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## *Commoners: common right, enclosure and social change in England, 1700–1820*

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labourers at enclosure.<sup>19</sup> This is not to argue, as some historians have, that a benevolent enclosure movement generated employment for the underemployed. It is to suggest instead that commoners became utterly dependent on miserable wages. And that to earn them they worked harder.<sup>20</sup>

But the history of labour productivity, like the history of land productivity, is not the story told here. My concern is to describe and explain the survival and decline of commoners in eighteenth-century common-field England.

<sup>19</sup> For an explanation of labour productivity earlier in the century see Ann Kussmaul, *A General View of the Rural Economy of England, 1538–1840* (Cambridge, 1990), p. 175.

<sup>20</sup> Gregory Clark, 'Productivity Growth without Technical Change in European Agriculture before 1850', *Journal of Economic History*, 47 (1987); N. F. R. Crafts, 'Income Elasticities of Demand and the Release of Labour by Agriculture during the British Industrial Revolution', *Journal of European Economic History*, 9 (1980); cf. R. C. Allen, 'The Growth of Labour Productivity in Early Modern English Agriculture', University of British Columbia, Department of Economics, Discussion Paper no. 86-40.

## 1. *The question of value*

... the true interest of a nation, the authority of government, and the liberties and property of the subject, are all best established and promoted, by keeping things in a state in which the bulk of the people may support themselves and their families.

*An Enquiry into the Reasons for and against Inclosing the Open Fields Humbly Submitted to All Who have Property in them, and Especially the Members of the British legislature* (Coventry, 1767), pp. 5–6

... the province of ninety-nine out of an hundred was to receive, not to give orders.

John Clark, *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Hereford with observations on the Means of its Improvement* (1794), p. 75.

From the fifteenth century to the nineteenth, evaluations of common right were inseparable from the larger question of enclosure and the engrossment of small farms. For enclosure meant the extinction of common right and the extinction of common right meant the decline of small farms: 'Strip the small farms of the benefit of the commons', wrote one observer, 'and they are all at one stroke levelled to the ground.'<sup>1</sup> Disagreement about the value of common right has always been a debate within this debate. In our own century it is as part of the same argument that the quarrel continues between historians. If I begin with them it is not because they have the most to say about common right but because increasingly they

<sup>1</sup> [Stephen Addington], *Inquiry into the Advantages and Disadvantages Resulting from Bills of Enclosure* (1780), p. 14.



have chosen to say the least and in so choosing they have misunderstood the full meaning, the real value, of common right.

It was not always so.<sup>2</sup> To the Hammonds, commons were the hallmark, 'the distinguishing mark', of the old village because they gave labourers and small occupiers an independence of the wage that they would lose when the commons were enclosed. Lord Ernle also thought commons were the lowest rung on the property-owning ladder. Even E. C. K. Gonner described a social transformation at enclosure amounting to the end of peasantry that was due in part to inadequate compensation for the loss of commons. And C. S. and C. S. Orwin, historians of Laxton, agreed.<sup>3</sup>

But the place of the commons in the creation of a peasantry was not discussed by a later generation of historians, who disagreed with the Hammonds and whose interpretation became the new orthodoxy of enclosure history. For them the question of value was not to be measured in the broad terms of the social relationships engendered by independence of the wage. It was measured as no more than an *income* dependent on the quality of pasture on open fields and commons, and the regulation of open-field agriculture.<sup>4</sup> *The Agricultural Revolution 1750–1880* is the best expression of this view. Here J. D. Chambers and G. E. Mingay doubted the value of common pastures. They described 'the impossibility of improving the livestock, and the risks of wildfire spread of disease among beasts herded together on the commons and fields' of open villages.<sup>5</sup> They did so despite a concurrent re-evaluation of open-field agriculture that emphasized its relative dynamism.<sup>6</sup> To accommodate some of that evidence they argued that where there was progress in

<sup>2</sup> See above, pp. 6–7.

<sup>3</sup> Hammond and Hammond, *Village Labourer*, pp. 27, 26; R. E. Prothero, Lord Ernle, *English Farming Past and Present* (1912; 6th edn, 1961), pp. 306–7; Gonner was less certain than the Hammonds of the timeless value of common right, and doubtful of the connection between enclosure and high rates of poor relief. He thought the end of peasantry was less a consequence of deliberate expropriation than of the gradual rationalization of agricultural practice of which the extinction of common right at enclosure was part, E. C. K. Gonner, *Common Land and Inclosure* (1912; 2nd edn 1966), pp. 362–6; Orwin and Orwin, *Open Fields*, p. 178.

<sup>4</sup> J. D. Chambers, 'Enclosure and Labour Supply in the Industrial Revolution', *Economic History Review*, 2nd series, 5 (1953), p. 336.

<sup>5</sup> Chambers and Mingay, *Agricultural Revolution*, p. 49. The question of disease is discussed below in Chapter 4.

<sup>6</sup> Chambers and Mingay, *Agricultural Revolution*, pp. 49–52, citing W. G. Hoskins, 'The Leicestershire Farmer', and Havinden, 'Agricultural Progress', pp. 74–82.

open-field farming it was accompanied by the individualization of practice. The result was that the progressive open-field parish looked remarkably like an enclosed one: rights and commons were engrossed into a few hands.<sup>7</sup> But where there was *no* progress in open-field farming, common of pasture was of almost no use: commons were unregulated, cattle were unstinted and overstocked, disease was rife. In short, either rights were virtually useless because practice was so poor, or they were of equally little value because progressive practice was so good that it had virtually swept away the old communal system and common right with it.

As a result the argument exonerated the very controversial means by which common right was extinguished between 1750 and 1850: parliamentary enclosure. If commoners who lost common right at enclosure had long before ceased to benefit from it, or if the stock they fed on commons was inferior and diseased, then enclosure, in taking commons away, impoverished no one. The subsequent popularity of this view spanned the political spectrum of social historians. It appeared that the English peasantry, small and ill-nourished at the start of the eighteenth century, had died by 1750 – before enclosure. Common right has received little attention ever since.<sup>8</sup>

It was, of course, very much a part of the eighteenth-century scheme of things. Though equally enmeshed in the enclosure debate, the value of common right was discussed then in the larger terms later taken up by the Hammonds. And enclosure was as controversial in the eighteenth century as it had ever been. From early on, and particularly from the 1760s to the 1790s, writers declared its legiti-

<sup>7</sup> Chambers and Mingay, *Agricultural Revolution*, pp. 49–52.

<sup>8</sup> The exception is K. D. M. Snell's *Annals of the Labouring Poor: Social Change and Agrarian England 1660–1900* (Cambridge, 1985), which assumes the value of commons given both widespread complaint about the loss of cows and fuel after enclosure, and the belief that the end of commons would increase the supply of labour. M. E. Turner's work on small owners at enclosure neglects common right and is inconclusive about change: Turner, 'Parliamentary Enclosure and Land-ownership Change in Buckinghamshire', *Economic History Review*, 2nd series, 27 (1975), pp. 565–81; J. A. Yelling gives common right more weight than Chambers and Mingay but draws no conclusion about its importance, in part because 'we have only the judgement of contemporaries to depend upon': Yelling, *Common Field and Enclosure in England, 1450–1850* (1977), pp. 230–2. Historians who noted the dislocation of enclosure and the sense of loss following the end of common right, M. K. Ashby, *Joseph Ashby of Tysoe, 1859–1919* (Cambridge, 1961; 1974 edn); E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), A. J. Peacock, *Bread or Blood* (1965), did not carry the argument (see below Chapter 10).



macy or illegitimacy in pamphlets, articles and reports. Read together, they become a connected series of exchanges on the nature of enclosure and the meanings of common right, made between members of the political nation. They are the physical survivals of a lengthy public policy debate. Their authors often knew each other, cited, applauded or ridiculed each other. Their work is substantially one text.

Despite this integrity, historians have not examined the subject as a whole. Selective quotation supports one interpretation of the effects of enclosure or another; too often there is no reference to contemporary voices at all. But looking at the debate as an historical event in itself disinters the polemic and illuminates the meaning of common right for eighteenth-century observers. It shows us the world as they saw it. And it also reveals some of the world as it was. It becomes clear that beneath the argument between these writers lay a fundamental agreement. Opponents agreed on the nature of English rural society before enclosure, and they agreed on enclosure's effect: it turned commoners into labourers. Their disagreement was about the worth of each class; neither side doubted that the transformation occurred, and had profound consequences. I shall argue later on that this was an informed debate: individualized agriculture, a new set of smallholders, and a bitter sense of betrayal amongst commoners replaced an economy dependent on common right, petty landholding and communal regulation. In this chapter I want to look at the debate's shared perception of the very different societies common-field and enclosed villages supported.

#### THE SOCIAL MEANING OF COMMON RIGHT

Common right was defended at the centre of government in sermons, pamphlets, judgements and speeches for three hundred years. Eighteenth-century defenders wrote in the tradition of Thomas More, Hugh Latimer, Thomas Lever, Robert Crowley, John Hales, Sir Francis Bacon, the Levellers at Putney, Gerrard Winstanley and John Moore. These men had condemned depopulation and the loss of commons at enclosure, and Tudor and some Stuart governments agreed with them.<sup>9</sup> They did not condemn

<sup>9</sup> Official, intellectual, and some ecclesiastical opposition to enclosure did not prevent it, as Hugh Latimer lamented: Christopher Hampton, ed., *A Radical*

enclosures that benefited poor peasants by reorganizing their land to their advantage. Nor did agricultural writers who supported enclosure – Fitzherbert, Tusser, Norden – approve of enclosure for the conversion of arable land to pasture or the loss of commons without full and proper compensation in land.<sup>10</sup> This was 'bad' enclosure in anybody's terms, and for much of this period it was illegal.

What distinguishes the period from the mid seventeenth century to the 1790s is the development then, not before, of a public argument in favour of enclosure even when it *did* cause local distress. This followed the final withdrawal of official resistance to enclosure in the early seventeenth century: the last Inquisitions of Depopulation were held in the 1620s.<sup>11</sup>

The public debate opened in the 1650s with a series of pamphlets written by two Midland clergymen, Joseph Lee and John Moore, one of whom (Lee) was also an encloser.<sup>12</sup> It is an important debate but short-lived: little public argument about enclosure appears to have followed the Restoration.<sup>13</sup> Timothy Nourse and Daniel Hilman broke the silence in the first decade of the eighteenth century; the 1730s saw the publication of pamphlets by John Cowper, Thomas Andrews, and others, the estate management and husbandry treatises of Edward and John Laurence, and the first few

*Reader: The Struggle for Change in England 1381–1914* (1984), p. 109. For official attitudes to early modern enclosure see E. Power and R. H. Tawney, *Tudor Economic Documents, I, Agriculture and Industry* (1924, new edn, 1951), section 1. See also Joan Thirsk, *Tudor Enclosures* (Historical Association, 1958, reprinted 1967, new edn, 1989); Peter Ramsey, *Tudor Economic Problems* (1963), ch. 1; Joan Thirsk, ed., *The Agrarian History of England and Wales, IV, 1500–1640*, pp. 213–39; and John E. Martin, *Feudalism to Capitalism. Peasant and Landlord in English Agrarian Development* (1983; 1986).

<sup>10</sup> R. H. Tawney, *The Agrarian Problem in the Sixteenth Century* (1912, reprinted 1967), pp. 149–50. Levellers at Putney could imagine useful enclosure too: A. S. P. Woodhouse, ed., *Puritanism and Liberty. Being the Army Debates (1647–9) from the Clarke Manuscripts with Supplementary Documents* (1938), p. 339.

<sup>11</sup> J. E. Martin, 'Enclosure and the Inquisitions of 1607: An Examination of Ker-ridge's Article, "The Returns of the Inquisitions of Depopulation"', *Agricultural History Review* 30 (1982); Mary E. Finch, *The Wealth of Five Northamptonshire Families 1540–1640*, Publications of the Northamptonshire Record Society, XIX (Oxford, 1956), pp. 162–3.

<sup>12</sup> See Joyce Oldham Appleby, *Economic Thought and Ideology in Seventeenth-Century England* (1978), pp. 59–63, and below, p. 43.

<sup>13</sup> Enclosers may have gone unchallenged, thanks to a productive agriculture and a newly stable population, thus Appleby, *Economic Thought and Ideology*, p. 57: 'The fear of famine ceased to haunt the English'. Plenty may have stifled the public expression of opposition to enclosure but not necessarily the local.



private enclosure Acts.<sup>14</sup> Then, in the 1760s, dearth and a strong spate of Acts drove defenders of commons to write against enclosure again. This time more advocates of enclosure felt impelled to answer them than ever before: bad enclosure, first sanctioned in the mid seventeenth century, found its most passionate supporters in the mid eighteenth. To understand how they and their opponents saw commoners, and to understand what they expected enclosure would do to them, I want to pick up the debate in 1700, beginning with the case of the defenders of commons.

Always contentious, Timothy Nourse began *Campania Foelix* with a denunciation of commoners. They were 'very rough and savage in their Dispositions', of 'leveling Principles', 'refractory to Government', 'insolent and tumultuous'. More dangerous than mastiffs and stallions, they needed the same harsh treatment, civility was futile: it was easier 'to teach a Hog to play upon the Bagpipes, than to soften such brutes by Courtesy'. In the flora of English landed society these men were 'trashy Weeds or Nettles, growing usually upon Dunghills, which if touch'd gently will sting, but being squeez'd hard will never hurt us'.<sup>15</sup> As the men, so too the land they lived on: commons gave only a 'lean and hungry soil' to lean and hungry stock ('And as the men, *so are the Cattle*') unfit for the dairy or the yoke.

But Nourse also thought that common-field agriculture supported a larger population than enclosed farms, that it provided soldiers and sailors ('excellent good Food for Powder'), and a supply of labour more valuable than any increase in the supply of cattle. In effect, the very qualities of insubordination and independence that made commoners a nuisance also made them brave and prolific (like mastiffs and stallions). And because these qualities sprang from the commons themselves, their survival was in the national interest.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> See below, *passim*.

<sup>15</sup> Timothy Nourse, *Campania Foelix, or a Discourse of the Benefits and Improvements of Husbandry* (1700, 2nd edn, 1706), pp. 15–16. Timothy Nourse, miscellaneous writer, born Newent. BA Oxford 1655–8; holy orders; admirer of Dr Robert South; associated with Roman Catholics, converted in 1672, lost fellowship; returned to Newent and a country life; 'suffered much on the outbreak of the popish plot', died 1699, *Dictionary of National Biography* (1885).

<sup>16</sup> On the national interest see Appleby, *Economic Thought and Ideology*, esp. p. 277. Nourse echoed Shakespeare's King Henry V:

And you, good yeomen,  
Whose limbs were made in England, show us here

And commons supported a viable, even admirable way of life too. Commoners were poor but they were not paupers, their cottages and commons were miniature farms. Few had no pasture ('a pretty Plot of Ground like a Meadow') or some field land ('a little Rib of Tillage for Bread-Corn'), or fruit trees ('a slender Orchard').<sup>17</sup> Nourse's description of this economy is as approving as his description of commoners' insubordination was emphatic. He could even recognize in the 'familiar enjoyments' of commoners living in their 'Rural Mansions' a bond with much richer men: they were both property owners. In fact, commoners' rights were older than any manorial lord's.

In 1732 John Cowper argued in terms of the national interest too. Open-field villages were the source of all grain, all manufactures, and abundant cheap labour. Enclosure would devastate all three.<sup>18</sup> The profit of a few landlords was nothing compared to the 'Good of the Whole', for how could wealth be produced but by labour?<sup>19</sup> Cowper knew 'of no Set of Men that toil and labour so hard as the smaller Farmers and Freeholders, none who are more industrious to encrease the Product of the Earth; none who are more serviceable to the Commonwealth; and consequently none who better deserve Encouragement'.<sup>20</sup> And Thomas Andrews followed Cowper in identifying the victims of enclosure as less the needy poor who dominated the seventeenth-century debate (and its twentieth-century re-statement) than the working, productive poor: 'I mean, not only the *Poor*, strictly so called, but also our poorer Sort of *Freeholders, Farmers, and Manufacturers*'. When they lost their commons at enclosure they lost their independence too: 'Stand (says the Philosopher) from betwixt me and the Sun, lest thou take away what thou can'st not give me. For, in those places where the Poor

The mettle of your pasture; let us swear  
That you were worth your breeding: which I doubt not;  
For there is none of you so mean and base,  
That hath not noble lustre in your eyes.

(Henry V, Act III, Scene 1, lines 25–30)

<sup>17</sup> Nourse, *Campania Foelix*, pp. 15–16, 100, 102, 100, 103–4.

<sup>18</sup> John Cowper, *An Essay Proving that Inclosing of Commons and Common Field Land is Contrary to the Interest of the Nation* (1732), pp. 1, 5–7, 12, 22–3, 24. Cowper is described as a Surrey farmer in the *Dictionary of National Biography* entry for Edward Laurence.

<sup>19</sup> Cowper, *Essay*, p. 10; here he is answering J. Laurence, *A New System of Agriculture and Gardening* (1726), pp. 45–6, which made a case for the individual's right to profit from enclosure.

<sup>20</sup> Cowper, *Essay*, pp. 3–4, 18.



are deprived of their Common Pasturage, the most comfortable Gift of a Free Country is taken away.<sup>21</sup>

A generation later, in the 1760s and 1770s, enclosure Bills, often leading to conversion to pasture, began to fill the committee rooms of the House of Commons. In addition poor harvests provoked serious food riots in 1766 and again in the early 1770s.<sup>22</sup> Arguments against enclosure were familiar. But criticism of enclosers as profiteers began to sharpen, and so did the fear that enclosure threatened internal peace.

The familiar arguments were three. A decline in small farmers would weaken England's military strength. Tillage was more beneficial to the public than pasture. And, again, it was not only more productive, it was also 'necessary to the very being of the community'. 'The true interest of a nation' was served by a society in which most people could live without wages. But here is the sharper criticism: enclosure impoverished twenty small farmers to enrich one. It reduced the size of holdings that were once nine or ten acres to only six or seven. Rents rose and prices followed: Commoners became labourers, mere 'tools'. Landlords grew lazy, some 'little better than tyrants or bashaws ... who when they had less wealth were more sensible of their dependence and connections, and could feel both for the poor and the public upon every emergency'. Their claim to the exclusive enjoyment of their land was nothing more than an excuse for 'shutting out' the poor from their rights on the common fields, from gleaning, from getting turf and furze.<sup>23</sup> And the fear: in destroying village relations enclosure also endangered relations in the nation as a whole. It brought about an open dissatisfaction that risked mob rule and encouraged sedition, even Jacobitism.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Thomas Andrews, *An Enquiry into the Encrease and Miseries of the Poor of England; which are shewn to be I, Taxes ... II, Luxury ... III, Absence of Great Men from their Counties ... IV, Inclosures of Commons* (1738), p. 38.

<sup>22</sup> On the chronology of Acts see Michael E. Turner, *English Parliamentary Enclosure. Its Historical Geography and Economic History* (Folkestone and Hamden, 1980), ch. 3, esp. p. 68, Table 10: 39 Acts were passed in the 1730s, 393 in the 1760s, 640 in the 1770s; on conversion to pasture, see pp. 75–6. On food riot see Andrew Charlesworth, ed., *An Atlas of Rural Protest in Britain, 1548–1900* (1984), pp. 88–94.

<sup>23</sup> Anon., *An Enquiry into the Reasons for and against Inclosing the Open Fields Humbly Submitted ...* (Coventry 1767), pp. 5–6, 8, 11.

<sup>24</sup> Anon., *Enquiry into the Reasons*, pp. 10, 12, 14. The author replied to Homer on the question of an individual's rights, arguing that if everyone had the right to exclusive enjoyment then no one had a right to 'dictate to any one of their

Writing, as this author did, in the wake of the 1766 food riots and with the example of John Wilkes before him, 'vox populi' might well be considered 'vox dei'.<sup>25</sup> But the belief that enclosers stole independence from the poor outlived this crisis. As enclosures accelerated through the 1770s, and into the 1780s when inflated poor rates and more profitable alternative investments temporarily slowed them down, the economy of commoners and their distinctive independence were more thoroughly described.

Consider, for example, this account of the economy of farmers' wives, written by an anonymous 'Country Farmer' in 1786. Before enclosure, he wrote, small farms were numerous, rents were low, and the land was tilled, not left for pasture. Because profit did not come easily, farmers turned their hands to everything. Their wives did the same. Their dairies stocked the markets with eggs and poultry. The money they made was spent on shop goods for their families; anything left over they 'used to sink into their own pockets as a kind of pin-money, to buy themselves and children such necessary little articles as required, without applying to their husbands for every trifling penny they might want to lay out'.

But, after enclosure and the foreclosure of mortgages, these families moved to other parishes (if they could afford a settlement) or they left, indentured, for America. The old lingered on in the village. All were 'fenced out of their livelyhood', prey to the ambitious and aspiring.<sup>26</sup> Enclosure depopulated and depopulation led to the social and economic transformation of the village.

Defenders of commons argued that common fields supported the economies of small farmers (and their wives) then, and those of the

neighbours'. Moreover 'though he has only an acre in a field in which they have five hundred ... His one acre may be as important to him and his family, as their five hundred to them', p. 15; and Henry Homer, *An Essay on the Nature and Method of Ascertaining the Specifick Shares of Proprietors, upon the Inclosure of Common Fields. With observations upon the inconveniences of open fields, and upon the objections to their inclosure particularly as far as they relate to the publick and the poor* (1766, 2nd edn, Oxford, n.d.), pp. 5, 6.

<sup>25</sup> Anon., *Enquiry into the Reasons* p. 37. *Vox Populi, Vox Dei: Being True Maxims of Government*, was the title of a frequently printed Whig pamphlet expounding a contract theory of government first published in 1709 and possibly written by Daniel Defoe: see H. T. Dickinson, *Liberty and Property: Political Ideology in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (1977), p. 73.

<sup>26</sup> Anon., *Cursory Remarks on Inclosures, Shewing the Pernicious and Destructive Consequences of Inclosing Common Fields &c. By a Country Farmer* (1786), pp. 19–20, 5–7, 22.



'cottager, mechanic, and inferior shopkeepers' too. They generated independence, thrift, and industry: 'this common-right is an incitement to industry, and also an encouragement to the young men and women to intermarry, and is the means of supporting their children with credit and comfort, and of course renders them very valuable members of society'. The thrifty children of thrifty cottagers became farm servants, saved to get married and stock a cottage of their own, and while the men worked as labourers on neighbouring farms the women tended the livestock at home. In all this they were unexceptional: 'I could mention many cottagers in my neighbourhood ... who keep two or three milch cows, two or three calves a rearing, forty or fifty sheep, two or three hogs ... chickens, ducks, geese and turkies, to the amount in number of fifty to one hundred in a year.' And at the worst of times the honesty and energy of cottagers kept them from theft and the poor rate.<sup>27</sup>

Probably the most published eighteenth-century defender of commons was Dr Richard Price, the Unitarian defender of the American revolution. His *Observations on Reversionary Payments*, first published in 1771, ran to at least six editions.<sup>28</sup> Simply put, Price said that enclosure concentrated wealth. It ruined small farming families and drove them into the towns; it raised prices; it intensified labour and encouraged luxury. Above all, it destroyed equality: 'modern policy is, indeed, more favourable to the higher classes of people', he wrote, 'and the consequences may in time

<sup>27</sup> Farmers used the common only 'from the time the grass begins to shoot to the mowing time'. Cottagers took this for granted; they were fortunate that 'great farmers', and the stewards of large landlords had not conspired to let their cottages decay, in order to engross their rights: Anon., *A Political Enquiry into the Consequences of Enclosing Waste Lands, and the Causes of the Present High Price of Butchers Meat. Being the Sentiments of a Society of Farmers in -----shire* (1785), pp. 43-4, 111, 46, 48. For a discussion of the engrossment of cottage rights see Chapter 3.

<sup>28</sup> In 1786 his adversary, John Howlett (whose arguments are considered next), complained that Price had 'printed and reprinted' his views, so confirming and establishing them without 'seeming to have at all attended to the accounts, of equal authenticity, repeatedly given on the other side of the question'. The reason for the popularity of Price's work may have been his tables for calculating annuities as much as his observations about enclosure, but to Howlett and some radicals (Thomas Spence, Thomas Evans) the latter were more important. Howlett replied to Price's *Essay on the Population of England from the Revolution to the Present Time* (1780), in *An Enquiry into the Influence which Enclosures Have Had upon the Population of this Kingdom* (1781); he refers to *Observations on Reversionary Payments* in the second edition (1786), p. 2.

prove that the whole kingdom will consist of only gentry and beggars, or grandees and slaves'.<sup>29</sup>

These opponents of enclosure writing in the first half of the eighteenth century, and in the first wave of parliamentary enclosures from 1750 to the outbreak of war in 1793, framed their arguments with three observations. First, enclosure was for the conversion of arable to pasture; second, it impoverished small farmers and landless commoners who lost land, use rights and work; third, it diminished the supply of military as well as agricultural and manufacturing labour. Most of them thought that enclosure depopulated, and that depopulation would destroy the basis of both national and local wealth. In contrast, the value of common right lay in its support of a fertile, hardy population employed in the production of corn, in the encouragement it gave to manufacture, and in the military reserve it sheltered. These arguments flowed from fear of depopulation in its narrowest sense – the unpeopling of enclosed villages. But when writers described depopulation they meant *more* than a decline in numbers: they were talking about the disappearance of an entire economy. It was one rooted in hard work, governed by thrift, independent of the poor rate and the wage. Commoners were to be cherished.

Like defenders of commons, writers in support of enclosure in the eighteenth century also argued in terms of the national interest – though they adopted the argument late in the day, and commoners might have argued with their definition of the nation.<sup>30</sup>

The Reverend John Howlett, after Arthur Young, was the most active public supporter of enclosure in the 1780s. He was also a friend of Young, with whom he set up a correspondence, and in whose *Annals of Agriculture* he published for most of his career.<sup>31</sup> Howlett's patron in the 1780s was Alexander Wedderburn, Lord Loughborough, later Baron Rosslyn, an improver with a Scottish enlightenment background and an English legal platform. As a young man Wedderburn had been a pupil and friend of Adam

<sup>29</sup> Price, *Observations* (6th edn, 1805), quoted in Karl Marx, *Capital* (Everyman edn, 1962), II, pp. 158-9; again, engrossing 'is, indeed, erecting private benefit on public calamity; and for the sake of a temporary advantage, giving up the nation to depopulation and misery', Price, *Observations* (2nd edn, 1772), p. 361, cited in Wilhelm Hasbach, *A History of the English Agricultural Labourer* (1908; 1966 edn), pp. 158-9.

<sup>30</sup> See below, pp. 42-6.

<sup>31</sup> G. E. Mingay, ed., *Arthur Young and his Times* (1975), p. 12.



Smith, and had developed an interest in Scottish agriculture.<sup>32</sup> In England he became Solicitor General in Lord North's administration (1771–4), then Chief Justice of Common Pleas (1780–93), and Pitt's Lord Chancellor (1793–1801). In 1788 as Chief Justice he declared against shared land use and in favour of the exclusive enjoyment of property when he ruled that the right to glean could not be defended at common law.<sup>33</sup>

Loughborough may have been drawn to Howlett's ability as a demographer and statistician, and to his unequivocally improving ideas. In 1781 these led Howlett to repudiate Dr Price's allegation that enclosure depopulated in a pamphlet he dedicated to Loughborough.<sup>34</sup> He wrote in a decade of harvest failure, high prices, riot, the loss of America, and when enclosures slowed from the torrent of the 1770s to a trickle. The significance of Howlett and Loughborough was that together they brought a new, harder line of argument to the enclosure debate. In effect Howlett agreed with the defenders of commons that enclosure reduced farmers to labourers.

<sup>32</sup> John Howlett, *Enclosure and Population* (1973), with an introduction by A. H. John, p. [i]; Wedderburn also wrote an appendix to Howlett's *An Examination of Dr Price's Essay on the Population of England and Wales* (Maidstone, 1781). In Edinburgh he was a founder member of the Select Society and the first editor (1755–6) of the *Edinburgh Review*: John, Lord Campbell's *Lives of the Lord Chancellors and Keepers of the Great Seal of England, from the Earliest Times till the Reign of King George IV* (5th edn, 1868), VII, pp. 339, 358–69; R. H. Campbell and A. S. Skinner, *Adam Smith* (1982), p. 37. On the Select Society as a forum for the discussion and implementation of economic change, including agricultural improvement, by a modernizing elite, see I. Hont and M. Ignatieff, eds., *Wealth and Virtue: The Shaping of Political Economy in the Scottish Enlightenment* (Cambridge, 1985), *passim*, esp. p. 68.

<sup>33</sup> *Steel v Houghton et Uxor* (1788), 1 H. Bl. 51, ER 126, pp. 32–9; for discussion of the case see Peter King, 'The Origins of the Gleaning Judgement of 1788: A Case Study of Legal Change, Customary Right and Social Conflict in Late Eighteenth-Century England', *Law and History Review*, 10 (1992), and Thompson, *Customs*, pp. 139–42. (Smith's understanding of the seasonal marketing of grain is reflected in Loughborough's arguments in 1788.) In London in the mid seventies Wedderburn gave weekly dinners attended by Adam Smith: Campbell and Skinner, *Adam Smith*, pp. 154, 163, 166; in 1776 he published his *Essay upon the Question What Proportion of the Produce of Arable Land Ought to Be Paid as Rent to the Landlord* (Edinburgh, 1776). As Lord Chancellor, so anxious was he to exercise office that after Pitt's administration fell he continued to attend cabinet meetings until 'politely dismissed' (*DNB*). He became Earl of Rosslyn in 1801.

<sup>34</sup> Richard Price was also one of Lord Shelburne's many protégées, and a correspondent of William Pitt. Both Shelburne and Pitt were political opponents of Loughborough at this time, John Ehrman, *The Younger Pitt: The Years of Acclaim* (1969), pp. 86, 261–7. In 1792 Loughborough went over to Pitt, the first Whig to do so: Steven Watson, *The Reign of George III 1760–1815* (Oxford, 1960), p. 580; he became Lord Chancellor in January 1793.

But it was worth the price ('disagreeable and painful as it may be to the tender and feeling heart') because it would encourage population growth. In particular, enclosure would provoke a rapid and general increase of labouring and then of indigent poor. Labourers married early ('they readily obey the suggestions of natural constitution'). Marrying earlier they had more children. And the poorer they were, the earlier they married. Fortunately they felt their growing poverty less keenly than those with more money: 'They have already trod the rugged path, and felt its thorns and briars.'

In other words, dependence and unemployment, supposedly the worst consequences of engrossing, were advantageous. They would cause population to grow.<sup>35</sup> And the creation of a proletariat through enclosure was a guarantee of economic growth on a broad front.<sup>36</sup> Enclosure meant larger agricultural and manufacturing populations, greater agricultural production, stable grain prices. The traditional argument was reversed: now proletarianization, instead of damning enclosure and the disappearance of common right, justified it.

Howlett alone connected enclosure and poverty, but the prediction of wage dependence became general. Not every critic of commons followed him in recommending the transformation: several writers including Nathaniel Kent and Thomas Stone regretted the loss of small farmers in particular. (The wage dependence of former landless commoners did not concern them.) And Arthur Young from as early as 1784 argued against the uncompensated loss of common right.<sup>37</sup> But, if they did not recommend it, it is important

<sup>35</sup> Howlett, *Examination of Dr Price's Essay*, pp. 26–9. Charles Vancouver also argued that labourers would marry earlier ('the gratification of an early and generous passion') as a consequence of enclosure: Charles Vancouver, *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Cambridge* (1794), p. 197. Historians of eighteenth-century demography also explain growth in terms of an earlier age at marriage: see E. A. Wrigley and R. S. Schofield, *The Population History of England 1541–1871: A Reconstruction* (Cambridge, 1981).

<sup>36</sup> In ancient Rome the proletariat was the lowest class in the community, distinct because it contributed only its children to the state. In this sense the word fits Howlett's vision exactly. In the text that follows I use the term to signify the class of wage-dependent labourers that defenders and supporters thought would result from enclosure. Of course, every supporter, not just Howlett, denied that enclosure would depopulate: it would leave the commoners' reproductive function intact and create a class of labourers at the same time.

<sup>37</sup> Nathaniel Kent, *Hints to Gentlemen of Landed Property* (2nd edn, 1776), pp. 218–35; Thomas Stone, *Suggestions for Rendering the Inclosure of Common Fields and Waste Lands a Source of Population and Riches* (1787), pp. 76, 81; A. Young, 'Introduction', *Annals of Agriculture*, 1 (1784), p. 63.



to note that none of these observers of proletarianization thought it sufficient grounds for opposing enclosure: 'Let no one imagine', said Young,

that one word offered in this paper is meant generally against enclosing: all contended for is ... that instead of giving property to the poor, or preserving it, or enabling them to acquire it, the very contrary effect has taken place; and as this evil was by no means necessarily connected with the measure of enclosing, it was a mischief that might easily have been avoided.<sup>38</sup>

And many pamphleteers and most reporters to the Board of Agriculture *did* recommend the creation of complete wage dependence. They said that the discipline was valuable. They argued that the sanction of real or threatened unemployment would benefit farmers presently dependent on the whims of partly self-sufficient commoners. For them, like Howlett, the justification for ending common right was the creation of an agricultural proletariat.

Here is John Clark from Herefordshire: 'The farmers in this county are often at a loss for labourers: the inclosure of the wastes would increase the number of hands for labour, by removing the means of subsisting in idleness.'<sup>39</sup> And Vancouver on Devon commoners whose independence meant that it was 'not without much difficulty that, under such circumstances, the ordinary labour of the country is performed'.<sup>40</sup> So too in north-west Hampshire, where

<sup>38</sup> The exception to the rule is William Pitt, the Midland reporter to the Board of Agriculture, who recommended that enclosure occur only where it would promote tillage, but his comments came too late for most of the counties he visited: Pitt, *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Northampton* (1809), pp. 60–3. A. Young, 'An Inquiry into the Propriety of Applying Wastes to the Better Maintenance and Support of the Poor ...', *Annals of Agriculture* 36 (1801), pp. 497–547 at p. 515. Sir George Onesiphorus Paul was another supporter of enclosure, who also advocated allotments of land (of at least one-third acre garden ground) for the poor: see Esther Moir, *Local Government in Gloucestershire 1775–1800: A Study of the Justices of the Peace* (Publications of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society, VIII, 1969), p. 62.

<sup>39</sup> John Clark, d. 1807, gaelic scholar, land and tithe agent. Reporter to the Board of Agriculture for Brecknock, Radnor and Hereford; his *The Nature and Value of Leasehold Property* was published posthumously in 1808 (*DNB*); Clark, *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Hereford* (1794), p. 29.

<sup>40</sup> Charles Vancouver, *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Hampshire* (1813), p. 505. (Charles Vancouver, fl. 1785–1813, American, of Philadelphia. Invited English settlers to America to farm. Owned 53,000 acres in Kentucky, the woodlands and forests of which he was busy improving in 1807. Wrote reports for the Board for the counties of Cambridge (1794), Essex (1795), Devon (1808) and Hampshire (1813), *DNB*.)

labouring families readily earned a guinea a week in the summer season by travelling a few miles to the Berkshire peat meadows. Work in the forests, wastes and woodlands 'allure many to task-work in such places, cutting wood and raising fuel'. There was summer work in the saltings and fisheries on the coast, and there was constant employment in the transport of timber from the woods to the canals and rivers. Portsmouth and other shipyards drew the best labourers, 'leaving behind but feebleness and debility, to carry forward the common labours of the county'. High wages for task-work led to short days, which then set the standard for agricultural labour. In Devon the working day ended early at 5 p.m., in Hampshire it was over even earlier at 3.30 or 4 o'clock.<sup>41</sup>

Enclosure would change this timetable for good. It would end commoners' relative wage-independence, and make agricultural labour necessary.<sup>42</sup>

Once commoners were dependent, care should be taken to prevent labourers becoming in any way independent of the wage again. Even planting new hedgerows required careful thought. Medlars (*mespilus germanica*), for example, should never be used because 'it is bad policy to increase temptations to theft; the idle among the poor are already too prone to depredation, and would still be less inclined to work, if every hedge furnished the means of support'. Equally, cottage gardens should in no circumstance be large enough to take the labourer away from wage work.<sup>43</sup> When evicted from the common by enclosure, said Vancouver, labourers must live in cottages belonging to farms, and at a distance from the corrupt solidarity of the village. Or they might live in large houses of industry, for which the Parkhurst house of industry in Parkhurst

<sup>41</sup> Vancouver, *General View ... Hampshire*, pp. 381–5, 496, 505; for more complaints of labour shortage see Peter Foot, *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Middlesex* (1794), p. 31; Clark, *General View ... Hereford*, pp. 27–9; Thomas Rudge, *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Gloucester* (1807), pp. 49–50, 97. (Thomas Rudge, antiquary; born Gloucester; BD Oxford, 1784; Rector of St Michaels etc. Gloucester, and vicar of Haresfield on presentation of the Earl of Hardwick; Archdeacon of Gloucester (1814); Chancellor of the diocese of Hereford (1817); *History of the County of Gloucester* (1803); *History and Antiquities of Gloucester* (?1815), *DNB*.)

<sup>42</sup> Vancouver, *General View ... Hampshire*, p. 496; see also J. Billingsley, *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Somerset* (1797), p. 52; J. Middleton, *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Middlesex* (1807), p. 102; J. Bishton, *General View of the Agriculture of Shropshire* (1794), cited in Hammond and Hammond, *Village Labourer*, p. 31.

<sup>43</sup> Rudge, *General View ... Gloucester*, pp. 97, 50 (my italics).



Forest on the Isle of Wight, built to take seven hundred, was a model. Vancouver saw no harm in potato plots, but he feared teaching commoners to read and write. 'Independence' had become a threat: 'however beautiful it may be in theory to raise the lower orders to a situation of comparative independence', said Rudge, the line 'between the proprietor and labourer' must be drawn firmly. Without it 'neither agriculture nor commerce can flourish'.<sup>44</sup> Labourers must be labourers, not more. Subordination required dependence on a wage: the lesson of the commons had been learnt.

There was widespread agreement, then, between critics of commons and defenders, that enclosure would produce a more biddable, available labouring class. But how did the proponents of enclosure address the other argument of traditionalists: that access to land and common right supported a way of life superior to wage labour?

Critics argued that the living afforded by the common-right economy was inferior because it was primitive. Next to notions of modern agriculture the idea of sharing land in common was barbaric.<sup>45</sup> Toftstead owners in the Boston fen, said Pennington, would be hurt by enclosure, but their economy, like that of poor fenmen, was primitive. It made as much sense to preserve it as it did to leave North America to the Indians: 'Let the poor native *Indians* (though something more savage than many in the fens) enjoy all their ancient privileges, and cultivate their own country their own way. For 'tis equal pity, notwithstanding some trifling dissimilarity of circumstances, that they should be disturbed.' The idea was ludicrous, far better to engross the small farms after enclosure. The greater production of oats alone would be worth more than all the ancient harvest of mats, rushes, reeds, fish, fowl, fodder and fuel.<sup>46</sup>

The President of the Board of Agriculture, Sir John Sinclair, also put the origins of commons in the dark ages, that stage of society when 'Men were Strangers to any higher Occupation than those of Hunters and Shepherds'. The waste was an enemy to be engaged and

<sup>44</sup> Vancouver, *General View ... Hampshire*, pp. 505-9. Rudge, *General View ... Gloucester*, p. 50.

<sup>45</sup> John Clark said it was 'the barbarous usage of remote ages', *General View ... Hereford*, p. 69; see also A. Young, *General View of the Agriculture of Lincolnshire* (1813), p. 488.

<sup>46</sup> Pennington, *Reflections*, pp. 34-5, replying to *An Enquiry into the Reasons for and against Inclosing the Open Fields*, p. 40. For a description of the international scope of improving ideology see Thompson, *Customs*, pp. 164-75.

beaten. 'We have begun', he wrote in 1803, inspired by the drama of the war,

another campaign against the foreign enemies of the country ... Why should we not attempt a campaign also against our great domestic foe, I mean the hitherto unconquered sterility of so large a proportion of the surface of the kingdom? ... let us not be satisfied with the liberation of Egypt, or the subjugation of Malta, but let us subdue Finchley Common; let us conquer Hounslow Heath; let us compel Epping Forest to submit to the yoke of improvement.<sup>47</sup>

Without 'improvement' labourers could to some extent work or not as they chose, and potentially rich land lay unused. Critics did not always distinguish between small farmers, landless commoners and squatters on wastes. When they did, they described small farmers much as they did poorer commoners. They were unproductive and conservative, either by definition or because the commons killed enterprise. Some worked too hard for the poorest of livings. Others wasted their time at the market, full of their own import-

<sup>47</sup> Sir John Sinclair, *Memoirs of Sir John Sinclair*, II, p. 111, quoted in E. Halevy, *England in 1815* (2nd edn, 1949), p. 230. John Barrell has noted how often enclosure writers associated the cultivated landscape with the civilized, known world, and the uncultivated with the hostile and inhuman: John Barrell, *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place 1730-1840: An Approach to the Poetry of John Clare* (Cambridge, 1972), esp. pp. 75, 94. Many war-time writers, though not all, focussed on waste commons, partly because much common-field pasture already had undergone enclosure. From early on Young had seen little difference between them: stinted fielden commons were as barbaric as any fen or heathen waste. To keep them was no 'less absurd than it would have been, had the Tartar policy of the shepherd-state been adhered to, and the uninterrupted range of flocks and herds preferred to the appropriation of the soil, as the property of individuals': Young 'Introduction' *Annals of Agriculture*, I (1784), p. 70. The advantages of nomadic pastoralism are discussed in Bruce Chatwin, *The Songlines* (1987), pp. 16-19, etc.

If Sinclair and Young thought the ancient origin of commons lay in the primitive agriculture of primitive people, the descendants of commoners, nineteenth-century agricultural labourers, disagreed. They deployed the stadial theory differently: commons were ancient but they were far from uncivilized because their *raison d'être* was to protect the commoner. Such barbarity was better than enclosure:

When Romans reigned in this land, the commons they did give,  
Unto the poor for charity, to help them for to live,  
But now they've taken the poor man's ground, that certainly is true,  
Such cruelty did ne'er abound, when this old hat was new.

For a full text of 'My Old Hat' see Howkins and Dyck, "'The Time's Alteration'", p. 22.



ance.<sup>48</sup> Commoners in general stood in the way of national economic growth. Instead of the nation's pride they were a measure of its backwardness.

This evaluation of the common-right economy allowed many writers to adopt Timothy Nourse's instinctive distrust of commoners, but without his respect for their economy. For most it went further than distrust. Critics of commons loathed commoners with a xenophobic intensity. They were a 'sordid race', as foreign and uncultivated as the land that fed them.<sup>49</sup> Like commons they were wild and unproductive. They were lazy and dangerous. If wastes must be subdued, so must they. Fenland commoners were the worst. 'So wild a country nurses up a race of people as wild as the fen', Young wrote of Wildmore fen in Lincolnshire, in 1813. In Louth he had seen a gang of fenmen, a 'mischievous race', charged with 'laming, killing, cutting off tails, and wounding a variety of cattle, hogs and sheep'. Many were commoners. He knew 'nothing better calculated to fill a country with barbarians ready for any mischief than extensive commons, and divine service only once a month'. Fen commoners drank, they worked only four days a week, they could not be depended upon for the harvest.<sup>50</sup> Pennington said they, not enclosers, were *de facto* engrossers producing nothing of legitimizing value. They might be 'justly called the *Great profanum vulgus* of the fens'. Some were worse: 'these lurk like spiders, and, when they see a chance, sally out, and drive or drown or steal just as suits them, and are the Buccanneers of the country'.<sup>51</sup>

But critics feared and despised forest commoners too, and indeed anyone living on heath or waste. An anonymous writer in 1781

<sup>48</sup> Some improvers made an exception of small farmers, once their lands were enclosed (above at note 37), but some of the most influential improvers argued that they were as much a brake on productivity as landless commoners: Howlett, *Examination of Dr Price's Essay*, pp. 24–6; Clark, *General View ... Hereford*, p. 75; A. Young, *General View of the Agriculture of Oxfordshire* (1813), pp. 94–5.

<sup>49</sup> Identifying commoners as a race was alive and well in the 1850s and later: the few survivors of enclosure were 'relics of that sordid race' who favoured the common-field system, *Agricultural History, Gazetteer and Directory of the County of Huntingdon* (1854), p. 76.

<sup>50</sup> Young, *General View ... Lincolnshire*, p. 488. On drinking amongst commoners other than fenlanders see John Monk, *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Leicester* (1794), pp. 56–7; W. Marshall, *Rural Economy of Gloucestershire* (2nd edn, 1796), pp. 15–16.

<sup>51</sup> Pennington, *Reflections*, p. 37. Crabbe thought the same of Suffolk marsh commoners: 'Here joyless roam a wild amphibious race / With sullen wo display'd in every face': 'The Village' Book I (1783), line 85, in *George Crabbe. Tales, 1812 and Other Selected Poems*, ed. Howard Mills (Cambridge, 1967), p. 3.

called them 'more perverse, and more wretched' than labourers in enclosed villages. Their commons were the 'most fruitful seminaries of vice', providing 'habitations of squalor, famine, and disease'. He had seen 'sloth the parent of vice and poverty begotten and born of this said right of Common. I saw its progress into the productive fields of lying, swearing, thieving. – I saw the seeds of honesty almost eradicated'.<sup>52</sup> Hampshire foresters were an 'idle, useless and disorderly set of people', whose first act of plunder was to steal the materials for the very roofs they lived under. Their 'habitations', their appearance and their morals were much inferior to those of labourers in tied cottages or houses of industry. The very attraction of wastes was the chance they afforded for 'pilfering and stealing'.<sup>53</sup> In the Black Mountains of Herefordshire, 'IDLENESS, that fell root on which VICE always finds it easy to graft her most favourite plants', turned idle commoners into criminals, unlike the labourers in the Golden Valley below.<sup>54</sup>

The industry and independence of commoners was a 'lazy industry' and a 'beggarly independence'.<sup>55</sup> They were thieves by definition:

<sup>52</sup> Anon., *Observations on a Pamphlet entitled an Enquiry into the Advantages and Disadvantages, Resulting from Bills of Enclosure ...* (Shrewsbury, 1781) p. 5. See also Thomas Scrutton, *Commons and Common Fields* (1887), pp. 138–40, for references to the connection of poverty, common lands and crime in the *General Views* of the counties of Hertford, Gloucester, Shropshire, Essex and Buckingham; also Arbuthnot, *Inquiry into the Connection between the Present Price of Provisions and the Size of Farms*, p. 81; [Report on commons in Brecknock], *Annals of Agriculture*, 32 (1799), p. 632; Gonner, *Common Land* p. 360, n. 1, cites numerous examples of this view; also Vancouver, *General View ... Hampshire*, p. 495; Young, *General View ... Oxfordshire*, p. 239; Laurence, *New System*, p. 46. An earlier pamphleteer complained to Parliament that fen projectors had misrepresented the value of the fens, which was enormous: the seminaries they sheltered had little to do with vice, they were 'seminaries and nurseries' of fish and fowl 'which will be destroyed on draining thereof': *The Anti-Projector of the History of the Fen* [1646], p. 8, quoted in H. C. Darby, *The Draining of the Fens* (1940), p. 52.

<sup>53</sup> Laurence, *New System*, p. 46.

<sup>54</sup> Clark, *General View ... Hereford*, p. 28. Defenders saw the crime wave moving in the other direction. They argued that the loss of commons and conversion to pasture at enclosure generated criminality. See, for example, 'The Old Fashion'd Farmer', writing to Sir John Fielding in the *London Evening Post* on 12–14 January 1775, and asking 'who, in their senses, would force the subjects of their Prince to become thieves, and then encourage the executioners to dispatch them because they would not live honestly?'; similarly 25–27 February 1772; I am grateful to Nicholas Rogers for these references.

<sup>55</sup> W. Mavor, *General View ... Berkshire*, pp. 328–9, cited in Tate, 'Handlist of English Enclosure Acts and Awards Relating to Lands in Berkshire', *Berkshire Archaeological Journal*, 47 (1943), pp. 67–8.



they commoned without legal right. At enclosure Parliament had no obligation to compensate them. Instead they must abase themselves, become deferential and 'assume (if anything) the meek and humble tone of those who implore charity for the love of God. As a charity it should be asked – as a charity it should be given.'<sup>56</sup>

Dependence through reliance on a wage was to identify the new structure of agrarian society and ensure the authority of farmers over labourers. It was as essential to the critics' world view as an independent peasantry was to their opponents'. John Clark considered the justice of this in 1794:

But one man to have so large a tract of land, and so many people obliged to obey his orders? To this it is to be replied, that in farming, as in most other occupations, men of the greatest talents generally get to the head of their professions, while others are left by the way; and whoever will examine the extent of the intellects of the general run of mankind, employed in any branch of business, will find, that Nature, in allotting to each his respective portion of her gifts, had it in view that the province of ninety-nine out of an hundred was to receive, not to give orders.<sup>57</sup>

So both sides of the published debate said that enclosure would ensure labourers' complete dependence on a wage, and encourage the proletarianization of small farmers. Enclosure would end 'independence'. On this question the only argument was whether to welcome or disapprove of the change. Only common right stood between the survival of the common-field peasantry and its proletarianization. This assumption was so thoroughly worked into the social vision of both defenders and critics as to be beyond dispute.

#### COMMON RIGHT AS INCOME

The other side of independence was income. The structure of the debate about this, the economic value of common right, is very similar to the debate about independence. Critics and defenders agreed that common right provided a living – just as it provided independence. Once again they valued it differently. What defenders

<sup>56</sup> Anon., *Observations on a Pamphlet entitled an Enquiry into the Advantages and Disadvantages* pp. 8, 10. This observer claimed that only landowners, not the landless, and few commoners, had common right: p. 9. For another view see below, Chapter 2.

<sup>57</sup> Clark, *General View ... Hereford*, p. 75.

called a sufficiency, critics called meagre and lawless. What defenders saw as hard work and thrift, critics saw as squalor and desperation. One observer's cow with her milky treasure was another's half-starved, ill-bred runt. They were looking at the same things but who saw clearly? From evidence like this what can historians conclude about the economic value of common right?

It seems clear that the motives of the critics of commons make their evaluations of common right suspect. They wanted to raise productivity and to improve the supply and quality of labour. In the harvest-crisis decades of the 1790s and 1800s they led a movement for the easier and cheaper enclosure of wastes. As they saw it, common right stood in the way of modernization. Accordingly, they could not approve of it, and they could not see, in the larger terms of national interest, how common-right economies could be allowed to survive. Most of them were Anglican vicars, professional agricultural writers, or land agents and surveyors. Either they stood to gain from enclosure personally, or their Church, their employers or their readers did. So there are good reasons why critics of commons might undervalue common right.

Nevertheless, unlike some historians, critics of common right did not doubt its widespread survival. In Gloucestershire, Rudge found that occupiers of an acre, or even less, grazed sheep on the fallows, winter and summer, to their great advantage; in Herefordshire, Clark noted that a cottage and a small close brought hill-grazing; in the Hampshire forests, Vancouver thought encroachments of two or three acres meant relative independence; in Devon, labourers living on the borders of wastes and commons were similarly 'independent of the farmers and many of the country gentlemen'.<sup>58</sup> And in Middlesex, Thomas Baird described commoners on Hounslow Heath and Enfield Chase who seemed to live on air, without either labour or any obvious advantage from the common.<sup>59</sup>

Nor did these observers think commons worthless. Rudge talked about their 'considerable advantage'; John Clark had to justify the extinction of common right in Herefordshire on the grounds that the county suffered a shortage of labour: the fit poor must work for

<sup>58</sup> Rudge, *General View ... Gloucester*, p. 104. Clark, *General View ... Hereford*, p. 26. Vancouver, *General View ... Hampshire*, pp. 81, 505.

<sup>59</sup> T. Baird, *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Middlesex* (1793), pp. 22–6, 36; Peter Foot, in looking at the same county, described a thousand acres of unstinted meadow on the Middlesex side of the Lea, on which inhabitants turned whatever stock they pleased: Foot, *General View ... Middlesex*, p. 69.



wages even though 'To deprive the *poor* of that benefit, which, in their present state, they derive from the *waste land*, must, no doubt, at first view sound *harsh*'. Similarly, in Middlesex, common rights were 'a matter of some little conveniency as well as emolument'; they had to be sacrificed only for the greater good of the community at large. Common right on Salisbury Plain was probably the best means of using this unimprovable land. In Bedfordshire Thomas Batchelor described the common at Campton cum Shefford (one of many Bedfordshire commons) as fertile and reputed never to run bare; it supported many cottagers with rights for a mare and a colt or a milch cow, two bullocks and twelve sheep each.<sup>60</sup>

But when they came to compare the lives of commoners and small farmers with those of labourers in *enclosed* villages estimates of value changed. Now commons offered no more than a poor living, a thin independence. In fact, reporters contradicted themselves on the subject of value. The enclosure of Corse Chase, a 1,350 acre common in Gloucestershire, Rudge said, would be a 'trifling' loss to local cottagers.<sup>61</sup> Thanks to overstocking, said Vancouver, parish wastes in Hampshire were of little benefit; even forest commoners lived miserably.<sup>62</sup> The value of grazing 'greyhound-like sheep' or 'a parcel of ragged, shabby horses' and getting fuel from the five thousand acres of Hounslow Heath were nothing compared to a regular wage, in Baird's opinion. Here is his description of the cattle on Enfield Chase:

In the spring the chace is covered with ticks which fasten on the cattle, and by sucking their blood, reduce them so low, that they are incapable of raising themselves from the ground, and in this state they are often carried away in carts, being unable to walk, or stir from the place where they are fallen.

Foot agreed: the many thousand acres of waste in Middlesex were almost worthless. In general, Middleton added, Middlesex commons, 'as in most other places', provided only the worst sort of

<sup>60</sup> Clark, *General View ... Hereford*, pp. 27–8. Baird, *General View ... Middlesex*, p. 22. [A. Young], 'Waste Lands' [a digest of the Reports to the Board of Agriculture], *Annals of Agriculture*, 33 (1799), p. 15. In this context see also Pitt, *General View ... Northampton*, pp. 60–1; Thomas Batchelor, *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Bedford* (1813), pp. 224–5; and Young, *General View of the Agriculture of Lincolnshire* (1813), p. 19, on happy commoners living on four to twenty acres each in the Isle of Axholme, enjoying 'vast commons'.

<sup>61</sup> Rudge, *General View ... Gloucester*, p. 251.

<sup>62</sup> Vancouver, *General View ... Hampshire*, p. 496.

firing, and only enough pasture to keep the cattle from starving. The building materials, the ground for a house, the firing and free run for pigs and poultry they offered were only 'trifling advantages'.<sup>63</sup>

From Somerset, Billingsley reported that cottagers' cattle were generally stunted. They starved first on the common, then again in the winter for lack of fodder. Commons were no advantage at all, in fact cottagers had more to gain from enclosure than farmers.<sup>64</sup> From Bedfordshire Thomas Stone described the 'diminutive carcasses ... of sheep that barely get a subsistence' on commons.<sup>65</sup> Young said if he were King he would enclose every waste in the kingdom, thereby exchanging 'the miseries of poverty for cheerfulness'.<sup>66</sup> The produce of wastes, said a writer in 1781, was no more than 'gorst, heath, fern, broom, briers, bushes, thistles, moss and various other weeds, with a mixture of some grass'.<sup>67</sup> In the same year Howlett claimed that a thousand-acre heath in his neighbourhood did not 'support a single poor family'.<sup>68</sup> He scorned the idea of the 'Paradisaical Common'; a commoner's child would get a better dowry from a few years in service than all the lambs and wool a cottage could provide.<sup>69</sup> Pennington thought commoners no better off than the poor elsewhere, possibly worse.<sup>70</sup> And both Howlett and Young said that commons brought no relief to the poor rate: in Chailey, Sussex, and Sutton Coldfield, Warwickshire, large unstinted commons drove the poor rate up, not down. Commons were the worst kind of charity.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>63</sup> Baird, *General View ... Middlesex*, pp. 23, 26; Foot, *General View ... Middlesex*, p. 30; Middleton, *General View ... Middlesex*, pp. 117, 103; the estimate of Hounslow Heath's size is Middleton's, p. 114.

<sup>64</sup> Billingsley, *General View ... Somerset*, pp. 51–2.

<sup>65</sup> Stone, *Suggestions for Rendering*, p. 53.

<sup>66</sup> Young, 'Introduction', p. 61.

<sup>67</sup> Anon., *Observations on a Pamphlet Entitled An Enquiry into the Advantages and Disadvantages Resulting from Bills of Inclosure ...* (Shrewsbury, 1781), p. 13.

<sup>68</sup> Howlett, *Examination of Dr Price's Essay*, p. 29.

<sup>69</sup> J. Howlett, *Enclosures a Cause of Improved Agriculture* (1787), pp. 76–7. This is a reply to the anonymous author of *A Political Enquiry* (1785), though Howlett ignored the author's description of cottagers' children doing the very thing he argued only labourers' children would do: going into service to save wages: see above, p. 24.

<sup>70</sup> Pennington, *Reflections*, p. 33.

<sup>71</sup> A. Young, 'Dairy Farms', *Annals of Agriculture* 5 (1786), pp. 222–4; and 'Mischiefs of Commons', *ibid.*, 8 (1787), p. 347; Howlett, *Enclosures a Cause*, p. 80.



Nathaniel Kent, an admirer of cottagers, argued that commons were of no use to them. Fewer than one in six kept a cow. Cottagers were better off in the care of a good farmer.<sup>72</sup> And Baird claimed that even the fuel from commons, the least doubtful of benefits, would be bought more cheaply when commoners were put to work after enclosure.<sup>73</sup>

Others thought that small farmers lived no better than their labourers: enclosure and proletarianization would be a deliverance, if age was no impediment:

Indeed I doubt it is too true, that he must of necessity give over farming, and betake himself to labour for the support of his family; but on the other hand, we must consider that the condition of a small farmer is very often worse than even that of a day labourer; he works harder, and lives poorer; has all the cares, and little of the proportional profits of the larger farmer; and experience very often shews, that he earns as a labourer a much more comfortable subsistence than before, if not too old to betake himself to his new station.<sup>74</sup>

This comparison between the old system and the new coloured every criticism of common right.

Their opponents said that critics could not see the common-right economy clearly because they were either ignorant or wilfully blind. I shall return to ignorance later. An anonymous defender of commons analysed the psychology of wilful blindness in 1780: *in order to enclose*, an encloser must first deceive himself about the value of commons, he must 'bring himself to believe an absurdity, before he can induce himself to do a cruelty'. So he convinces himself that, because his tenant sometimes fell upon hard times, he always did, that because he 'sometimes loses an horse, or a cow, or his expected train of goslings, and is then distressed to pay his rent, or to

<sup>72</sup> Kent, *Hints to Gentlemen*, pp. 112–13, 115, 243, 252.

<sup>73</sup> Baird, *General View ... Middlesex*, p. 22; G. O. Paul, *Observations on the General Enclosure Bill* (1796), p. 40: free fuel from wastes was more expensive in terms of hours of labour lost than bought coal.

<sup>74</sup> Anon., *The Advantages and Disadvantages of Inclosing Waste Lands and Open Fields. Impartially Stated and Considered. By a Country Gentleman* (1772), pp. 31–3; Clark, *General View ... Hereford*, p. 75; Vancouver, *General View ... Hampshire*, p. 81; Howlett, *Insufficiency of the Causes*, pp. 42–3. Compare the twentieth-century view of Eric Kerridge: 'The unsuccessful farmer who became a wage labourer had lost nothing but his chains', *The Farmers of Old England* (1973), p. 150.

procure a sum of money to supply the loss, – that none of them ever yielded his profit or comfort'.<sup>75</sup>

But the motives of defenders of commons themselves may make their evaluation of the common-right economy equally suspect. Their defence was grounded in the fear of depopulation in two senses: an absolute decline in population, including labour supply and military reserves, and a fundamental change in rural society – unemployment, the decline of small farmers, the loss of peasant independence. In defending the old society they might exaggerate its value, construing as independence what was only temporary relief from chronic underemployment. Their picture of rustic harmony and a trusty peasantry may have been no more than (in Gilbert Blane's words) a 'poetical device', an unspecific, idyllic pastoralism.<sup>76</sup>

The motives of both opponents and supporters of enclosure make their conflicting opinions about the income value of common right difficult to weigh. But there are clues to a proper assessment of value in what critics of commons saw, and what they did not see. These are to do with the laziness of commoners, the time they wasted, and their poverty.

First, the complaint that commoners were lazy. We have seen that improvers often noted this. They used laziness as a term of moral disapproval. But what they meant was that commoners were not always available for farmers to employ. We might ask why were they *unavailable*? In some regions and at some times high wages in non-agricultural occupations made agricultural wages unattractive. But commoners were 'lazy' in the fens too where there were fewer industrial alternatives to farm work, and also in Middlesex where they seemed to live without either benefit from the common *or* labour. In fact (with the occasional exception of small farmers), *every* commoner was lazy, whether wages were high or not. This suggests that they refused to work because they could live without wages, or without regular wages. Their laziness becomes an indica-

<sup>75</sup> Anon., *An Enquiry into the Advantages and Disadvantages Resulting from Bills of Inclosure in which Objections are Stated and Remedies Proposed ...* (1780), pp. 66–7.

<sup>76</sup> [Dr. Gilbert Blane], *Inquiry into the Causes and Remedies of the Late and Present Scarcity and High Price of Provisions in a Letter to the Right Honourable Earl Spencer, KG, First Lord of the Admiralty* (1800), p. 42.



tor of their independence of the wage. And the degree of frustration critics felt when they saw this laziness may be a guide to how well commoners could do without it.

Then there is the *time* we have heard critics say commoners wasted. Most often they wasted it gathering fuel. Wage labour, it was said, would enable commoners to buy coal. The value of the common was no more than wood for the fire. Evidently critics did not know that a waste might provide much more than fuel. Sauntering after a grazing cow, snaring rabbits and birds, fishing, looking for wood, watercress, nuts or spring flowers, gathering teasles, rushes, mushrooms or berries, and cutting peat and turves were all part of a commoning economy and a commoning way of life invisible to outsiders. This is partly explained by the repulsion critics felt at the very idea of commons. Obviously such an attitude made any proper investigation of the value of common right difficult.

But to some extent this ignorance was deliberate. William Marshall, one of the most prolific writers on English agriculture, refused to interview anyone. He preferred to rely on his own observations. He also tried to avoid being a transient tourist reliant on secondhand accounts, a sin of which he accused some Reporters to the Board.<sup>77</sup> Arthur Young and at least some Reporters did spend time talking to farmers, but they almost never talked to smaller commoners. Merely looking at a common or a common-field village wasn't enough, as defenders said. When critics took things at face value, they mistook the uncultivated common for infertile heath, and many did not see common-field pasture at all.<sup>78</sup> Critics of commons in the eighteenth century shared a myopia common among modernizers. 'We ever must believe a lie', said William Blake, 'when we see with, not through, the eye.'

<sup>77</sup> Barrell, *Idea of Landscape*, pp. 91–3.

<sup>78</sup> The Reverend James Willis, 'On Cows for Cottagers', *Annals of Agriculture*, 40 (1803), pp. 557, 562; on blindness to common-field pastures see Anon., *Reflections on the Cruelty of Inclosing Common-Field Lands, Particularly as it Affects the Church and Poor; in a letter to the Lord Bishop of Lincoln by a clergyman of that diocese* (1796), p. 16. Agricultural 'experts' who defamed wastes were a joke to one defender of commons. They wrote 'farming romances', whose impractical theorizing was about as good a guide to farming as Fielding's *Tom Jones* was to adolescence: Anon., *A Political Enquiry into the Consequences of Enclosing Waste Lands*, pp. 3–11. This author also argued that misconceptions about the common-right economy were rooted in an ignorance of the nature of real commoners, pp. 109–11.

Nor could they understand the relationship between the commoners' means and their *wants*. Commoners had little but they also wanted less. The result may have been that they lived well enough for themselves, but invisibly and poorly in the eyes of outsiders.<sup>79</sup> The satisfaction of commoners was incomprehensible to supporters of enclosure. Listen to their accounts of the misery of small farmers: they lived worse than labourers; they were no better than their own sows, incurious, deaf to the world.<sup>80</sup> But this state of mind is as credibly ascribed to contentment as it is to misery. In West Haddon small farmers, bitterly opposed to enclosure, argued that they had 'enough'.<sup>81</sup> Oliver Goldsmith thought in the same terms: 'his best riches' were 'ignorance of wealth'. So did every defender of commons who described the self-sufficiency of cottagers. Brigstock commoners argued that their enclosing landlords had enough too and should be satisfied. The poet John Clare said the same thing.

Perhaps having 'enough' was unimaginable to men who wrote about crop yields, rents, improvements, productivity, economic growth, always *more*, as it has been incomprehensible to twentieth-century historians living in constantly expanding market economies, albeit on a finite planet. Something critics might have understood better was the pride of ownership that small farmers also displayed which was the other side of self-importance. Something they missed entirely was the constantly negotiated interdependence of commoners, their need of each other.

When critics of commons weighed the value of common right they did so in their own terms, the terms of the market. They talked about wage labour and the efficient use of resources. But commoners lived off the shared use of land. To some extent they lived outside the market. They lived in part on the invisible earnings of

<sup>79</sup> Marshall Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics* (Chicago, 1972; London, 1974), p. 13; Hugh Brody notes that visitors to pre-Famine Ireland also mistook poverty for desperation: Brody, *Inishkillane: Change and Decline in the West of Ireland* (1973), p. 55. Defoe made the point early in the eighteenth century on visiting cave-dwelling commoners in the Derbyshire Peak: inside the cave were two sides of bacon, and pots made of earthenware, brass and pewter; outside was a cow, a pig and a patch of barley ready to harvest: Defoe, *Tour*, II, p. 62.

<sup>80</sup> Some of the tone is captured in this: 'A wicked, cross-grained, petty farmer, is like the sow in his yard, almost an insulated individual, who has no communication with, and therefore, no reverence for the opinion of the world. – To no person is good character of so little importance': *Commercial and Agricultural Magazine* (July 1800), quoted in Thompson, *Making*, p. 219.

<sup>81</sup> See below Chapter 7, pp. 198–9.



grazing and gathering. Much of this was inconceivable to critics, either because they did not look or because they did not want to see. In their eyes commoners were lazy, insubordinate and poor. But when historians come to assess these assessments we have to understand that none of these conditions, except poverty, is a measure of the inadequacy of a living. Even poverty, in the case of commoners, may have been in the eye of the beholder: commoners did not think themselves poor.<sup>82</sup>

Polemical debates settle few arguments without empirical enquiry. Despite this, the evidence found in polemic is both useful and usable. From the enclosure debate we learn that common right was widespread and probably useful enough to offer significant independence of the wage. Furthermore, the breadth of agreement, both between writers and over time, that common right was the only obstacle to complete wage dependence for small occupiers as well as landless commoners is striking. The general expression of this view, coupled with other evidence, suggests to me that these observers were right. This is not to argue that agreement between people who otherwise disagree is an acid test of the truth of a proposition: clearly, this evidence requires corroboration, some of which later chapters will provide. But it is to argue that in the case of common right the testimony found in the words of contemporary observers about social process is strongly presumptive.<sup>83</sup>

The value of knowing that the debaters talked about the world-as-it-was is that it reintroduces to the history of enclosure the role of politics. Defenders and critics were not dealing in imagined or archaic notions of rural England. They were well informed, they talked about real alternatives. So when the critics won the argument for enclosure they helped to change the lives of commoners, and commoners knew it.

#### PEASANTS OR LABOURERS? SOCIAL CHANGE AND THE NATIONAL INTEREST

The centrality of the debate's very large arguments about independence, loyalty, labour supply, productivity, and the effect of

<sup>82</sup> For a longer discussion see below, Chapter 6.

<sup>83</sup> It is possible that all these writers shared, and expressed in their language, an image of a world that no longer existed. It is possible too that they did not, and this is the argument here. On this point see George Steiner, *After Babel* (Oxford, 1975), p. 21, quoted in Richard Pine, *Brian Friel and Ireland's Drama* (1990), p. 3.

enclosure on the poor rate, marks a shift in emphasis from the seventeenth to the eighteenth centuries. Unlike the earlier debate between John Moore and Joseph Lee, argument about the legitimacy of ending common right in the eighteenth century was more than a conflict between the moral economy and the self-interested individualism of agrarian capitalism.<sup>84</sup> Increasingly it was also a debate over how best to serve the national interest. Or, more exactly, and crucially, a debate about what sort of society best served that interest.

This is not to say that ideas of paternal obligation and individual freedom were outmoded. Manifestly they were not, any more than paternal behaviour was obsolete. The argument that the rich had an obligation to the poor was still made (and usually with more grace than any other) but as a way of framing the argument about enclosure it took second place to an argument about country.

In Nathaniel Kent's and Thomas Andrews' eyes the national interest was best served by the industry, independence and patriotism of a flourishing peasantry. In the Reverend John Howlett's it was served best by a multitudinous, fecund, ever-growing proletariat, no matter how poor. But behind both views was a fundamental concern with Britain's economic and political hegemony. This concern was matched by an agreement that Britain's power lay in her navy, her merchant marine and her manufactures as well as her agriculture. The question was how could agriculture serve them best?<sup>85</sup>

<sup>84</sup> For the debate between Lee and Moore see Appleby, *Economic Thought and Ideology*, ch. 3, esp. pp. 55–63. Lee supported an individual's right to enclose, pointing out the public benefits that accrued; he disparaged commons as 'the seed-plot of contention, the nursery of beggary'. Moore argued that the motive for enclosure was greed, which led enclosers to forget their duty to the poor: they 'buy the poore for silver ... make chaffer and merchandize of them for gain and profit: they use them as they doe their beasts, keep them or put them off for advantage: they buy them, and sell them, as may best serve their turns to get by them'. The observation of a greater eighteenth-century emphasis on national interest than individualism made here does not contradict Appleby's: her description of the triumph of mercantilist over liberal economic ideology in the 1690s is consonant with the shift: see Appleby, *Economic Thought and Ideology*, ch. 9, esp. p. 277.

<sup>85</sup> On the national interest see, among others: Cowper, *Essay*, pp. 10, 22–3; Anon., *An Enquiry into the Reasons for and against*, p. 11; Homer, *Essay*, pp. 35, 38, 41; Anon., *A Political Enquiry*, pp. 36–7 ('agriculture is the parent of industry and wealth. A well conducted system of farming is the only root from whence can spring a lasting wealth, power, and happiness to this nation'), pp. 54, 55–7, 98, 104, 122; Henry Kett, *An Essay on Wastes in General, and on Mosswood in Particular* (Norwich, 1792), p. 6; Andrews, ed., *Torrington Diaries*, p. 395.



For this reason it is wrong, I think, to understand the writers on the eighteenth-century debate to be arguing only or even primarily about the creation of a labour supply or exclusive property rights – even though these were almost certainly the *undeclared* priorities of critics of commons. Labour supply was a concern of all those writing about enclosure in the eighteenth century, as it always had been. The effect of enclosure on labour helped to stigmatize or to legitimize enclosure and the end of common right. Very properly historians have not let it go unnoticed.<sup>86</sup>

But rather than labour supply or property rights, critics described alternative societies and asked which best served the national interest. Commoners were not only potential labourers; they were either property-owners and patriots, or criminals and paupers, too. Critics expressed a concern with morality and poverty as well as labour supply. They argued that enclosure would provide solutions to all three problems. Defenders expressed a concern with common rights and loyalty as well as work. They argued that rural society *as it stood* guaranteed both. Ultimately critics' arguments justified the creation of an abundant supply of cheap labour completely dependent on the wage. But neither critics nor defenders of commons framed their arguments as solutions for the problem of labour supply.

In the same way writers did not argue the individual's right to the exclusive enjoyment of his property: indeed critics, to whose lips this argument had come most readily in the 1650s and 1730s, increasingly argued the subordination of individual property rights to the 'national' interest and accused *commoners* of selfish individualism. Ultimately, of course, the legitimation of enclosure did establish exclusive property rights – much to the benefit of enclosers. But, as in the case of ensuring a cheap labour supply, if this was their aim critics chose not to argue it directly.

Why should this concern us here? The debate's emphasis on social change in the national interest is important because it shows that critics of commons were willing to recommend a large piece of deliberate social restructuring, and to be seen doing it. Improving ideology, the Hammonds wrote, was as deadly to the old system as greed itself.<sup>87</sup> It was deadly not only because it took away commons

<sup>86</sup> Snell, *Annals*, pp. 174–5; N. F. R. Crafts, 'Enclosure and Labour Supply Revisited', *Explorations in Economic History*, 15 (1978); and see above, pp. 28–30.

<sup>87</sup> Hammond and Hammond, *Village Labourer*, pp. 30–4.

but because it took away an economy and a society too. Critics of commons wanted to improve society as well as agriculture: they wanted to change the structure of rural England.

Whether they were instrumental in producing the change they envisioned is beside the point (though they wrote as if they were, and Parliament passed almost a hundred enclosure Acts *a year* between 1800 and 1814). The causes of wage dependence were many, and the capture of public opinion only one of them. The point is that critics of commons, improvers and enclosers, made an argument that *justified* the change. They made an attack on independence thinkable. To do this, to ensure a consensus that would in turn make labour available and dependent, and common fields and wastes ready for enclosure, they had to malign and denigrate the basis of that independence, the common-right economy.

In making their attack on that economy explicit, they confirmed commoners in their belief that agricultural improvement held no advantage for them, and they legitimized the most rapacious of enclosers in their turning of common rights into mean and demeaning charity. In the end the critics' arguments not only legitimized, but also *publicly expressed* the terms of class robbery. They served the 'national' interest at the cost of the loss of common right, and they offered little compensation to those who paid the bill.

When independence went, and wages and poor relief took its place, social relations inevitably changed. All the old arguments of the defenders of commons come into play.<sup>88</sup> Property does beget content with one's lot, and content begets loyalty to landlords and farmers as well as to Nations. Take away property and you take away, in Thomas Andrews' words, 'the most precious gift of a free country': the independence of commoners. With it went connection,

<sup>88</sup> On property and patriotism see, William Paley, *Works*, 5 vols. (1823 edn), II, p. 59; C. Bruyn Andrews, ed., *The Torrington Diaries. A Selection from the Tours of the Hon. John Byng (later Fifth Viscount Torrington) between the Years 1781 and 1794* (1954), pp. 141–2; 207–8. The lesson was learnt later on, after most enclosure had occurred. Observers contrasted incendiary, landless Norfolk and Suffolk labourers with law-abiding Lincolnshire smallholders; the need to establish internal peace became an argument for providing agricultural labourers with allotments: Young, *General View ... Lincolnshire*, p. 469; and his 'Inquiry into the Propriety of Applying Wastes', pp. 509, 510–11; G. Lawson, 'Hints Favourable to the Poor', *Annals of Agriculture*, 40 (1803), p. 53; Pratt, 'Cottage-Pictures' [1801], in *Sympathy and Other Poems Including Landscapes in Verse, Cottage-Pictures, Revised, Corrected and Enlarged* (1807), pp. 253–5; J. Williams, *The Historical and Topographical View ... of Leominster* (Leominster, 1808), p. 121.



sympathy and obligation. The value of the commons was their social cement. The arrogance of critics was to think they could do without it.

### THE END OF THE ARGUMENT

By the late 1790s commoners no longer found anyone to speak for them at the centre of government. This happened when critics of commons won the national interest debate there. It was underlined when Pitt's government ignored a body of opinion in favour of proper compensation for commons. It was confirmed again by the failure of defenders to advocate any real power for commoners themselves.

The critics laid the groundwork for their victory in the 1760s when they began to adopt the national interest argument of the defenders of commons. At the same time they began to transfer the defenders' descriptions of commoners as honest, hardworking and available to the future agricultural proletariat. Newly equipped, critics increasingly defined defenders' concern for the rights of commoners as hostile to the national interest, which was first and foremost to ensure an adequate supply of food. Increasingly, they justified enclosure as an extension of tillage not pasture. Increasingly, it was evident that this sort of enclosure, whatever else it might do, did not immediately depopulate. By the mid 1780s critics had kidnapped the national interest argument. They went on to use it to win support for the very institutional change that defenders had hoped it would prevent.

The result was that from 1793, and particularly from 1795 to 1801, as the war and poor harvests reduced the supply of food, the national advantage of enclosing waste in particular seemed unanswerable. Critics of commons lobbied for an easier and cheaper way to enclose large wastes.<sup>89</sup> Defenders of commons, instead of oppos-

<sup>89</sup> See, among others: Sir John Sinclair, *An Address to the Members of the Board of Agriculture, on the Cultivation and Improvement of the Waste Lands of this Kingdom* (1795); Staffs. RO Q/SB Transl. 1800, printed address of the Grand Jury of the County of York, March 15, 1800, to the High Sheriff of the County of Stafford, printed and circulated by the Board of Agriculture, recommending legislation to facilitate the enclosure of wasteland for the production of grain; Blane, *Inquiry*, p. 52; J. Lawrence, *The Modern Land Steward* (1801), p. 30; W. Marshall, *Draught of a General Act, for the Appropriation of Parochial Wastes* (1801), and *On the Landed Property of England* (1804), section II, 'On Appropriating Commonable Lands'.

ing enclosure and extolling commoners, for their service to the national interest, talked about regulating enclosure, or helping those it had already displaced.<sup>90</sup> They did so because, in the very decade when the defence of commons became unviable, the worst predictions of earlier defenders came to pass. If there was dearth in the 1790s that enclosure might alleviate, there was also a new kind of poverty in the countryside understood by men like the Reverend David Davies and Thomas Bewick in terms of the loss of land and commons.<sup>91</sup>

The public policy defence of commons now seemed futile. But the victory of the critics, coupled with the crisis in the countryside, brought about some agreement on the need for a proper compensation for commoners between enclosers like Young, Sir John Sinclair and Nathaniel Kent, and critics of enclosure like the Reverend David Davies and Viscount Torrington.<sup>92</sup> The breadth of this agreement on compensation, in which opponents of enclosure and its advocates were united, is evidence of the widely agreed upon value of common right. The Hammonds made this point when they argued that every prominent writer on agriculture in the 1790s and early 1800s supported compensation: 'Parliament was assailed on all sides with criticisms and recommendations', they wrote. Their conclusion that 'its refusal to alter its ways was deliberate' may be illustrated by the later careers of two critics whose apostasy reveals

<sup>90</sup> In 1801 John Lawrence wrote that the defenders' ideas 'so generally promulgated some years ago, seem now to have nearly all melted away before the sun of reason and experience'; they were doomed because they had preferred the 'savage state of man' to the 'civilized'; Lawrence, *Modern Land Steward*, pp. 24-5.

<sup>91</sup> The Reverend David Davies, *The Case of the Labourers in Husbandry Stated and Considered* (1795), pp. 56, 81; Thomas Bewick, *A Memoir*, ed., Iain Bain (1862; 1975 edn), pp. 24, 60.

<sup>92</sup> Sir John Sinclair, 'Observations on the Means of Enabling a Cottager to Keep a Cow, by the Produce of a Small Portion of Arable Land', in *Communications to the Board of Agriculture*, IV, no. 18 (1805), pp. 358-67; N. Kent, *The Great Advantage of a Cow to the Family of a Labouring Man* (1797) (broadsheet), and (same title) in *Annals of Agriculture*, 31 (1798), pp. 21-6; Kent practised what he preached: in 1796 his firm of land agents divided up land for cottagers on lands of the Earl of Egremont in Yorkshire: see Pamela Horn, 'An Eighteenth-Century Land Agent: the Career of Nathaniel Kent (1757-1810)', *Agricultural History Review*, 30 (1982), p. 7; Andrews, ed., *Torrington Diaries*, pp. 505-6: looking at the poverty of cottagers without land at Romney Warren near Chicksands Priory 'surround'd by hether they dare not collect, and by a profusion of turnips they dare not pluck', Torrington doubted the charity of his hostess: 'Madam said I, you only apply temporary balm; let them [have land]'.



the officially approved function of critics of commons in the public debate: Arthur Young and John Howlett.<sup>93</sup>

Arthur Young believed enclosure was the best possible route to economic strength and full employment. But when he discovered that full employment and adequate agricultural wages did not follow enclosure, he tried to carry his considerable public with him to demand compensation for the loss of commons. He wanted a legally regulated allotment of land – particularly waste land – to commoners at enclosure. He was immediately marginalized. A committee of the members of his own Board of Agriculture refused to publish his tour of England, in which he described the poverty of enclosed villages. Young described the Board's repudiation in his diary:

[March 28th 1801] To-morrow will be published in the 'Annals' the first parts of my essay on applying waste lands to the better support of the poor. I prepared it some time ago for the Board, as it was collected in my last summer's journey; I read it to a committee – Lord Carrington [the Board president], Sir C. Willoughby and Mr Millington – who condemned it, and, after waiting a month, Lord C. told me I might do what I pleased with it for myself, but not print it as a work for the Board; so I altered the expressions which referred to the body, and sent it to the 'Annals'.

Even as he published it he doubted its effect:

I prayed earnestly to God on and since the journey for His blessing on my endeavours to serve the poor, and to influence the minds of people to accept it; but for the wisest reasons certainly he has thought proper not to do this, and for the same reasons probably it will be printed without effect. I think it however my duty to Him to do all I possibly can . . . I am well persuaded that this is the only possible means of saving the nation from the ruin fast coming on by the misery of the poor and the alarming ruin of rates. God's will be done!<sup>94</sup>

But even in the *Annals of Agriculture* Young wrote less directly than he wrote privately. Compare, for example, his two accounts of Millbrook in Bedfordshire. The enclosure here in 1796 included a 878-acre waste confidently expected to enrich the enclosers.<sup>95</sup> It was

<sup>93</sup> Hammond and Hammond, *Village Labourer*, p. 78.

<sup>94</sup> *Autobiography of Arthur Young*, p. 351.

<sup>95</sup> Enclosing the waste was a prime object of the enclosure: see Bedfordshire RO, R 3/1209 (1792).

clearly disastrous for the commoners. In 1800 Young visited the parish by chance, alone, on his way from Bradfield to Woburn. The desperate poverty of some of the cottagers, and the neglect of others, moved him greatly. In his diary he blamed their rich landlord, and advised the return of some of the waste:

These poor people know not by what tenure they hold their land; they say they once belonged to the duke [of Bedford], but that the duke has swopped them away to my lord [Lord Ossory]. How little do the great know what they swop and what they receive! . . . How very trifling the repairs to render these poor families warm and comfortable! . . . What have not great and rich people to answer, for not examining into the situation of their poor neighbours?<sup>96</sup>

But when he wrote publicly about Millbrook in the *Annals*, Young said only that 'The complaints of the poor chiefly turned on the points of fuel: [before the enclosure] they got much fern and turf, now an allotment assigned in lieu of the latter.'<sup>97</sup>

The gulf between the outrage and anger of the first encounter with Millbrook and the short statement emptied of any emotion at all in the second is startling. Perhaps Young had learnt something from the rejection of his *Inquiry*. To escape further ostracism he may have modified his public views and saved his class analysis of enclosure for his diary.

The censoring and self-censoring of partial apostates like Young is important. It suggests a reluctance to alienate the landed interest for which they had always acted as a lobby. But, whatever the reason, the reticence, the censorship and self-censorship are all evidence that prominent critics of commons said privately that their loss was more disruptive than they said publicly.

John Howlett was also a prominent and well-connected critic of commons. We have seen that he was unusual in that he could see that the rural proletariat created by enclosure might be unemployed and impoverished. In the 1780s he argued that this did not matter much because, as commoners, they were inured to misery anyway, and the growth of population in itself was worth the cost. But as that misery deepened in the 1790s and early 1800s Howlett stopped talking about enclosure altogether and began to look for ways of paying agricultural labourers decent wages. He publicly chastised

<sup>96</sup> *Autobiography of Arthur Young*, pp. 332–3.

<sup>97</sup> A. Young, *Annals of Agriculture*, 42 (1804), p. 27.



Pitt for deciding to let the market and the poor rate determine wage levels, and he publicly doubted the humanity of village elites in the dispensation of poor relief. He described the Reverend David Davies' account of newly landless labourers in enclosed villages, *The Case of the Labourers in Husbandry*, as 'incomparable'.<sup>98</sup>

Young and Howlett were critics of commons who became critics of enclosure. For enclosure did not bring about a proletariat of the industrious, hardy, healthy and moral sort. It took the commons from the commoners. It drove women out of their employment in the common-right economy. It drew the men to the pub, where what small compensation they got for their commons was 'piss'd against the wall'.<sup>99</sup> Finally, it put them both on poor relief, and stole the birthright of the common from their children. Knowing this (and knowing too that it might have been avoided), Young spoke out and went unheard, as he had expected. Then he left commoners in the hands of God. Howlett turned to other ways of saving labourers from poor relief and the tender mercies of the local farmers. Neither had much success.

Young and Howlett had served their purpose. They had been successful earlier because they had had things to say that promoters of enclosure, and Parliament, wanted to hear. They had successfully taken the arguments of the defenders, and turned them to enclosers' advantage. They had identified enclosure with the national interest. But they became ineffective when they had something to say that enclosers and Parliament did *not* want to hear. Indeed, they were silenced.

But the obduracy of Parliament in refusing compensation is not

<sup>98</sup> Cited in Hammond and Hammond, *Village Labourer*, p. 77. Howlett published his accounts of the state of the poor in Young's *Annals of Agriculture* from 1789 until his death. In these years it seems likely that his connection to Beilby Porteus, the Evangelical Bishop of London, was closer than his connection to Loughborough, who sided with Pitt against Whitbread's minimum wage Bill. For the Porteus connection see Howlett, *Enclosure and Population*, [p. i]. For Loughborough and Pitt see J. R. Poynter, *Society and Pauperism: English Ideas on Poor Relief, 1795-1834* (1969), p. 59. For the poverty of Essex agricultural labourers (particularly in newly enclosed Audley End) and problems of order in Howlett's village of Great Dunmow, see T. L. Richardson, 'Agricultural Labourers' Wages and the Cost of Living in Essex, 1790-1840: A Contribution to the Standard of Living Debate', in B. A. Holderness and M. E. Turner, eds., *Land, Labour and Agriculture 1700-1920. Essays for Gordon Mingay* (1991), pp. 69-89.

<sup>99</sup> The phrase, in this instance, is that of opponents of enclosure in the village of Atherstone: Warwick. RO, HR 35/15.

explained by improving ideology alone. After all, by the 1790s even pamphleteer improvers called for some compensation for the poor. By the late 1790s a new pamphleteer had caught the ear of Parliament. He was the Reverend Thomas Malthus. In 1798 he argued against giving outdoor relief to the poor; in 1803 he argued against giving them land. Saying that Arthur Young contradicted himself in prescribing for England what had ensured poverty in France, Malthus argued that giving land to the poor would lead to more poor relief, not less. The appeal of Malthus may explain the failure of defenders and critics of commons to persuade Pitt of the value of compensated enclosure. A newer ideology than improvement sealed the fate of nineteenth-century commoners.<sup>100</sup>

Defenders in the 1790s had an alternative to asking for compensation for enclosure or higher wages for labourers and work for women. They might have asserted the right of commoners to self-determination. This is not as anachronistic a suggestion as it sounds. Commoners' demands for some say in their own affairs were a large part of the local debate on enclosure.<sup>101</sup> But in the national debate few defenders of commons took this stand, perhaps because the 1790s was a bad decade in which to put so radical an argument publicly. If talk of making enclosers of waste compensate commoners was unacceptable when it came from the Secretary to the Board of Agriculture, the argument that commoners should have the power to prevent or shape enclosure could hardly be successful. Critics of commons were scathing on the subject. Paul put the livelihoods of commoners on a par with the sporting rights of grouse-hunters: in opposing the enclosure of wastes both denied the national interest. As we have seen, Charles Vancouver doubted the wisdom of teaching commoners to read and write, let alone their

<sup>100</sup> Thomas Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population, as it Affects the Future Improvement of Society* (1798), and *An Essay on the Principle of Population, or, A View of its Past and Present Effects on Human Happiness* (1803), in Gertrude Himmelfarb, ed., *On Population. Thomas Robert Malthus* (1960), pp. 556-63. Malthus' second edition is known for its optimism compared to the first edition, but this did not extend to commoners. Young replied in 'On the Application of the Principles of Population, to the Question of Assigning Land to Cottages', *Annals of Agriculture*, 41 (1804), pp. 208-31; in 1808 Young took up Malthus again in his Board of Agriculture, *General Report on Enclosures* where he argued (pp. 100-10) that improved agriculture could outstrip population growth. I am preparing a longer discussion of the argument between Pitt, Malthus and Young.

<sup>101</sup> See below, Chapter 9.



having the power to prevent enclosure.<sup>102</sup> Magistrates sending for troops to deal with enclosure rioters expressed themselves more directly: 'if poor people are suffered to make Laws for themselves', wrote James Webster from Bedfordshire in 1796, 'we shall very shortly have no Government in this County'.<sup>103</sup>

But defenders failed to advocate self-determination for another reason too. Nothing in their descriptions of commoners suggests that they thought commoners were equals. If commoners were honest and hardworking, they were also simple, innocent, uncorrupted rustics with strong bodies and English hearts. These are the best qualities of good subordinates but – despite their petty landholding and common right – not the qualities of informed citizens. In ignoring the possibility of self-determination, and in keeping commoners themselves out of the public debate, the defenders of commons ensured the end of the enclosure debate between pamphleteers, in Parliament and at the Board of Agriculture.

Outside these fora of the official body politic, commoners continued to resist enclosure as they always had. Thomas Bewick and John Clare (to name only two) continued to make the public observation that enclosure and the loss of commons turned commoners into labourers. And at the level of radical popular politics the Spencean Philanthropists saw the re-allotment of all the land to all the people as the basis of a new society in which commoners would be neither peasant nor proletarian.<sup>104</sup>

<sup>102</sup> Pennington, *Reflections*, pp. 34–5; Paul, *Observations on the General Enclosure Bill*, extracted in [Young] *General Report on Enclosures*, p. 159; Vancouver, *General View ... Hampshire*, pp. 505–9.

<sup>103</sup> PRO: WO 40/17, letter from James Webster JP, 2 August 1796, concerning the enclosure of Maulden, Bedfordshire.

<sup>104</sup> Thompson, *Making*, pp. 176–9, 672–4; Malcolm Chase, 'Thomas Spence: The Trumpet of Jubilee', *Past and Present*, 76 (1977); and *The People's Farm. English Radical Agrarianism 1775–1840* (Oxford, 1988).

# I

## *Survival*