consciousness of the difficulties involved in such a project. The problem was known well to nineteenth-century travellers in foreign countries; and from an urban perspective Benjamin Disraeli most famously articulated the notion that rich and poor were 'two nations'.<sup>38</sup> This point of view was echoed by cultural investigators in the Edwardian period. Martha Loane, for example, doubted that a normal conversation between members of the middle and working classes was possible;<sup>39</sup> and

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<sup>37</sup> Asa Briggs should be mentioned as an honourable exception here. He has given considerable attention in his *Social Thought and Social Action: A Study of the Work of Seebohm Rowntree* (1960) to Rowntree's rural interests. This more fully-rounded approach, it may be argued, is easier in a biographical study. However, T. S. and M. B. Simey, in their *Charles Booth: Social Scientist* (Oxford, 1960) were strangely silent on Booth's rural activities. This may reflect the relative poverty of surviving archival material relating to the old-age pensions inquiry in comparison to the 'riches' of the *Life and Labour* archive. It is more likely, however, that the omission is part of a more general reticence among historians of early sociological developments to take account the rural inquiries, whose preoccupations and procedures may seem more alien to the contemporary sociologist than those of the poverty surveys.

<sup>38</sup> Benjamin Disraeli, *Sybil, or The Two Nations* (Harmondsworth, 1980 [1st. ed. 3 vols., 1845]), p. 96.

<sup>39</sup> McKibbin, *Ideologies of Class*, p. 181; M. Loane, *From Their Point of View* (1908), p. 231.

the researches of Stephen Reynolds suggested a fundamental division between the rich and poor which made almost any investigative efforts meaningless. As Reynolds recognised, it was clear that the 'survey' method could not come to grips with the intricacies of working-class life, in town or country. Investigators were keen to stress their intimate knowledge of the rural working classes and their sympathy with them and for them. How far they succeeded in achieving intimacy can only be guessed at from a close reading of their work.

It was certainly clear to many that the agricultural labourer was socially and culturally sundered from urban middle-class, and, for that matter, working-class, society. The labourer was the great unknown quantity; and any attempt to investigate him and his condition involved some sort of crossing of social barriers. Certainly the responses of many of the investigated to the social researches of their social superiors which this thesis has uncovered seems to bear out C. F. G. Masterman's assertion in 1909 that

The landlord, the farmer, the clergyman, the newspaper correspondent primed with casual conversation in the village inn, think that they know the labourer. They probably know nothing whatever about him. With his limited vocabulary, with his racial distrust of the stranger, and all of another class, with a mind which maintains such reticence except in moments of overpowering emotion, that labourer stands, a perplexing enigmatic figure alone in a voluble, self-analysis world.<sup>40</sup>

Masterman cited Disraeli's characterisation of the 'two nations' of England sixty years earlier, and went on to conclude that

We are gradually learning that "the people of England" are as different from, and as unknown to, the classes that investigate, observe, and record, as the people of China or Peru. Living amongst us and around us, never becoming articulate, finding even in their directly elected representatives types remote from their own, these people grow and flourish and die, with their own codes of honour, their special beliefs and moralities, their judgement and often their condemnation of the classes to whom has been given leisure and material advantage. The line is cut clean by both parties, neither desiring to occupy the territory of the other.<sup>41</sup>

The notion that the social investigator was a traveller in a foreign country, then, was as valid in 1914 as it had been when Benjamin Disraeli made his much-quoted remark; and

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<sup>40</sup> C. F. G. Masterman, *The Condition of England* (1909), pp. 195-6.

<sup>41</sup> *ibid.*, p. 112.



this was the case in rural areas as much as in towns and cities. The rural poor, however, inhabited a world that was even more remote from the experiences of the urban middle classes than were the worlds of the urban slum-dweller and the poor but respectable city artisan. The divisions between country and town, and between the different classes of the rural community, made the social investigation of rural Britain seem of paramount importance, and shaped the way in which it was carried out.

**Appendix I: Charles Booth's questionnaire to the rural clergy** [see p. 112]

The clergymen were asked to answer the following questions for each person over 65 in their parish:

- (1) Age.
- (2) Sex.
- (3) Occupation.
- (4) Health.
- (5) Sources of maintenance (viz. whether parish, charity, relations, earnings, or private means, or any combination of these).
- (6) Whether in a club.
- (7) Rent.
- (8) Whether having a garden or allotment.
- (9) Family connections.
- (10) General remarks on manner of life.



**Appendix II: The English Land Restoration League's Daily Report Form** [see pp. 127-8]

The form was sent out with the red vans and filled in by the investigator in consultation with local informants. The emphasis is as given, in the *Special Reports* for 1891 and 1892.

**Are there any Allotments in the Parish?**

**If so, to what extent?**

**Allotment Rent per Acre? Farmers' Rent per Acre?**

**Names of largest Farmers in the Parish. [State acreage and rent, if possible]:-**

**Any unoccupied Farms or uncultivated Lands? For what reason?**

**What is the rate of Agricultural Labourers' Wages?**

**Rent of cottages?**

**Is the Population diminishing? If so, what is the reason given locally for this?**

**Are there any large Mansions or Parks in the Parish:-**

*Name of Mansion, etc.*

*Name of Owner*

*Amount at which Assessed*

**Local Organisations. [Labourers' Unions; Political or Social Clubs or Associations; Reading Rooms, etc.], with Secretaries' names and addresses:-**

**Remarks:**

*Signed* \_\_\_\_\_

Appendix III: J. A. Spender's 'lost' book on rural life [see p. 143]

Letter from J. A. Spender to Charles Booth, 16th September 1894, in University of London Library, MS797 I/6045. The (hand-written) letter is about Spender's book deriving from the study he carried out with Booth, and designed as a supplementary volume to the Booth's *The Aged Poor in England and Wales* (1894). As the letter shows, the character of the book was to have been very different from Booth's volume. The letter is valuable as showing the outline of a book which was never published, as Spender lost the manuscript while moving house. Some of the material from this "lost" book was incorporated into the report of the Land Enquiry Committee in [date??].

29 Cheyne Walk, Chelsea  
Sep. 16. 1894

Dear Mr. Booth,

As I hear that you are back from America I must send you a few lines to report progress. I am getting along gradually with the village book, though the work seems to expand as I get to close quarters with it. When I had read the reports of the Labour Commission, I came to the conclusion that what remained to be done chiefly was to present the thing concretely through our pictures of village life & to provide the material for a comparison between present and past. I thought also it would be useful to sum up briefly the results of the various enquiries during the century ending with the Labour Commission. In all this a special reference to the aged would remain.

I talked it over with Acland before he left town & he helped me towards a scheme which I hope you won't think too ambitious. I propose to divide the book into three parts.

I. Four introductory chapters (about 150 pages) containing as concise a history of the English Village & the various enquiries bearing upon it, drawn chiefly from Arthur Young, Eden, Cobbett, the Poor Law Commission, the Women & Children Enquiry, the Richmond Commission, with something about the census returns & the rural exodus question.

II. Our own Enquiry, following your geographical areas, certain of the best reports being given verbatim, with brief notes & comments bringing out any points of comparison between present & past conditions.

III. Separate chapters on special points chiefly

The Life of the Poor in Old Age with budgets etc.

2. Charities & Allotments.

3. Wages, hours & conditions of work.

4. Friendly & Benefit Societies.

5. General conclusions.

I have made a large hole in the second part & before I go away for my holiday in about three weeks time I hope to have 80 or 90 pages of the first part written. Sir Henry Longley has given me (through his Secretary) much material for a chapter on charities, & Bolton King on allotments. I have a good deal of the chapter on wages, hours etc. written with the aid of a friend who knows it practically, & Sutton of the Friendly Socs. department will help me with that part, so you see I am laying my friends under contributions & I am trying at the same time to extract whatever is practical from our



own returns.

A search among the '34 Commission papers has discovered reports upon some of our villages - some of which yield very interesting results.

I hope you will not be aghast at my ambitions &, still more, that nothing in **your** scheme clashes with your plans. But I felt after reading the Labour Commissioners' reports & Little's summaries of them that a mere editing of ours, travelling necessarily over much of the same ground, would be a little flat. When I began to read backwards, I was taken from one step to another from the Poor Law Commission to Cobbett thence to Eden & thence to Arthur Young when I paused. Several conclusions occur to me which I should like very much to discuss with you & I am particularly impressed with the importance of the last thirty years of the last century if one wishes to understand certain aspects of village life as it is now, & the causes which have led to the so-called rural exodus. Then, in one place & another there are so many interesting pictures of old village life which, I think, will bear revising.

The worst of it is, I am so busy with my ordinary work, that I make but slow progress. I can snatch seven hours a week, that is about the outside, but I go on in the scraps of time I can get & think it better not to try & rush it. Still I hope that March next year will see me at the end.

I hope you had a good time in America & have been able to take some real rest. We have put off our holiday in order to go to Italy & hope to start for Florence & Rome in about four weeks time.

With kindest regards from us both to Mrs. Booth & all yours

Believe me

yours very sincerely,

J. A. Spender.

PS: I am having the M.S. typewritten, but I find I'm little good at dictating.

#### Appendix IV: Rider Haggard's questionnaires [see pp. 154-5]

##### (A) Letter sent by Haggard to potential informants

Dear Sir,

I had hoped to have the pleasure of meeting you and of seeing your district during the course of a tour I am making, with the view of investigating agricultural affairs and prospects throughout England. This, however, owing to unavoidable circumstances I have, to my great regret, been unable to accomplish.

I enclose copy of a letter contributed by me to the 'Daily Express' which will inform you fully of the objects of my journey and the ends that I hope to attain. I have already been fortunate in obtaining much valuable information from many representative gentlemen in the various counties I have visited. My reason for troubling you is to ask whether you will be kind enough to supplement this by favouring me with your views on the following points:

1. Have rents fallen in your district since 1875, and if so, how much per cent? What is the average rental now on average lands?
2. To what extent has the 'fee simple' value of land fallen since 1875?
3. Are there many resident landlords in your district?
4. Do farms let readily and are rents regularly paid?
5. Is labour plentiful or scarce? What is the average wage, with and without harvest and all other extras?
6. Are cottages plentiful or scarce? What is their average size and condition?
7. Do the young men stay on the land or migrate to the towns? If the latter, what is the cause of this movement? Has education anything to do with it? If so, do you think the system could be improved?
8. What is the general condition of the tenant farmer – of the landlord – and of the labourer, in your district?
9. Do you see any signs of a revival of the agricultural interests? Are you personally hopeful as to the future?
10. What do you think will be the effect on the farming industry and the country at large, of the desertion of the land by the labouring classes? Have you any remedy to suggest?



(B) Arthur Cochrane's questions to those who supplied information for the maps in Rural England

1. What are (roughly) the proportions of arable and pasture land respectively?
2. Can you state for a few typical farms the rent per acre, or the total rent and the size and character of the farms?
3. What is the general nature of the soil in the district?
4. What system of farming is most prevalent as regards: (a) Stock (namely mainstay)  
(b) Arable (namely mainstay)?
5. What were the standard rates of cash wages in the summer and winter of 1901, respectively of (a) Ordinary farm labourers (b) men in charge of horses, cattle or sheep? (Harvest-wage, overtime &c. should be excluded from rates quoted).

## **Appendix V: Subjects covered in Rider Haggard's interviews** [see pp. 155-6]

Arthur Cochrane's surviving notebooks contain what we may assume to be a fairly detailed record of the interviews which took place; but the real godsend to the historian is Cochrane's detailed index to them, in which each interview is broken down into sections, and each section allocated to one or more sub-topics, which are then indexed. This allows each mention of each subject to be catalogued. The categories as defined by Cochrane were as follows:<sup>1</sup>

Aspect<sup>2</sup>  
Buildings/Churches  
Cattle  
Cottages/Houses<sup>3</sup>  
Conditions/Views<sup>4</sup>  
Capital/Markets  
Co-operation  
Culture/Disease<sup>5</sup>  
Curiosity/Foreigners<sup>6</sup>  
Crops/Vegetables  
Drainage/Water  
Farms/Estate/District<sup>7</sup>  
Farming Profit and Loss  
Fruit/Flowers  
Game/Sporting  
Horses/Manure  
Labour/Exodus<sup>8</sup>  
Land Values

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<sup>1</sup> The order varies somewhat from page to page in the index book (NRO MS4692/23). The order above is taken from one of the pages relating to Lincolnshire. As will be noticed, the order is not quite alphabetical. Where two or more sub-groups are included in each category, this was not necessarily the case throughout the index book. For example, 'Potatoes' was added to 'Timber' from Lincolnshire onwards. For Suffolk and Norfolk, not every category was listed on each page. On the first page of the Suffolk index, the category 'Stock' is listed, but there is no entry under it.

<sup>2</sup> This was not really an interview category. It was merely Cochrane's notes of the appearance and location of a particular farm.

<sup>3</sup> Availability, size and quality.

<sup>4</sup> A varied category, but often relating to the interviewee's view of the rural exodus or farming difficulties in general. Sometimes it seems to have borne a resemblance to the 'Remedy/Education' category (NRO MS4692/22, book 7, f. 79); and at other times described the appearance of a farm. For example: 'Conditions: in the parish of Good [?] we saw a farm, many fields of which were a mass of weeds ... the hedge [?] lying where they had been [?] last year.' (NRO MS4692/22, book 7, f. 71).

<sup>5</sup> The growing of crops, the use of manure, etc. The 'Disease' part of this category appears quite infrequently.

<sup>6</sup> This category – the first (and more common) half of it at any rate – sometimes referred to places of interest passed *en route*, for example old trees, in which Haggard took a particular interest (NRO MS4692/22, book 1, f. 14); and sometimes to unusual farming practices or techniques, such as in Jersey, where one entry read 'Curiosity: Potatoes – above the ground!!!' (NRO MS4692/22, book 1, f. 47).

<sup>7</sup> Description of the farm (only occasionally the estate or district): its size, type, water, marshes, weather, particular problems, and so on.

<sup>8</sup> Availability of labour, its cost per acre, and the character of the workmen. This category, along with 'Cottages/Houses' is very often highlighted in the notebooks (in a distinctive purple pencil).



Machinery/Implements  
Names<sup>9</sup>  
Pasture/Clovers  
Pigs/Poultry  
Places<sup>10</sup>  
Prices/Produce  
Prospect/Position<sup>11</sup>  
Remedy/Education<sup>12</sup>  
Rents (farm demand)  
Rates/Tithes/Taxes  
Soils/Fen/Wash  
Small Holdings  
Sheep  
System<sup>13</sup>  
Transport/Drought  
Timber/Potatoes  
Wages<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Names and addresses given to Haggard and Cochrane, for example of potential interviewees.

<sup>10</sup> Places mentioned by interviewees.

<sup>11</sup> How well-off the farmers and landlords were, the effects of the depression; their prospects for next year and the future in general.

<sup>12</sup> Possible remedies for the exodus, including education. This category shows Haggard's preoccupation with the exodus and the effects of education on the rural labouring class.

<sup>13</sup> Techniques and methods – *how* the work of the local farms was done. For example, two techniques described by C. H. Strutt in Essex: *puggling*, which was a way of putting straw to plants, and his system of fruit-boiling in packets (NRO MS4692/22, book 7, ff. 35-6).

<sup>14</sup> Usually the wages received by labourers; but sometimes the wage costs to the farmer.

**Appendix VI: The Tom Stone affair** [see p. 171]

**(A) The offending passage, which appeared in the *Daily Express*, 20th August 1901, and was reprinted in local newspapers**

Of the labourers as they are today – and this is interesting as coming from one of their own class – he could tell little that was good. All the best men, he declared, go away, as travelling facilities are easy, and those who are single can earn more money in the towns. The remainder do less work for a lower wage; indeed, he was of opinion that they do not want to work and won't work. He gave an instance of a man whom he had hired to dig in his garden for one day at a price of 3s. When he returned in the evening he found that he had not done a shilling's worth of work; in short, as he put it, he had robbed him of 2s. of his capital. For this state of affairs, however, he thinks that the farmers are to blame in part, since the labourer remembers that when they could pay they did not pay, and is now settling the debt. He thought that the old stamp of farmer must die out and that the land must be worked with more skill and science by those who make a study of its treatment and capacities ... Mr. Stone advocated nothing violent or revolutionary, only that the land and its workers should have a good chance. He did not even suggest protection, although he held that every possible means should be taken to improve the intelligence of the working classes. Sometimes, he said, there would be twenty men sitting in his public-house, not one of whom had an idea about Imperial, local, or any other matter of general interest. I may add that he struck me as a person of singular ability, by aid of which he has raised himself up to his present level, and that the words which came out of his mouth were, in my opinion, words of wisdom.

**(B) Letter from Stone to Haggard, no date, in NRO MS 4692/25 (Hunts.)**

Dear Sir, I beg to thank you very much for the kind way you referred to me in the report on my remarks to the *Daily Express*. I did not for one moment expect they would ever be published or no doubt I should have spoken with a little more caution, as it is I find I have upset the tempers of the working men immensely. At first I thought it would be simply a few days talk but I find it is much more serious, the whole neighbourhood seems up in arms about it. The report of people of the middle class who call at my house also bear out that statement. I am by no means a timid man but it is certainly going too far for me. On Saturday evening the men caused a disturbance in my house and I was hooted in the street outside till nearly midnight. I am also threatened with personal harm if caught out from home. I was to have attended a Horticultural Show at Sandy [in Bedfordshire] on Thursday next, but I feel sure if I go I will be hooted so I shall simply stay away. Also I have been in the habit of giving Horticultural lectures for the county council and I really believe I shall have to cancel my engagements for this winter. The remarks that seem to give the most offence is [*sic*] where I say they won't work and also about sitting in my house and having no intelligence, (both quite true) but I fear not prudent remarks to make. I have no doubt you are aware it has all been copied in the local papers and what I feel quite certain will happen is that I shall be attacked in the local papers next Thursday, and to which I shall be almost bound to reply, and shall



have to make the best fight I can of it; at this moment the policeman is just come in to make some inquiries about the disturbance on Saturday night. I have been thinking today of asking you if it would be possible to make those two phrases around a little different by some addition or some alteration of some sort, such as won't work under present conditions or without incentive, or anything you can suggest. If or not anything is done I must ask that this letter is strictly private as no one but myself hear [sic] will know anything about it. I must say it is causeing [sic] me a good deal of worry and I feel very upset about it. I am so sorry to have to trouble you about it and hope in time it may blow over alright but I expect a very bad time for the next few weeks. I am Sir faithfully yours, T. Stone.

**Appendix VII: Maud Davies's questionnaire used in the house-to-house survey of Corsley [see p. 182]**

1. Name.
2. Age.
3. Place of birth.
4. Occupation.
5. Name of employer (or state if on own account).
6. Wife's name.
7. Wife's place of birth.
8. Father's name.
9. Father's occupation.
10. Father's place of birth.
11. Paternal grandfather's name.
12. Paternal grandfather's occupation.
13. Paternal grandfather's place of birth.
14. Maternal grandfather's name.
15. Maternal grandfather's occupation.
16. Maternal grandfather's place of birth.
17. Names and sex of all children born, and date of birth; marking those which are still living; and trade or occupation of those who have left school.
18. Have any of your children left the parish? and if so, state where they went to, and what occupation they are following.
19. How many rooms are there in the house that you occupy?
20. Does any one else, and if so, who, dwell in the house?
21. If occupying land state the number of acres.
22. If employer, state occupation and number of persons employed, men, women, and young people.<sup>15</sup>

The form was filled out, 'so far as possible, for nearly every household, from information given by the householder, his wife, or one of his children'.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> M. F. Davies, *Life in an English Village: An Economic and Historical Survey of the Parish of Corsley in Wiltshire* (1909), pp. 99-100.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*, p. 99.



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The place of publication is London unless otherwise stated.

Items whose author is in square brackets ([ ]) were published anonymously unless otherwise stated. Any annotations to the bibliography appear in square brackets after the entry.

Abbreviations used:

JRASE - Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society of England.

JRSS - Journal of the Royal Statistical Society.

NAPSS - National Association for the Promotion of Social Science.

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*Morning Advertiser*

*The Nation*

National Association for the Promotion of Social Science *Transactions*

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