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The Victorian Countryside a Hundred Years On

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A review article of E. J. T. Collins, ed., *The Agrarian History of England and Wales Volume VII: 1850–1914*, Cambridge University Press, 2000. xl + 2277pp. 2 vols. £195; $295. 0 521 66214 1.

Volume VII of *The Agrarian History of England and Wales* completes a major publishing event. In 1956 R. H. Tawney chaired a meeting launching a series of eight volumes surveying the history of the English and Welsh countrysides from the Neolithic period to the beginning of the Second World War. The first, volume IV covering the years 1500 through 1640, appeared in 1967. This, the last and by far the largest book in the sequence, crowns the earlier achievements. Running to over 2,300 pages and published in two parts, volume VII is approximately twice the size – and price – of its immediate predecessors. If the physical presence of the book is impressive, the same comment applies to its content, elegantly edited by E. J. T. Collins, which covers a diverse range of topics, from King Edward potatoes to military underpants.

Historians writing in the early twentieth century saw the years between 1850 and 1914 as (to borrow from Dickens) the best of times and the worst of times for rural England and Wales. After the so-called 'Golden Age' of High Farming – 'an era of advancing prosperity and progress' according to Ernle in his classic *English Farming Past and Present* – followed the 'Great Depression', for Ernle 'a period of agricultural adversity – of falling rents, dwindling profits' and so on. These events occurred against the backdrop of the continued decline of agriculture's importance in the macro economy. In 1850 the agricultural sector comprised of over one fifth of national income; by the eve of the Great War the fraction had fallen to just one sixteenth. Growing urbanisation meant that eighty per cent of the population now lived in towns and cities. Finally, campaigns for land reform provided an intensified challenge to the landed elite's traditional position of privilege and political dominance. Thus Collins and his team of experts have a weighty set of issues to cover.[1]

One suspects that producing this volume must have been the best and worst of times for the editors too. Steering an enormous multi-authored work during the fifteen years from planning to publication can be no easy task. It may, therefore, be unfair to remind Joan Thirsk, successor to H. P. R. Finberg as general editor of the series, that in 1991 she predicted that volume VII 'should appear in 1992–3'.[2] Poor health unfortunately forced one of the principal contributors, B. A. Holderness, to withdraw from the

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project, requiring others to take on his writing and editorial responsibilities. This increased the total number of authors to twenty-five, many of whom were involved in previous volumes. Reflecting the continued gender imbalance in the discipline, only four are female. Sadly Holderness and another major contributor, Gordon Cherry, died before publication.

As in past volumes, the text comprises of good quality survey essays, a number of which make novel points along the way. Volume VII is, though, far from being purely a dry academic tome. The book includes this reviewer's favourite economic model – Jevons' theory that the business cycle was caused by sun spots (p. 5) – the faith in 'toad's bone', said to give men power over horses (p. 1410) and the revelation that mischievous students at Newcastle chorused: 'Hark the Herald angels sing/Basic slag is just the thing' (p. 602). Readers will also meet characters such as Thomas Read, a rare example of a farmer-cum-dentist (p. 68) and the unfortunate Northumberland nobleman who discovered from Ordnance Survey maps that his estate was ten thousand acres smaller than he had originally thought (p. 1529)!

Almost all reviewers of past volumes of the *Agrarian History* have complained about omitted topics.[3] The final book in the series effectively neuters such criticisms, for the end product provides room for about twice as much material as in previous contributions. In addition to those topics usually covered by the *Agrarian History* – agricultural regions, farming practice and the economic history of prices and marketing – volume VII also discusses subjects only intermittently included in past volumes, if at all. Social, cultural, political, environmental, demographic and even urban history feature in its pages. This volume therefore continues the movements begun in earlier publications in the series to incorporate new trends in academic research. The more balanced content ensures that this book will attract a much wider readership than previous ones. It deserves to be consulted by all historians interested in the seven decades after 1850, not just specialists in cows and ploughs.

I

The two parts of volume VII divide into seven sections. Undoubtedly the most innovative of these is the section, by Cherry and John Sheail, devoted to the impact of intensified urbanisation on rural areas. Cherry and Sheail's first four chapters survey urban-oriented influences on the countryside, such as the growth of city suburbs, while a further four chapters discuss land use and management in various different landscapes. One recurring theme is the reaction against the environmental and cultural changes brought by urbanisation. These are reflected in organised movements to conserve commons, buildings, footpaths and birds, and especially in Ebenezer Howard's attempt to combine urban and country living through the garden city, a model town of low density housing built at Letchworth, Hertfordshire. Politics is another topic to which the book rightly gives extensive coverage. John Fisher contributes an interesting study of agrarian politics, touching on Lloyd George's attack on landlordism and the rising role of farmers in the political process, and Collins' opening chapter focuses on the debate over free trade in the aftermath of the repeal of the Corn Laws. The protectionist

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movement failed, if only because the industry was divided on this issue: labourers and livestock farmers, as consumers rather than growers of corn, understandably failed to back the arable sector's demand for more expensive grain imports.

Treatment of social history in the *Agrarian History* has been erratic. Volume IV has been called one of the 'founding documents' of modern social history, whilst coverage in more recent volumes has tended to be more thin, although volume VI (1750–1850) devoted a long chapter to rural society.[4] Volume VII expands on the treatment in that last book, with Alun Howkins contributing two delightful chapters examining, respectively, types of rural communities and the social and cultural life of countryside dwellers and workers. Readers tempted to sneer at his discussion of folklore are warned: 'To see these beliefs as simply quaint ... is both to misunderstand them and to underestimate their importance ... they were central to the lives of the poor' (p. 1411). Anne Digby follows with two useful chapters, one on social institutions, which examines the roles of, and attitudes to, rural churches and schools, and another on the local state, spread about equally between the Poor Law and crime. Volume VII also gives substantial coverage to agricultural science and education, reflecting the large-scale institutional growth in these areas, in an expert chapter by Paul Brassley.

The remainder of the book presents the reader with the *Agrarian History's* more traditional fare. Farming regions, systems and techniques are each given their own chapter, with Brassley and Holderness responsible for the greater part of these texts. Nicholas Goddard and J. V. Beckett reprise their contributions to volume VI with excellent chapters on, respectively, agricultural associations and press, and landownership and estate management. English landowners have been the subject of extensive research, and a great deal too has been written about the agricultural labourer, a character close to the heart of previous volumes and ably surveyed here by Peter Dewey. By contrast, surprisingly little is known about the socio-economic class sandwiched between landlords and labourers in the middle of England's three-tiered agrarian society: the farmers. It is therefore a pleasure to see a chapter dedicated entirely to this group, by Gordon Mingay. Nevertheless the thin secondary literature shows up in the scanty amount of evidence on many topics. For instance, Mingay cites Rider Haggard in nearly a quarter of his eighty footnotes. Holderness' chapter on investment, capital and credit bravely battles against definitional and measurement problems, and again reveals how much more research remains to be done in these areas. A short chapter by Mingay succinctly outlines the major trends in taxation during the period. Harcourt's 1894 death duties aside, the burden of taxation was light, declined over time, and fell predominantly on the owners rather than the occupiers of land.

Collins' admirable survey of rural and agricultural change in these years of free trade will almost certainly prove to be the most widely read chapter in the volume. At just over 150 pages, it is a substantial monograph in its own right. As well as describing the economic performance of the farming sector using an impressive variety of qualitative and quantitative evidence, Collins analyses in some detail the causal factors behind the statistics, particularly those policies and institutions that allegedly served to inhibit the drive for growth, such as poor entrepreneurship by farmers and the deleterious effects of the estate system. Collins' account is particularly good at teasing out regional and

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sectoral variations to the national picture. The single biggest difficulty faced by Brian Short in his chapter on demography is in defining the rural population, which various estimates put at somewhere between 4.6 and 7.9 million in 1911 depending on how 'rural' areas are defined (table 21.1.). Short's survey is at its strongest when analysing migration, but I felt that his sub-sections on nuptiality and fertility in particular could have benefited from the initial setting out of a clearer conceptual framework, thereby providing a more obvious structure for the following discussion. John Chartres and Richard Perren contribute the vast majority of the section entitled 'trade, commerce and industry', which contains six sound chapters on marketing, agricultural services, servicing trades and industries, food processing industries and rural industry. F. M. L. Thompson's mini-essay on the chemical and fertiliser industries is, for this reviewer, the most elegantly written in the book, whilst Perren's fourteen pages on milling is little more than a marginally amended version of his 1990 article in the *Economic History Review*.[5]

The final part of volume VII largely consists of the usual section of statistics. That the years after 1850 mark the beginning of serious data gathering in England and Wales allows Bethanie Afton and Michael Turner to present a set of statistics more accurate and comprehensive than in any previous *Agrarian History* statistical appendix. Most of the book's 250 tables and 137 graphs and maps are located in these last chapters. This mouth watering cornucopia of figures is employed liberally by almost all the contributors; a nice example is Chartres and Perren's use of the census to show the rapid ageing of the rural craft workforce (table 20.1). Yet many statistics cannot be interpreted without some caution because much of the data suffers from some type of error or omission. Conclusions over the pattern and time path of agricultural labourers' earnings, for instance, should not be formed on the basis of money wages alone. The best available evidence (a Board of Trade survey of almost sixteen thousand farmers) suggests that, as late as 1907, perquisites and other allowances in kind averaged nearly one fifth of total earnings for adult male farm workers, with some differences between England and Wales.[6]

Most frustratingly of all, often the data is still inadequate to test specific hypotheses of interest. For example, the impact of schooling at an agricultural college cannot be rigorously assessed because representative samples of educated and uneducated farmers, together with statistics on their farm's productivity, simply do not exist (p. 646). Turner undertakes the most sterling work with the numbers in a detailed chapter on agricultural output and productivity. Utilising a variety of sources, notably the unpublished papers of J. R. Bellerby, Turner constructs annual series of farm prices, produce and related variables. The technicalities of this exercise make this chapter the least easy read in the book, but it is a crucial contribution to the volume. Parts of what Turner presents here have already appeared in print, but he builds on this previous work by producing invaluable new estimates of productivity growth, which allow general inferences over the performance of the farming sector in these years to be drawn.[7]

After a 'final overview', Collins closes the book with six pages of ideas for future research. Because research agenda tend to be something of a personal choice, Collins sensibly asked other contributors for their thoughts. This exercise is entirely appropriate,

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for an explicit aim of the *Agrarian History* has been to encourage new work into topics under, and not under, discussion; only reviewers are likely to be irritated by the repetitions from earlier chapters.[8] The good news for rural historians is that 'much remains to be done' (p. 2152). For instance, as Howkins nicely puts it: 'More is known ... about cows and ploughs than those who used them or deployed them' (p. 2154). Naturally it is easy to add to Collins' list. For this reviewer, the most startling revelation in the volume was the 'informed guesses' that in 1877 two-thirds of English farm land was managed by a mere sixty or so land agents (p. 732). Even if these guesstimates are some way off the mark, the control of agricultural property must still have been enormously more concentrated that its ownership (on Bateman's well-known calculations for 1873, 4,127 individuals owned 56 per cent of land in England and Wales; p. 702). More research on the roles and influence of this tiny elite of land agents appears, then, to be something of a priority.

II

Past volumes of the *Agrarian History* have been criticised for their failure to confront the big issues of their particular time period, but the authors of this book are careful to address these wider concerns.[9] 'A central issue raised by this volume', writes Collins, 'is the extent to which English agriculture, in the Golden Age as well as the Great Depression, can be seen to have failed' (p. 2152). This is not the place for anything more than a superficial outline of a selection of the various arguments presented in the text. Nevertheless the general sense, especially as presented in Collins' overview pieces, is of more questions than answers. Both the overall magnitude of any 'failure', and the groups, policies or institutions that might have been to blame, are left largely unresolved. Though unsatisfactory, this is perhaps understandable given the imperfect and often contradictory evidence available.

Least uncertain is the continued revisionism to the old distinction between the best and worst of times in English and Welsh agriculture. The difference in the annual 'physical growth rates' of the High Farming and Great Depression periods turns out to have been less than one per cent. For Collins, the Golden Age was '[l]ess prosperous than farming folklore would have us believe', with a rate of growth 'very substantially lower than in the preceding quarter century' (pp. 205, 131, 2148 respectively). Furthermore, key quantitative indicators such as prices and rents suggest that the so-called Great Depression was actually more muted and regionally specific than contemporary comment and Ernle claimed, with the pastoral west holding up much better than the arable east (e.g. pp. 142–4, 960).

For Howkins, though, the notion of a Great Depression downgraded to a few regional difficulties leaves 'a deep sense of unease'. In some of the most thought-provoking passages in the book, Howkins suggests that the widespread contemporary *belief* of severe agricultural adversity led to 'something both more far reaching and wider than ... a simple economic depression'. He argues that 'if men and women believe there is a ''depression'' they will act as if there is one', and the two decades after 1870 appear to mark a watershed of socio-cultural change in the countryside, reflected in disruptions to

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Table 1. *Total factor productivity growth in UK agriculture, 1871–1911* (average annual percentage growth rate)

	Measure I	Measure II
1871–1891	0.79	0.56
1891–1911	0.52	0.37

Source: *Agrarian History*, VII, table 3.33.
Notes: Measure I utilises an agricultural price deflator weighted by the share of each product in 1870; measure II employs 1910 weights. TFP is measured as the residual of increases in output that are not explained by greater land, labour and capital inputs. Data constraints mean that the figures cover the UK rather than England and Wales.

demographics, politics and social relations (pp. 1503–7). Howkins's thoughts on this 'agrarian crisis' merit further investigation, and indeed they provoked me to find a crude indicator of the perceptions of one socio-economic class which provides a quick and dirty test of his assertions: the rate of tree planting. As an investment that requires a long time to produce a return, landowners would presumably not have planted many new trees if they were not sanguine about their economic prospects. Yet between 1880 and 1891 the total measured acreage of woodland in England and Wales increased by ten per cent.[10]

Table 1 presents the key new quantitative evidence on economic achievement in the volume: Turner's estimates of the ideal performance measure, total factor productivity (TFP), which summarises in a single figure the productivity gains arising from increased efficiency in the use of land, labour and capital inputs. As Turner comments: 'the greatest [productivity] gains were made during the decades of the agricultural depression' rather than in the subsequent recovery, when the rate of TFP growth slowed. Turner is rightly cautious about the theoretical and practical problems of measuring TFP, but this finding 'certainly... encourages a rethinking of the period' (pp. 319–20).

Case study evidence, however, provides mixed support for the aggregate statistics. For example, Brassley's discussion of the use of artificial fertilisers is largely inconclusive ('There were good reasons both for their adoption and for their non-adoption'; p. 547), as is Roy Brigden's mini-essay on the quality of farm buildings (pp. 497–504). Perren contends that the apparently late and limited technical change in milling, together with the slow development of marketing co-operatives, were actually both reasonable responses by farmers to prevailing market and institutional conditions (pp. 979–80, 1062–75). And, in an argument reminiscent of the famous debate over Britain's allegedly sluggish adoption of the mechanical reaper, non-adoption of the steam plough is also judged to have been a rational choice given Britain's lack of large fields in heavy-soil regions, where this machine was most effective (p. 1001).[11] Conversely, Brassley's survey of agricultural science reveals clear backwardness in England and Wales compared to the Continent (pp. 598–622). A disturbing image is of British vets

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conducting horse surgery on the ground, whereas their counterparts in America and Europe utilised operating tables (p. 1049). The example of the agricultural engineering industry suggests what might have been missed were opportunities to improve growth potential for the future. David Grace shows that this sector achieved 'remarkably successful' penetration in export markets by selling threshers and steam engines. But reliance on these products: 'left firms wedded to a technology which was to be replaced by the petrol engine and the combine harvester ... when the petrol tractor emerged as a major, and eventually indispensable piece of equipment, it was other countries and other industries that benefited' (pp. 1011, 1017–8).

III

In short, volume VII of the *Agrarian History* is a wonderful piece of work. As with volume VI, almost all of the contributors draw overwhelmingly on printed primary and secondary sources. The main exceptions are Grace's short essay on the agricultural engineering industry, and the eight Afton-Turner tables compiled from archival material. In keeping with its novel content, the book makes some innovations in sources and methods too. Some authors occasionally utilise personal reminiscences and their own family memorabilia (e.g. pp. 23, 490, 1409), but by far the most notable new technique is the use of oral history, mostly deployed by Howkins in his chapters on rural culture and society. Volume VII also contains what must be the first two regression equations to be printed in the *Agrarian History* (pp. 134, 1185), although this is little more than a nod in the direction of cliometric analysis. Nevertheless, the employment of some new methods again indicates how this book, like other publications in the series, has moved to embrace recent developments in academic research. I failed to find any of the contributors undertaking a postmodern deconstruction of the English and Welsh countryside, though.

Unlike many supposed studies of 'England and Wales' that pay no more than lip-service to the Welsh experience, Wales generally receives a fair amount of coverage, but the occasional mention of Ireland is usually about as far as international comparisons are taken (indeed Collins ends the book by bemoaning this isolationist tendency of the British historiography). Because the drafts of some chapters were first submitted a decade before eventual publication, the references cited are not always tolerably up to date. Collins cleverly uses his closing mini-essay on 'pathways for future research' to smuggle in references to a dozen important books and articles from the 1990s which appeared after the earlier chapters had been completed, but it is doubtful if every reader will think of looking there. On the other hand, a footnote claims that chapter 27 had not been revised since it was submitted in 1989, but I counted citations to five works published after that date!

The book suffers from a few other blemishes. A handful of minor typographical errors have crept in (mostly punctuation), and the odd table is poorly labelled. Less trivially, a danger with the structuring of the *Agrarian History* is that comparatively minor topics, which could potentially fall under the remit of more than one chapter, end up being excluded completely. For example, country house visiting is salient to several of the

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matters discussed in the book (including countryside tourism and rural social and cultural life more generally), but I found no mention of this not inconsiderable leisure activity. And, inevitably, there are inconsistencies in the contents and approaches of the different authors. These are most visible in chapter five, which consists of five mini-essays examining different English regions (the midlands, the south west, and so on), with a sixth on Wales by Richard Moore-Colyer, who is rightly allowed twice the space allocated to each of his fellow contributors. These compositions are all valuable, with Moore-Colyer's the pick of the bunch, but they are somewhat uneven in their scope and the sources consulted. The coverage given to physical landscape and climate in each region, for instance, ranges from two brief paragraphs to two pages. Similarly, Christine Hallas's piece on northern England is the most densely footnoted in the book but draws almost exclusively on Parliamentary reports and the *Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society of England*, whereas her colleagues make much more use of secondary sources.

Perhaps the single biggest drawback of volume VII is its price – £195 – which ensures that only the most affluent specialists in this period will even consider purchasing their own copy. It is to be hoped that Cambridge University Press will publish a paperback version of at least some of the chapters so as to make their valuable contents available in a more affordable form, perhaps in combination with some chapters in the earlier volume VI.[12] Another complaint is the continued use of an – albeit lengthy – 'select' bibliography. Under the Murphy's Law of select bibliographies the reference one is searching for is never included, necessitating a trawl through the footnotes to locate the work in question.[13] A comprehensive and authoritative work of this kind really ought to include a complete bibliography. I was also disappointed by the decision not to include the illustrative plates that appeared in some of the recently produced volumes, especially as Cherry and Sheail spend some time discussing photographic records of the landscape (pp. 1531–4). Since the already high cost of the book ensures that the majority of purchasers will be libraries, it is not obvious that increasing the price by the few extra pounds needed to cover the expense of a full bibliography and a set of plates would have significantly affected sales.

To end on these more negative points should in no way detract from the epic scholarly achievement represented by the completion of the *Agrarian History* endeavour. The final, most ambitious, book in the series has clearly benefited from the learning process arising from nearly half a century of planning, writing and editing, together with the more recent rise of information and communication technologies. Few will have the time or inclination to read both parts of volume VII cover to cover. Yet this book, even more so than its predecessors, will be both an indispensable work of reference, and an essential point of departure for new research, for years to come.

Notes

1. Ernle: cited in *Agrarian History*, VII, pp. 1541, 1543. Statistics: ibid. p. 1.
2. Ibid., III, p. xix.
3. B. M. S. Campbell, 'Laying Foundations: The Agrarian History of England and Wales 1042–1350', *Agricultural History Review*, 37 (1989), 188–9; idem, 'A Fair Field Once Full of

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Folk: Agrarian Change in an Era of Population Decline, 1348–1500', *Agricultural History Review*, 41 (1993), 70; P. D. Glennie, 'Crisis and Restructuring in Late-Medieval England and Wales', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 18 (1992), 330–8; H. J. Habakkuk, 'The Agrarian History of England and Wales: Regional Farming Systems and Agrarian Change, 1640–1750', *Economic History Review*, 40 (1987), 281–96; P. D. A. Harvey, Review of vol. II, *Economic History Review*, 43 (1990), 739; M. A. Havinden, 'Evolution or Revolution? Agriculture's Critical Period, 1640–1750', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 12 (1986), 207; R. W. Hoyle, Review of vol. III, *Economic History Review*, 46 (1993), 197; E. John, 'The Agrarian History of England and Wales Volume I', *Agricultural History Review*, 21 (1973), 138–9; M. A. Overton, 'The Critical Century? The Agrarian History of England and Wales 1750–1850', *Agricultural History Review*, 38 (1990), 187; K. D. M. Snell, 'Agrarian Histories and our Rural Past', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 17 (1991), 195–203; F. M. L. Thompson, Review of vol. VI, *Economic History Review*, 43 (1990), 491–2; E. A. Wrigley, 'Early Modern Agriculture: A New Harvest Gathered in', *Agricultural History Review*, 35 (1987), 69–70.

4. Quotation from *Agrarian History*, VII, p. 1229.
5. R. Perren, 'Structural Change and Market Growth in the Food Industry: Flour Milling in Britain, Europe, and America, 1850–1914', *Economic History Review*, 43 (1990), 420–37.
6. Calculated from *Agrarian History*, VII, table 12.4, as the unweighted mean across all occupational groups.
7. M. E. Turner, 'Output and Prices in UK Agriculture, 1867–1914, and the Great Agricultural Depression Reconsidered', *Agricultural History Review*, 40 (1992), 38–51.
8. *Agrarian History*, III, p. xix; ibid., VII, p. 28.
9. Glennie, 'Late-Medieval England and Wales', p. 336; Hoyle, Review of vol. III, p. 197; Wrigley, 'Early Modern Agriculture', pp. 70–1.
10. Calculated from *Agrarian History*, VII, p. 1641. A proper analysis would take other factors into account.
11. The reaper debate is surveyed in C. Ó'Gráda, 'British Agriculture, 1860–1914', in R. Floud and D. N. McCloskey, eds., *The Economic History of Britain since 1700*, II (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 153–6.
12. There is a precedent. J. Thirsk, M. W. Barley, P. J. Bowden, J. Chartres and C. Clay, eds., *Chapters from the Agrarian History of England and Wales, 1500–1750*, 5 vols. (Cambridge, 1990) reprinted chapters originally published in volumes IV and V, together with an introduction summarising work that had subsequently appeared.
13. Overton, 'Critical Century?', p. 187.

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