A NEW HISTORICAL GEOGRAPHY OF ENGLAND BEFORE 1600

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Edited by
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PREFACE

In 1936 the Cambridge University Press published *An historical geography of England before A.D. 1800*. It has been reprinted a number of times but clearly the moment has come not for a further reprint nor for a new edition but for an entirely new volume based upon the enormous amount of work that has been done since 1936, and especially since 1945. Much of the new work has appeared in the pages of three journals, *The Economic History Review*, *The Agricultural History Review* and the *Transactions and Papers of the Institute of British Geographers*. Moreover, the English Place-Name Society has continued to produce its scholarly volumes year by year; the Domesday Book has been analysed geographically, so have the Lay Subsidies of 1334 and 1524–5. Our views of agriculture and industry in later times have also been modified by a variety of monographs.

Not only has there been much exploration of sources, but also much discussion about the method of historical geography. In particular, a contrast has often been drawn between the reconstructions of past geographies and the study of geographical changes through time, between the so-called 'horizontal' and 'vertical' approaches. This present volume seeks to combine both, and the combination was suggested by J. O. M. Broek's *The Santa Clara Valley, California: a study in landscape changes* (Utrecht, 1932).

The new work begins with the coming of the Anglo-Saxons in the belief that so far as there ever is a new beginning in history, that event was such a beginning. It continues beyond the eighteenth century, up to 1900 or so, but this has not been taken as a rigid date because 1914, rather than 1900, marks the effective end of the nineteenth century. In contemplating the result, one can only be very conscious of what remains to be done. As far as sources are concerned, although much recent work has been done on the Tithe Returns of the 1840s, a comprehensive treatment has yet to appear. There have also been interesting studies on enclosure, but no large-scale attack on a geographical basis. Or, to take another example, even so obvious a source as the Census Returns, from 1801 onwards, still awaits comprehensive analysis and interpretation. As far as method is concerned, much further enquiry is needed to see to what extent statistical techniques and locational analysis can be applied to historical data of varying quality and coverage.

In another generation or so the materials for an historical geography of England will not be as we know them now. A wider range of sources will have been explored and evaluated. Fresh ideas about method will have prepared the way for a more sophisticated presentation. And by that time we and our landscape will have become yet one more chapter in some other *Historical Geography of England*.

I am greatly indebted to my fellow contributors for their co-operation and patience. All of us must thank the staff of the Cambridge University Press for their skill and care. We must also thank Mr G. R. Versey. He has not only drawn all the maps and diagrams but has compiled many of them and has also given much general assistance at all stages of the work.

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KING'S COLLEGE
CAMBRIDGE

Candlemas, 1973

NOTE TO TWO-VOLUME EDITION

This edition consists of the first six chapters of *A new historical geography of England* (1973). The text remains the same but the opportunity has been taken to make a few minor corrections, and the Index has been adjusted to meet the needs of the volume. An Introduction has been added to explain the thinking behind the plan of the work as a whole.

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St Basil's Day, 1976

INTRODUCTION

An account of the geography of a past age that aims to explain as well as to describe should, like one of the present-day, take into consideration the relevant circumstances of earlier times. But when we contemplate a chronological series of cross-sections, we are at once faced with more complicated considerations. Two very different methods of treatment can be envisaged. If, on the one hand, each cross-section in a sequence aims at being a balanced geographical account, compounded of description and explanation, there will, of necessity, be much repetition and varying degrees of overlap as each cross-section ranges backwards to satisfy its own needs. If, on the other hand, each cross-section is limited strictly to its own contemporary materials, a valid criticism might be that the sequence constitutes a series of static pictures that ignore the process of becoming.

It is possible to compromise between these two extremes in a way suggested by J. O. M. Broek in *The Santa Clara Valley, California: a study in landscape changes* (Utrecht, 1932). Here, four cross-sections are separated by three studies of the economic and social forces that led to successive changes in the landscape. The device of separating the explanatory narrative from the description of a landscape at each period serves not only to explain each landscape but also to provide connecting links between the successive views. For *A new historical geography of England* the choice consists of six narratives and six cross-sections as follows:

1 *The Anglo-Scandinavian foundations*
2 Domesday in England
3 *Changes in the early Middle Ages*
4 England *circa* 1334
5 *Changes in the later Middle Ages*
6 England *circa* 1600
7 *The age of the improver: 1600–1800*
8 England *circa* 1800
9 *Changes in the early railway age: 1800–1850*
10 England *circa* 1850
11 *The changing face of England: 1850–circa 1900*
12 England *circa* 1900

The choice of dates for the various cross-sections depends partly on the march of events, and also (let us admit it) upon the availability of sources of information. Even so, such a choice can only be an individual one, and the thinking that lies behind it must now be described.

The work as a whole begins with the coming of the Anglo-Saxons 'in the belief that so far as there ever is a new beginning in history, that event was such a beginning'. This is not to imply that pre-Saxon contributions were unimportant. Clearly, continuity between Roman Britain and Anglo-Saxon England was much greater than was at one time believed, and further work may strengthen this belief. But this does not affect the fact that the coming of the English to England was a new beginning – with all it meant in the peopling, the language and the institutions of much of these islands. When the Normans arrived in 1066, the villages they encountered bore names that were certainly not Celtic – except in Cornwall. Part of Britain had become England.

The period between the end of Roman rule and the year of the Norman Conquest was one of great fluidity, and the sources are so limited that it is difficult for the pen to catch the scene. Yet it was a formative period of the greatest importance for the landscapes of later times. Anglo-Saxons and Scandinavians covered Roman Britain with their new villages, and proceeded rapidly to clear its woodland. No later invasion of peoples significantly modified the Anglo-Scandinavian pattern; the Norman Conquest was the transposition of an aristocracy and not a folk movement of new settlers on the land. Twenty years after their coming, the Normans instituted the enquiry that resulted in Domesday Book. Its unique character as a source enables us to survey the results of the centuries of migration and settlement and to present a view of England in 1086.

In the years after the Conquest, the countryside continued to be cleared and towns grew and prospered. But this expansive movement did not continue uninterruptedly throughout the Middle Ages. In places it slowed down; in others it ceased; and in yet other places the frontiers of cultivation even retreated, and the populations of towns may have declined. Certainly in England, as in most of Western and Central Europe, medieval agrarian and commercial effort had reached a peak by 1300, and the great age of expanding arable and trade was succeeded in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries by one of stagnation and recession. The decline was especially marked during the hundred years between 1350 and 1450. The early fourteenth century seemed therefore suitable

for another view of England. Moreover for this critical period a convenient and unique source is at hand – the lay subsidy of 1334. It is convenient coming as it did before the full impact of the recession of the later Middle Ages was felt. It is unique because the assessment agreed upon in that year continued to be the basis for later subsidies until 1623. This means that although the rolls of 1334 (as for other years) have not entirely survived, the missing figures can be recovered from later rolls. It is possible, therefore, to achieve a reasonably complete cover from which to construct a general framework for delineating the geographical and economic condition of the country as a whole.

A possible date for a cross-section at the end of the Middle Ages might be 1500. But although Henry Tudor had won the throne of England in 1485, the years around 1500 had yet to see the recession of the later Middle Ages merge into the full flowering of the sixteenth century, a flowering reflected in the writings of such men as Leland and Camden, in the maps of Saxton and Norden, and in Speed's *Theatre of the Empire of Great Britaine* (1611) which aimed at presenting 'an exact geography' of the realm. The Tudors, in the words of Charles Whibley, 'recognized that the most brilliant discovery of a brilliant age was the discovery of their own country', and in so doing helped to provide material that makes 1600 rather than 1500 a more suitable moment for another cross-section. That the Tudor dynasty came to an end with the death of Queen Elizabeth in 1603 did not determine the choice, but, at any rate, made it not inappropriate.

The choice of dates for cross-sectional views in the modern period can also be argued. Macaulay chose 1685 as the basis for the famous third chapter in his *History of England* (1848), but this is too near 1600 in the present scheme. Another date that might have been chosen is some year in the 1720s. Scotland had been united with England in 1707, the War of Spanish Succession was over in 1714, and Daniel Defoe's *Tour* appeared in 1724. This latter date was used by G. M. Trevelyan in his *England Under Queen Anne* (1930), and, like Macaulay's choice, was appropriate in the context of his own work. Other conceivable dates might have been 1760, at the beginning of the canal age, or even 1780 when the annual rate of industrial growth was first greater than 2%, but both dates are too near 1800 which for many reasons appeared as an ideal date for a cross-section in the full work. The first Census was taken in 1801; this was also the year of the so-called Acreage Returns for different crops; furthermore, between 1793 and 1815 appeared the *General*

Views of each county issued by the Board of Agriculture. Taken together they yield a remarkable body of information which reinforces the choice of the year 1800.

Thus it was that the span of years from 1600 to 1800 was covered in one chapter. The clearing of the wood may have been the great epic of the Middle Ages but now, after 1600 came other epics – the draining of the marsh, the reclamation of the heath, the enclosure of the arable, the spread of landscape gardens and the beginning of the later seats of industry. And so the changes of these two centuries were brought together under the title 'The Age of the Improver'.

After 1800 it is clear that the time-intervals between the cross-sections need to be shorter. Not only was the pace of change accelerating, but the written evidence about it was increasing prodigiously. J. H. Clapham chose 1820 and 1886–7 as dates for describing what he called 'the face of the country'; both were suitable for the development of the themes of his *Economic history of modern Britain* (1926–38). But for us 1820 is too near 1800; and 1886–7 is too near 1900. We chose the year 1850 because it may be said to mark the end of 'the early railway age', some of the results of which were indicated in the census of 1851. As for agriculture, the tithe surveys of the 1840s, and the county reports in the *Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society* (1845–69) together provided the only detailed picture since the *General Views* of the Board of Agriculture. Moreover, mid-century, on the eve of the Great Exhibition of 1851, seemed a suitable moment at which to pause.

The years after 1850 saw the full development of Britain as an industrial state. Towns became the birthplaces of the major part of the population, and agriculture declined to a subordinate position in face of overseas competition. The final cross-section is tied to the year 1900. We might have chosen 1910 or 1914 which marked the effective end of the nineteenth century; the last two chapters certainly do not hesitate on occasions to reach towards these dates. Rightly or wrongly, we chose 1900 for the title of the last chapter. At any rate when Queen Victoria died on 22 January 1901 many felt that a great epoch had closed.

H. C. D