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Social Investigation and Rural England, 1870-1914

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mentioned above. Perhaps the book is a little less original, and a little less important, than its author suggests. Even the emerging “new Darwinism” that Stack is determined to resist turns out to be the product of handful of academics, with an e-mail address at the London School of Economics. Behind all this, Stack has a point. His work is part of a developing attempt to see British Socialism in a new light, to show how intellectual ideas permeated into party politics and into a broader party culture. Despite its constructed isolation from recent writing, it should be welcomed as a contribution to the changing literature on pre-war socialist ideas.

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DUNCAN TANNER

Mark Freeman. *Social Investigation and Rural England, 1870–1914*. Rochester, N. Y.: Boydell Press. 2003. Pp. xi, 217. \$70.00. ISBN 0-86193-257-9.

As urbanization and its associated problems spread in England, rural areas became increasingly idealized in popular imagination. The countryside evoked images of beauty, health, and traditional values, and it was commonly assumed that for those living in such idyllic surroundings the benefits outweighed the disadvantages. Historians seem to share this view, Mark Freeman notes, since most research on late-nineteenth-century social problems has incorporated only the findings of urban surveys, overlooking the more numerous investigations into rural conditions available, including those by such famous reformers as Charles Booth and Seebohm Rowntree. By way of rectifying this situation, Freeman has recorded and analyzed every rural investigation conducted between the “Revolt of the Field”—the 1872 strike by agricultural workers in Warwickshire that first drew national attention to the issues of rural poverty and discontent—and the outbreak of World War One. A chapter reviewing some earlier rural inquiries precedes this material. In addition to the surveys produced by commissioners appointed by the Board of Agriculture or other government agencies, Freeman’s research turned up investigations conducted by private individuals with a social conscience, by representatives of socialist organizations, and, especially after the turn of the century, by reporters for crusading newspapers. Of particular interest among the latter is a 1901 study for the *Daily Express* produced by the well-known novelist Rider Haggard.

It should be noted that this book is not primarily about rural social problems *per se*, though it constantly refers to them and provides a lot of information in passing. Readers expecting in-depth analyses of specific issues, such as rural depopulation, poor housing conditions and the low level of agricultural wage rates, or even a general description of changes in rural conditions over time, will not find them here. Freeman’s focus is the social investigations themselves, and his main aim is to identify the surveys, describe the investigators’ methods of obtaining information, and assess if and how the modes of inquiry affected the accuracy of the ensuing reports.

Freeman’s prime conclusion is that the social class and ingrained social attitudes of investigators and informants skewed the findings of most of the reports during the entire period, thereby minimizing appreciation of the need for intervention by the national government or local authorities. The material Freeman looks at both confirm and expand modern interpretations of the relationships between social classes in rural areas during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. While few historians need to be reminded about the social elite’s sense of its own worth in this period, some may not fully appreciate

the depth of these individuals' disdain for the rural working class, as revealed by these reports.

Generally speaking, Freeman notes that both upper- and middle-class residents of rural areas held a most unflattering opinion of their working-class neighbors, particularly agricultural laborers. Often referring to the latter contemptuously by the generic name "Hodge," they considered the typical farm worker a dull-witted, unambitious oaf, incapable of either articulating his distress or remedying his circumstances. In return, says Freeman, the general attitude of the laborer towards his social "betters" emerges as one of sullen resentment: the touching, sincere deference the rural poor are traditionally supposed to have shown to the local upper crust being exposed as a myth.

Attitudes on both sides were important, Freeman writes, because they largely determined where the data about rural conditions came from. Initially, the surveys used the "informant" method of collecting information, with middle-class investigators depending mainly on conversations with members of the rural elite, with whom they felt more comfortable and whom they assumed had the information readily to hand. Clergymen were the most frequently consulted informants, and the most likely to describe their poorer parishioners as "ignorant and backward" (p. 30). When included, interviews with agricultural laborers often went badly due to investigators' condescending attitudes and the fact that the interviews were conducted at public meetings with employers or foremen in attendance, thus inhibiting honest and detailed responses. To a certain degree, this was still a problem at the end of the period when agricultural laborers were called to give evidence at intimidating hearings conducted by theoretically more open-minded commissioners. Although most investigators after 1880 adopted the "respondent" mode of inquiry, which gathered more data than before from the rural working classes themselves, even their reports do not fully reflect reality, Freeman notes, because they continued to give less weight to the opinions of working people than to those of more socially prominent witnesses.

The amount of detail and a degree of repetitiveness stemming from the discussion of each investigation separately in chronological order makes the book a rather dull read. Nevertheless, this is a work of considerable achievement based on impressively thorough research. By drawing attention to this neglected wealth of material, Freeman has opened the door to fresh research into the social problems of the era. Social historians will surely find Freeman's book an invaluable reference tool.

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Carolyn J. Kitching, *Britain and the Geneva Disarmament Conference: A Study in International History*. New York: Palgrave. 2003. Pp. vii, 230. \$65.00. ISBN 0-333-96850-6.

Alexander Cadogan, principal adviser to the United Kingdom delegation at the World Disarmament Conference wrote privately of the United States delegate in April 1933 that "that unspeakable old man Norman Davis has stymied the Conference for the moment. America having been asked to *do* something in the intervals of lecturing us, he has spent a nightmare 48 hours wondering how and how soon to indicate that he *won't* do anything. I have enjoyed watching him squirm." Such invective implying some American responsibility for the failure of the Disarmament Conference of 1932–34 is relatively rare and might be set against the contention in this book that British policy was hamstrung partly by a search for American approval (p. 197). Generally, treatments of the Conference are apt to blame