

HOWKINS, Alun — *The Death of Rural England: A Social History of the Countryside Since 1900*. London and New York: Routledge, 2003. Pp. xii, 260.

Since the 1990s, one might be forgiven for thinking that the oft-assumed dichotomy in British society between a chaotic, threatening, and rambunctious city and a peaceful, ordered, and safe country has been reversed. There have been violent showdowns between environmentalists and police in the heart of rural Britain. Hundreds of thousands of supporters of the Countryside Alliance have thronged the streets of London protesting against the policies of successive Conservative and Labour governments. Defenders of fox hunting recently invaded the House of Commons, though, it must be said, the hallowed chamber was half-empty at the time. Perhaps most importantly, British agriculture was thrown into crisis in the 1990s by outbreaks of BSE and foot-and-mouth disease among livestock. This resulted in the forced slaughter of hundreds of thousands of animals and bans on British produce throughout the European Community. The foot-and-mouth outbreak even led to the postponement of the general election in May 2001.

What has happened to Britain's green and pleasant land?

Alun Howkins's magisterial survey of the fate of rural England provides some compelling answers. The book is an important contribution to our understanding of a neglected aspect of British society in the twentieth century. The theme of decline that winds through his book has various forms. The clearest example of the decline of and even crisis in rural society came at the end of the twentieth century, with BSE and foot-and-mouth, but, of course, there are other examples of substantive change in rural England over the past hundred years. As Howkins shows, the nature and structure of rural society, the use of land, and even the meaning of the countryside have all changed profoundly in the last century.

Even with such change, there has been some continuity. One of the striking points Howkins makes, for example, is about the economic success of agriculture in the twentieth century. With the notable exceptions of the interwar years and the period since the 1990s, agriculture was relatively prosperous. Unsurprisingly, domestic agriculture did well during the First and Second World Wars. Agriculture also benefited from state intervention in peacetime. The 1920 *Agriculture Act* (repealed in 1921) set minimum prices for produce. After 1945 Labour and Conservative governments offered high subsidies to agricultural production. Britain's entry into what was then called the European Economic Community in 1973 changed the nature of subsidies, but did not eliminate them. These subsidies were accompanied by the establishment of marketing boards for particular kinds of produce. The most desperate period before the 1990s was the Great Depression, when produce prices fell, without any buffering from the state. But even in the midst of desolation to arable areas, non-arable farming, concentrating on meat and dairy production, prospered. Agriculture could not, therefore, be described as a failing economic endeavour.

In almost every other way, however, rural society declined, or at least became largely unrecognizable from its earlier character. On the eve of the First World War, the country was the foundation of aristocratic, deferential society, a counterpoint to the burgeoning industrial, class society of the cities and suburbs. Rural society was

organized around the stable world of the “big house”, the village, and the field. It was built upon the communal and sometimes cooperative life of local institutions like chapels, friendly societies, and the Farmers’ Union. Work meant work in the fields or domestic service. By the end of the twentieth century, this world had disappeared. One obvious change was the decline of the landed aristocracy as a relevant force in rural life. As Howkins shows, the twentieth century saw a gradual shift in rural power and influence from the aristocracy to farmers. By the 1930s, the National Farmers’ Union, not the aristocracy, was the dominant voice of rural England. At the other end of the class spectrum, there was both continuity and change. Poverty and hardship were enduring certainties in the lives of farm workers throughout the twentieth century. Even in the post-1945 period, farm workers earned about 30 per cent less than industrial workers. Only in 1976 was the oppressive “tied cottage” system abolished. Change came with the sharp decline in the numbers of farm workers. In the East Riding of Yorkshire between the wars, there was a 41 per cent decline in farm workers under the age of 21. After 1945 the total number of full-time farm workers dropped from 500,000 to 100,000. The stranger at the feast of rural society in the twentieth century was the white-collar worker who lived in the country but did not work the land. “[W]hite-collar countrymen and women” were the true “modernizers” of rural England (p. 161), gradually overwhelming the working population.

Changes in social structure were founded upon changes in land ownership and usage, which altered the very meaning of the country. It is often said that, after the First World War, more land changed hands than at any time since the Domesday Book. Certainly land sales blossomed after 1918, but the long-term shift seems to have been a different kind of concentration of land ownership, in which fewer farmers owned more land. Farms fell in number, but their size increased. At the same time, suburbanization ate up increasingly large swathes of rural land. Attempts to plan such development, like the wartime Scott Report, were simply an acknowledgement of the inexorable progress of suburbanization. The latter changed the meaning of land from an environment of production to one of occupation. Howkins is also excellent on a third major change: the countryside as a space of spectacle and recreation. From the 1930s on, ramblers, hikers, day-trippers, cyclists, and car drivers tried the patience of country-dwellers. We forget the struggles over this well-meaning invasion, such as the 1932 Pennines dispute, but they indicated a larger battle over who could claim the countryside.

The last chapters of Howkins’s book deal with the increasingly destructive encounter between the countryside, agriculture, and modernity in the second half of the twentieth century. Postwar agriculture was built upon new technologies of production, including the use of chemical pesticides and livestock feeds made from the bodies of other animals. Both were roads to disaster. Pesticides contaminated land and people. The use of ruminant feed led directly to the tragedy of BSE and its human form, Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (CJD). Housing development in rural areas meant demands for better roads, destroying many of the features of rural life that had attracted new inhabitants in the first place. Hedgerows that had supported indigenous species of rural wildlife were, for example, often casualties of land and road development; Howkins presents a heartbreaking list of farmland birds at the point of

extinction in Britain because of this simple but devastating change. The very nature of modern farming (such as the brutal practice of live animal exports, in which animals are transported without water, feed, or rest for 24 hours) has also led to conflict and a crisis of confidence in the English countryside. The growth of organic farming and the demand for “real” or “whole” foods, itself the object of modern marketing and consumer capitalism, might be seen as an alternative version of agriculture, a different take on the uses of the English countryside.

What is interesting in all of this is that there has been a shift in the focus of political and social debate in Britain. Up to the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846, British politics was driven by rural issues. By the 1880s, it was increasingly shaped by the demands of the city. But by the early twentieth century, concern about food standards, the environment, animal welfare and rights, and land usage made the rural once again important in British society and politics. The rural is no longer merely a comforting myth of national identity, a pleasant vista to dispel unsettling thoughts of contemporary life or a reassuring counterpoint to the modern. The rural now reflects modernity. The familiar signature tune of BBC radio’s soap about rural Ambridge, “The Archers”, should perhaps now be played in a minor key, with touches of dissonance.

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HUEL, Raymond J. A. — *Archbishop A.-A. Taché of St. Boniface: The “Good Fight” and the Illusive Vision*. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press and Western Canadian Publishers, 2003. Pp. ix, 429.

Biography is currently undergoing rehabilitation among social historians. Whereas these historians once dismissed the genre for its traditional “great man” approach to the past, they are increasingly acknowledging the need for critical and comprehensive studies of individual lives. Underlying this prescription is a concept of the individual as a product of diverse historical forces — some social, some cultural, some political, some economic. It is the biographer’s task to identify these forces and to examine the ways in which they converge and interact over the course of a single life. Hence, according to many social historians, biography can offer rich insight into larger historical phenomena and can contribute to a wide-ranging understanding of the past.

This is the theoretical premise of Raymond Huel’s *Archbishop A.-A. Taché of St. Boniface: The “Good Fight” and the Illusive Vision*, winner of the Manitoba Historical Society’s Margaret McWilliams Award for best scholarly book (2004). Huel — professor emeritus of history at the University of Lethbridge — introduces his work as “more than the story of an individual. It is the history of the Catholic Church in Quebec and the Canadian North West.... It is the account of an attempt to create a new Quebec in the West.... It is a story of cultural confrontation and conflict” (p. xxv). By incorporating the “new directions” of biography into his study of the Oblate Archbishop, Huel presents a multifaceted, exhaustively researched, and meticulously