THE VILLAGE LABOURER

1760-1832

e Government of England
the Reform Bill

BY

J. L. HAMMOND AND BARBARA HAMMOND

. . . The men who pay wages ought not to be the political masters of those who earn them (because laws should be adapted to those who have the heaviest stake in the country, for whom misgovernment means not mortified pride or stinted luxury, but want and pain, and degradation and risk to their own lives and to their children's souls). . . .

LORD ACTON.

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TO

GILBERT AND MARY MURRAY

PREFACE

THIS edition differs from previous editions of *The Village Labourer* in two respects. The original Chapter One has been omitted: this chapter described the concentration of power in the hands of a small class, which was the leading feature of our political development in the eighteenth century. Secondly, the Appendices have been reduced, but the student who wishes to pursue the subject of enclosure further will find, at the end of this volume, full details of four important and representative enclosures.

In their preface to the edition published in 1913 the authors discussed some of the controversies that had arisen on the topic of the enclosures. It seems worth while to reproduce here the substance of that preface. Two main criticisms have been passed on the treatment of enclosures in these pages: the first, that the writers have drawn an unjust picture, because they deliberately excluded the importance of enclosure in increasing the food supplies of the nation; the second, that the hardships of the poor have been exaggerated, and that, though the system of enclosure lent itself to abuses, there was no evidence that wrong was done in the mass of enclosures.

The writers submit the following considerations: (1) It has been the accepted view of all modern critics, with the single exception of Dr. Hasbach, that the enclosures of this period, or at any rate the enclosures that took place after 1795, made the soil of England immediately more productive. That this is the usual view was stated in the text; its correctness was not discussed or questioned. The subject of this volume is the fate of the Village Labourer, and so far as he is concerned, the facts which they are accused of neglecting suggest two reflections: (*a*) the feeding of Manchester and Leeds did not make life cheaper to him; and (*b*) if agriculture suddenly became a great industry, multiplying as some say England's resources twenty-fold, an equitable readjustment must have

increased the prosperity of all classes engaged in that industry. The greater the stress laid on the progress of agriculture, the greater appear the perversity and injustice of the arrangements of a society under which the labourer became impoverished. If it is argued that the misery of the labourer was the price the nation had to pay for that advance, it is worth while to point out that that was not the view of Young, or Davies, or Eden, or Sinclair, or Cobbett, and that the actual revolution that was accomplished was not the only alternative to the old unreformed common field system. (2) The authors desire to point out how little they have relied on solitary instances for their general statements. Complaint has been made of the publishing of the story of the attempted enclosure of Sedgmoor, but those who read that account carefully will see that the passage from Selwyn's letters are important as disclosing the state of mind of a chairman of an Enclosure Committee; they will note also that his letters show that it was a common practice for Members of Parliament to arrange meetings in order to manipulate Committees in the interest of private persons. Selwyn's view of the responsibilities of a chairman of one of these Committees has therefore a special significance. The main question for the historian is this: Were the poor sacrificed or not in the enclosures as they were carried out? The writers have given their reasons for thinking that they were sacrificed, and needlessly sacrificed, and no evidence has come under their notice in the criticisms published to shake that view. They have set out the actual methods of procedure that were adopted for converting England from the old to the new system, and they think it is clear that those methods were such that the poor were bound to suffer unless Parliament expressly intervened for their protection. This was apparent, or became apparent, to observers at the time, and proposals that would have helped the poor were made by Arthur Young, by Eden, by Davies, by Suffield, and by the Board of Agriculture. Those proposals were disregarded, not necessarily from wickedness or rapacity, but because the atmosphere of the ruling class was unfavourable. Young referred to his own proposal six years later in a passage which is worth quoting:

'I have been reading over my *Inquiry into the Propriety of applying Wastes to the better Maintenance of the Poor.* I had

almost forgotten it, but of all the essays and papers I have produced, none I think so pardonable as this, so convincing by facts, and so satisfactory to any candid reader. Thank God I wrote it, for though it never had the smallest effect except in exciting opposition and ridicule, it will, I trust, remain a proof of what ought to have been done; and had it been executed, would have diffused more comfort among the poor than any proposition that ever was made' (*Autobiography*, July 14, 1806).

One further fact of interest and importance in this connection may be mentioned. Michael Sadler, the Factory Reformer, was, unhappily for England, thrown out of Parliament after the passing of the Reform Bill. He was in the House of Commons for only three years. One of the most important speeches that he made in his brief career there, was a long speech reviewing the disastrous change that had come over the agricultural labourers in recent times. The chief cause he found in the disappearance of the small farmer, the pulling down of cottages, and the enclosures. He said that the enclosures had inflicted on the poor as a class 'the most irreparable injuries.' Like Thelwall, with whom he would have been slow to recognise any affinity, he argued that enclosure might have benefited the poor, but that in practice it had ruined them. 'Inclosures might indeed have been so conducted as to have benefited all parties; but now, coupled with other features of the system, they form a part of what Blackstone denominates a "fatal rural policy"; one which has completed the degradation and ruin of your agricultural poor.'

Two subjects are discussed fully in this volume for the first time. One is the actual method and procedure of Parliamentary Enclosure; the other the labourers' rising of 1830. More than one important book has been written on enclosures during the last few years, but nowhere can the student find a full analysis of the procedure and stages by which the old village was destroyed. The rising of 1830 has only been mentioned incidentally in general histories: it has nowhere been treated as a definite demand for better conditions, and its course, scope, significance and punishment have received little attention. The writers of this book have treated it fully, using for that purpose the Home Office Papers accessible to students in the Record Office. They wish to express their

gratitude to Mr. Hubert Hall for his help and guidance in this part of their work.

The obligations of the writers to the important books published in recent years on eighteenth-century local government are manifest, and they are acknowledged in the text, but the writers desire to mention specially their great debt to Mr. Hobson's *Industrial System*, a work that seems to them to throw a new and most illuminating light on the economic significance of the history of the early years of the last century.

Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Ponsonby and Miss M. K. Bradby have done the writers the great service of reading the entire book and suggesting many important improvements. Mr. and Mrs. C. R. Buxton, Mr. A. Clutton Brock, Professor L. T. Hobhouse, and Mr. H. W. Massingham have given them valuable help and advice on various parts of the work.

HEMEL HEMPSTED, *April* 1920.

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