

The Agrarian History of England and Wales, Volume VII, 1850-1914. Edited by E.J.T. Collins.
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. Pp. xl, 2,277. \$-----.

Excess, we learned as children in Glasgow, was the defining characteristic of Americans: big country, big cars, food served by the bucket, big talk, Texas, CGE models. Eccentricity identified the English: bird watching, Bovril, train spotting, the Archers, bus spotting, Women's Institute Teas, the standard of living debate.¹ This book represents an interesting merger of all that is American with all that is English. With 2,317 pages devoted to English agrarian history between 1850 and 1914, completed 44 years after the series was initiated, and published only after the deaths of two of the principal authors, it screams American style excess.² The loving care, however, devoted to duck decoys, the Large Black Pig Society, Church of England music, sand dunes, malaria, Cupiss's Constitution Balls, golf courses, agrarian utopianism, ruderal (sic) habitats, the Rational Dress Society, and much, much more betrays an endearing eccentricity that could only be English.

The history of the English countryside 1850-1914 seems so brutally simple to the uninitiated. Labor productivity in agriculture improved through mechanization. Yields per acre improved little. Thus there was a sustained decline in the agrarian labor force, and a migration to the towns of everyone except those suitable to be denizens of Cold Comfort Farm. Cheap food imports after the 1840s kept land rents low, and the rise of urban populations greatly increased the wealth associated with cities, so reducing the power and influence of the landowning classes in English society and politics. Other than that not much changed. A farm in 1914 was very

¹ The defining characteristics of Glaswegians were of course drink, violence and religious bigotry – manly pursuits.

² The volume devoted to 1750-1850 and the Agricultural Revolution was a puny 1,215 pages while the volume for 1348-1500, including the Black Death and the great Peasant Revolt was a mere 982 pages.

much a farm of 1850, with a few more machines in the barn and perhaps some juiced up manufactured fertilizers. There were only the most minor institutional changes. Even admitting the necessity of a proper appreciation of the role of Church of England music in rural life, how do you grow 2,317 pages from this unpromising foundation? And how much is of relevance to economic history?

The way you get 2,317 pages is not by challenging this simple brutal picture. The picture of English agriculture held by the uninitiated is not challenged. The length comes from covering every conceivable aspect of rural life. There are chapters on agrarian politics, on six farming regions (in a country whose area is smaller than most US states), farming systems, animal health, agricultural science, land ownership, farmers, laborers, marketing, rural industries, agricultural engineering, rural industry, retail trades, local authorities, rural demography, the urban impact on the countryside, agricultural education, agricultural statistics, agricultural institutions, food policy. Aficionados of the English rural scene will thrill to find estimates of the carcass weight of pigs in 1871 (p. 311), to learn that there were 300,374 Large Black Pigs on holdings of more than one acre in Great Britain in 1908 (p. 564), or to discover that the Night Poaching Prevention Act of 1862 allowed the police to stop and search anyone walking rural roads at night (p. 1454). But the casual reader must be warned that most chapters will be heavy sledding: so many words, so little action.

For quantitative economic historians such as this reviewer the most valuable chapters are the excellent ones by Bethanie Afton and Michael Turner on agricultural statistics, which themselves occupy 384 pages. These chapters collect together in one place an exhaustive compilation of both published and unpublished statistics on output, prices, inputs, areas, tenancy, land rents, agrarian occupations, wages, and foreign trade in food from 1850 to 1914. Anyone

looking for statistics on agriculture in England in these years should consult this volume first.

The only complaint I would have, and it is a minor one, is that because of the untimely death of A. H. John the earlier volume in the series, 1750-1850, has a very limited statistical section. This means that many of the series developed here, such as those on hay prices, terminate abruptly in 1850 with no continuation in the earlier volume, even though the data exists.

The 97 page chapter by Turner “Agricultural Output, Income, and Productivity” will also be of interest to quantitative historians, and has much useful information. One problem with this chapter though is that the unit of analysis is mainly the United Kingdom because the work of previous investigators such as Bellerby was focused on the UK. But this means lumping in English agriculture with the very different production conditions in Ireland. For the UK output per worker is estimated to have risen by 44 percent from 1871 to 1911, but output per acre only 10 percent. The productivity chapter has no discussion, however, of why gains in productivity were concentrated on labor and not on land, and little discussion on whether these modest gains represented a failure of English agriculture.

It seems churlish to bemoan of omissions in a 2,317 page work after complaining that it is too long. But there are some notable gaps. First there is very little attention to the performance of English agriculture compared to high productivity competitors such as the US. Second there is very little comparison of the productivity trends in agriculture compared to what was happening in industrial sectors. 1850 represented the peak of British power and influence in the world. In the late nineteenth century its productivity advantage in industry and transport declined relative to the USA and Germany. It would be interesting to know whether agriculture experienced a similar relative decline.

In sum, this is a work of immense erudition applied to obscure ends. It will function well as a reference source for those with ideas to test about the functioning of the agrarian sector in England in 1850-1914. But the reader will have to bring those ideas to the work.

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