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G. E. Mingay. *Land and Society in England, 1750-1980.* London and New York: Longman, 1994. vii + 278 pp. $22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-582-49132-8.

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Gordon Mingay's most recent book exhibits just those qualities that have marked his contributions to English agricultural history for these many years: a lucid prose style, a keen eye for detail, a generous demeanor, and a critical yet not dispassionate feel for the material. As part of Longman's series on themes in British social history, his *Land and Society in England* successfully integrates the characteristic concerns of the agricultural historian (such as output, land use, yields, and the like) with those of the social historian (such as social structure, the impact of religion, and poverty), although one of a particular ilk. The result is a book that is rich in texture yet not obscured by it, scholarly but not pedantic.

The book's great strength is the apparent ease with which the author moves across the terrain. Perhaps naturally, Mingay's attention initially is directed toward the fate of England's "landed interest" during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Like the "Industrial Revolution", the concept of an "Agricultural Revolution" may no longer be tenable. Nevertheless, Mingay contends that English landowners performed admirably during the long eighteenth century. Home production certainly could not hope to keep pace with population growth, but even as late as 1851 between eighty and ninety per cent of English food needs were still being supplied by English farmers. Mingay notes with characteristic understatement that such a record demonstrates that aristocratic and gentry control of the principal levers of political and economic control during the period were not only moderately successful but served the nation's economic best interest as well.

This might appear to be an unexceptionable statement if it was not for the variety of ways in which the nation's best interest could be interpreted. For example, if total output or productivity is adopted as the criterion for such a judgment then perhaps such a conclusion is not unwarranted. (It should be noted, incidentally, that Mingay's data are derived largely from the series of British agricultural statistics constructed by Mitchell and Dean and Dean and Cole, both of which were published in 1962. N.F.R. Crafts' estimates published in BRITISH ECONOMIC GROWTH DURING THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION (1985) are not assessed here nor are the even more recent contributions of Gregory Clark, B.A. Holderness, or Robert Allen.) Certainly, there is no contesting the fact that in the middle of the nineteenth century, and for many decades before then, British agriculture was more productive and absorbed a smaller proportion of British resources than any of that sector's European counterparts.

However, one might ask whether the same statement would appear unexceptionable if agricultural employment or food consumption during the same period were used as the standard of judgment? Here there is less support for the contention that aristocratic and gentry dominance served the nation's best interest. In the first instance, Robert Allen's work on the South Midlands has revealed a growing degree of rural unemployment during the classic period of industrialization as well as a concomitant decline in real income. Under free market conditions, it may not have been the responsibility of aristocratic and gentry employers to provide jobs for rural labourers, but it is difficult nonetheless to define a nation's best interest in terms of declining real incomes and rising unemployment. Indicators of food consumption, which are difficult to accumulate, are similarly pessimistic. If human height can serve as a suitable proxy for nutritional status, then the work of Floud, Wachter, and Gregory shows a significant decline in the well-being of British workers during the period after 1820. In this sense as well, therefore, the nation's best interests were not being well-served by aristocratic and gentry dominion over the land.

Of course, the relationship of land to society is a much broader topic than can be contained in data on output, employment, and consumption. At the book's core are half a dozen chapters covering the major socio-economic groups of English rural society during the late eighteenth

and early nineteenth centuries. With the deft hand of a keen and confident stylist, Mingay traces among other things the declining influence of the nation's landowners, the fate of freehold and tenant farmers, the role of the clergy in local society, and poverty and poor relief in the countryside. Several of these vignettes omit some of the most recent research. For example, Mingay's account of the demographic impact of the Speenhamland system relies only on J.P. Huzel's work and does not make reference to George Boyer's calculations, which came to the opposite conclusion. Similarly, the discussion of wife-sales relies solely on S.P. Menefee's 1981 book and omits any mention of E.P. Thompson's extended discussion and critique which appeared in CUSTOMS IN COMMON. While reference to these works may have changed Mingay's account in detail, it is unlikely that they would have altered his conclusions that, in the first instance, the political and economic reaction to the Speenhamland system mistook the ultimate causes of low wages and, in the second instance, that popular rural customs were surprisingly immune to the influences of both Church and Chapel.

Naturally, the declining political importance of the landed interest is a theme to which Mingay returns in several chapters. Major political issues such as the Corn Laws are certainly given their due weight, but the author does a particularly fine job of elaborating the broad range of threats against landed society in the nineteenth century, including attacks on strict settlement, poor estate management, and, most importantly, the Game Laws. Indeed the current actions of John Major's government to restrict the actions of activists protesting against fox-hunting testifies to the enduring nature of the conflict between the ethos of the landed interests and the wider community. Nonetheless, Mingay traces the declining influence of the land not only to its declining economic importance, but also to the particular democratic changes of the late nineteenth century. The advent of the secret ballot in 1872 (which deprived landlords of influence over the electorate), the 1885 Reform Act (which replaced the historic county and borough boundaries with by and large single-member constituencies and extended the franchise to rural householders) and the virtual abolition of the Lords' power of veto in 1911, all contributed to the weakening of the landed interest. Moreover, as Mingay rightly notes, the direct influence of the gentry and lesser landowners suffered a similar fate as the responsibilities of justices of the peace and parish officials were gradually transferred to elected Boards of Guardians, School Boards, County Councils, and District Councils.

This social history, however, is slightly weakened by the author's neglect of the importance of the land to nineteenth and twentieth century social and intellectual movements. Although Thomas Spence, Tom Paine, and Joseph Arch are mentioned, the Chartist Land Plan, Robert Owen, William Morris, and Robert Blatchford are somehow ignored altogether while William Cobbett's significance is noted only in passing. Even more surprisingly for a survey of this sort is the fact that Martin Wiener's analysis of "the English spirit" is overlooked despite the obvious relevance of a discussion of this thesis and of its critics to the relationship between land and society.

Mingay's analysis is also noticeably thinner when he crosses into the twentieth century. In particular, the earlier emphasis on rural social structure gives way to a more orthodox history of agricultural legislation. Moreover, there is no clear reason given for ending this survey in 1980. It is self-evident to a shopper at any supermarket that agricultural policy and its impact on food prices continues to play an important role in British and European politics. The lure of the land has also exerted a renewed appeal after that date, during what Reginald Hill has recently labeled "the days of swine and Porsches." While, moreover, Mingay makes reference to the increasing penetration of middle- class, professional types into the countryside, one would welcome a more expansive treatment.

The legacy of the land is not only reflected in the politics and structure of society. Its influence continues in innumerable ways: in the numbing saturation of the BBC with garden shows; the legacy of Gertrude Jekyll and Vita Sackville-West and the especial regard for their gardens; the national prominence given to the Chelsea Flower Show; the activities of the Ramblers Association; the unparalleled longevity of *The Archers*; and the ritual migration of Range Rovers (and some Jeep Cherokees) to garden centers each Saturday. Perhaps asking the author adequately to assess the many facets of these aspects of the English imagination of rurality, would be to require him to write a different book, but such an analysis would undoubtedly bear fruit if it came from Professor Mingay's pen. Thus, there is a great deal to commend this survey of English land and society, not least its raising as many questions as it answers.

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