God speed the plough

The representation of agrarian England, 1500–1660

ANDREW McRAE
University of Sydney

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Introduction

> 'I do not dwell in the Country, I am not acquainted with the Plough: But I think that whosoever doth not maintain the Plough, destroys this Kingdom.'
>
> (Robert Cecil, House of Commons, 1601)

The plough was upheld, throughout the early modern period, as a central symbol of agricultural activity and rural life. Its perceived value within political debate at the turn of the seventeenth century highlights the complex range of significance it could evoke, as contemporary writers sought to represent the practices and values of agrarian England. The ballad 'God spede the Plough', written around 1500, eulogizes the struggles of a husbandman crippled by the demands of the clergy, tax-collectors, purveyors and others.[1] Subsequently the plough was claimed as an emblem of traditional structures of rural society, in a stream of complaint decrying the effects of depopulating enclosure. Equally, though, the plough could symbolize the expansive energies of a farmer improving his land. John Fitzherbert's 1523? *Boke of Husbandrye*, concerned to educate 'a yonge gentylman that entendeth to thryve', begins with a series of chapters on ploughs.[2] In the words of one landowner, 'The Plowghe is the Lords penne', with which he can inscribe his ideals of labour and productivity onto the land.[3] Others would extend this argument to fashion sweeping visions of national

[1] BL Lansdowne MS 762, fol. 5[a]; printed in *Pierce the Ploughmans Crede, to which is appended God spede the Plough*, ed. Walter W. Skeat (London, 1867), pp. 69–72. There was also a play of this name, of which no text survives, performed in London in 1593 (*Henslowe's Diary*, ed. R. A. Foakes and R. T. Ricket (Cambridge, 1961), p. 20), while an anonymous writer used the phrase as the title for a pamphlet of 1601 which defended traditional systems of ploughing and sowing against the recent innovation of corn setting.

[2] *Boke of Husbandrye*, chs. 2–6; the quotation is from fol. 47[a] (1530 edn).

[3] John Kay of Woodsome, 'the Plowghe'; Folger Shakespeare Library MS W.b.483, p. 1.

profits and pleasures generated out of the countryside. 'The Kingdoms portion', declared the poet Robert Herrick, '*is the Plow.*'[4]

The figure of the labourer at his plough attained a similar resonance; yet here too disparate texts reveal an ongoing struggle over the identity of a cultural icon. For conservative critics of rural change, the ploughman typified the stable community of the manorial estate. In a wave of mid-Tudor publications that combined traditional social morality with Protestant agitation, the honest labourer emerged as a powerful spokesman for complaint. *The Praier and Complaynte of the Ploweman unto Christ* (1531?) and *Pyers plowmans exhortation unto the lordes knightes and burgoysses of the Parlyamenthouse* (1550?) are but two examples of this tradition. Following generations, however, were more sceptical. In the eyes of the Elizabethan satirist, not even the ploughman was immune to the pernicious lure of 'Lady Pecunia',[5] while for those seeking to improve agricultural yields, the customary practices of ploughmen were clogs to progress, 'poor silly shifts . . . to preserve themselves ignorant and unserviceable'.[6] The movement toward aesthetic celebrations of the English landscape in the seventeenth century effected a further metamorphosis of the figure. In John Milton's 'L'Allegro', which participates in an influential poetic project to merge naturalistic detail with the values of a classical pastoral tradition, the native ploughman 'Whistles o'er the furrowed land' at the break of day.[7]

The apparent contention over the significance of both plough and ploughman draws attention to crucial questions concerning the representation of the land. Was the plough a symbol of manorial community and self-sufficiency, or an instrument of national expansion through a competitive market economy? Was the ploughman a roughly eloquent spokesman for the downtrodden, or a decorative figure in a pastoralized landscape of enamelled fields? At stake was the very meaning of rural England, and the attendant contests over meaning are documented in the pages of ballads, sermons, pamphlets, satiric verse and drama, husbandry and surveying manuals, chorographies and rural poetry. As these various texts shape images of rural life, broader questions crystallize. Was the English countryside to be envisaged as a patchwork of stable and self-contained estates, a site of agricultural innovation and economic

[4] 'The Country life' (1648); *Poetical Works*, ed. L. C. Martin (Oxford, 1956), p. 230.

[5] Richard Barnfield, *The encomion of lady Pecunia* (1598); *The Complete Poems*, ed. George Klawitter (Selinsgrove, 1990), p. 155.

[6] Walter Blith, *The English Improver Improved* (1652), p. 196.

[7] Published 1645; *Complete Shorter Poems*, ed. John Carey (Harlow, 1968), p. 135.

competition, or a scene of natural beauty and bounty? Were the interests of the country best served by the humble ploughman, the thrifty yeoman, the entrepreneurial innovator or the retired lord?

The representation of the land in the early modern period requires interpretation. Confronted by the rich plurality of images and arguments, one must attend to 'the processes by which meaning is constructed' in earlier periods.[8] This book will thus be concerned with the various and changing ways in which English men and women of the early modern period sought to ascribe meaning and order to the economy and society of their native countryside. At a time of considerable uncertainty and upheaval in rural England, the impetus to fashion authoritative representations of agrarian practice and change assumed a heightened significance. The Tudor moralists' cries of complaint in the face of change and the agrarian improvers' calls for progressive reform are equally urgent, yet utterly opposed in their definitions of social and economic values. In order to appreciate such confrontations, this study will focus on the discourses of agrarian England. For the representation of the land should be seen less as an unproblematic reflection of material conditions than as the site of a struggle over signs and discursive knowledge. Discourse constructs meaning by working upon the infinitely diverse and mutable circumstances of economic practice, social relations and topographic situation. The process of representation is aptly exemplified by the plough, at once a pivotal signifier in rival discourses of agrarian order and an essential instrument in the labours of rural survival, the currency of political rhetoric and the primary lesson of a husbandman's education.

Whereas an interest in the textual construction of meaning is shared by both historians and literary critics, my central concern to survey signifying practices throughout a wide range of texts departs from the strategies most frequently employed by the latter. The characteristic methods of analysis associated with the literary movements of the new historicism and cultural materialism aim to situate a particular literary work within its contemporary milieu.[9] By comparison, while I will

[8] Roger Chartier, *Cultural History: Between Practices and Representations*, translated from the French by Lydia G. Cochrane (Cambridge, 1988), p. 14. See also, in relation to changing approaches to 'cultural history', *The New Cultural History*, ed. Lynn Hunt (Berkeley, 1989); and Catherine Belsey, 'Towards Cultural History – In Theory and Practice', *Textual Practice*, 3 (1989), pp. 159–72.

[9] The best introduction to the earlier phases of these movements is Jean E. Howard, 'The New Historicism in Renaissance Studies', *English Literary Renaissance*, 16 (1986), pp. 13–43. See also *The New Historicism*, ed. H. Aram Veeser (New York, 1989).

occasionally focus on particular texts, the governing aim of such analysis will be to illuminate the representational fields within which those texts operate. If a poet such as Herrick demands attention for his rural poetry, the attention accorded will not privilege his works over those of contemporary pamphleteers or politicians. More consistently, however, I will argue that the role of literature as an 'agent in constructing a culture's sense of reality' may valuably be explored through attention to literary modes.[10] Hence the unashamedly earthbound tracts of improvement to be considered in chapter 5 might usefully be set alongside the contemporaneous poetic initiative toward georgic celebrations of labour and productivity. Similarly, the changing structures of agrarian complaint may be explored through a study of the textual strategies adopted by Renaissance satirists. In each case the development of a literary tradition is embedded in broader social, economic and ideological movements, yet at the same time literature itself asserts a significant cultural force as it performs its distinctive labours of representation.

The broad parameters of investigation are nonetheless qualified by a decision to pursue printed texts in preference to the vast range of manuscript material that might well command attention. Court records of enclosure disputes, manorial documents outlining tenurial practices and state papers concerning agrarian reform all offer to further our appreciation of rural discourse. But such sources will be employed only selectively, whereas my consideration of printed works aims for a comprehensive coverage of publications concerned with the land. Indeed, *God Speed the Plough*'s concerns with structures of discourse and processes of cultural change across a period of 160 years are perhaps best accommodated by a concentration on the printed word. It is reasonable to expect, from works prepared for the press, attention to the construction of authoritative discourses of rural order. Print facilitates the formation of textual conventions, and prompts writers to pursue nascent conceptions of national identity. These imperatives become immediately apparent in chapter 1, which will be drawn, by the sheer outpouring of printed matter, to the mid-Tudor reign of Edward VI, when preachers, poets and pamphleteers realized the potential of the press for the promotion of religious and social reform. Throughout the following hundred years print was established as the principal medium for cultural exchange, and the steady stream of works concerned with rural issues

[10] Howard, 'New Historicism', p. 25.

demonstrates at once the breadth and vitality of the gathering dialogue. Moreover, the relatively low cost of books and changing patterns in literacy ensured that the emergent print culture touched all socio-economic groups.[11] Even among agricultural labourers there was a small proportion who could read; 'everywhere', Margaret Spufford observes, 'illiteracy was . . . face to face with literacy, and the oral with the printed word'.[12]

In fact, the possibilities afforded by the medium of print had a significant impact upon several of the textual traditions to be considered, and consequently the analysis will frequently be extended by a consideration of bibliographical issues.[13] Details of the number of editions printed offer valuable evidence of the currency of texts and discourses. In an extreme case, such as Thomas Tusser's phenomenally successful *Five Hundred Points of Good Husbandry*, such information literally thrusts a work to the forefront of the study.[14] Further, attention to the physical form of a text promises insight into the 'assumed public', or cultural status the author or printer desired for a work.[15] The mid-Tudor complaint tracts reinforce their claims to be speaking in the voice of the people by conforming to cheap pamphlet formats and a stark black-letter page embellished only by marginal references to biblical texts. Reynolde

[11] Tessa Watt argues persuasively for the spread of print culture, especially through ephemeral textual forms, throughout the social order. The movement was facilitated in part by the low cost of the printed page; from 1560 to 1635 'book prices remained steady . . . when other commodities more than doubled in price and wages rose by half to two-thirds' (*Cheap Print and Popular Piety 1550–1640* (Cambridge, 1991), p. 261).

[12] *Small Books and Pleasant Histories: Popular Fiction and Its Readership in Seventeenth-Century England* (London, 1981), p. 32. Spufford here interprets the available evidence about literacy rates among labourers between 1580 and 1700 in a manner which contrasts with the view of David Cressy, whose research produced the figures. See Cressy's *Literacy and the Social Order: Reading and Writing in Tudor and Stuart England* (Cambridge, 1980).

[13] See D. F. McKenzie's programme for a study of 'texts as social products', in *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts* (London, 1986), p. 52. Roger Chartier's studies in cultural history adopt similar strategies: see especially *The Cultural Uses of Print in Early Modern France*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Princeton, 1987); and *The Culture of Print: Power and the Uses of Print in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Chartier, trans. Cochrane (Cambridge, 1989). Jerome McGann develops similar arguments, from the perspective of a literary scholar, in *The Textual Condition* (Princeton, 1991).

[14] Tusser's husbandry manual went through twenty-three editions in eighty-one years, after its first publication in 1557 as *A hundreth good pointes of husbandrie.*

[15] See Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, who distinguishes between 'audiences', as 'actual readership as determined by library catalogues, subscription lists and other objective data', and 'publics', 'the more hypothetical targets envisaged by authors and publishers, to whom they address their works' (*The Printing Press as an Agent of Change* (Cambridge, 1979), p. 64).

Scot makes a similar claim to a broad appeal by including in his husbandry manual detailed woodcut illustrations, for the education of 'him that cannot reade at all'.[16] By contrast, the tradition of chorography adheres to weighty and decorative forms of presentation, signalling its intent to appeal solely to the landowning elite.

The national structure of the publishing trade in England further influenced the dissemination of broad and coherent structures of discourse throughout the country. As the tentacles of a print culture spread outward from London, published representations of the land regularly formulated generalized images of rural order. The complaint tradition consistently insists upon a socio-economic model relevant across the country; specific details, if considered at all, are claimed as typical of nationwide problems. Similarly the Digger Gerrard Winstanley, who was driven more by a revolutionary vision than by any notable knowledge of agricultural and tenurial practice, saw no reason why the communist experiment at St George's Hill should not be multiplied across the country. The attention here to practices of representation which aspired to a national perspective should thus be distanced from the recent emphasis in social history on the local study. Although early modern England was unquestionably fractured by regional interests and identities, generations of writers fashioned vital new forms of nationhood.[17] While discourse has important local dimensions, attention here will consistently be drawn to the universalizing, naturalizing imperative so characteristic of the ideologically motivated statement.[18]

The wealth of texts that fall within the parameters of the study demonstrates the vigorous range of attention directed toward the land between 1500 and 1660. The representations of agrarian conditions and practices evidence at once cultural diversity and underlying ideological conflict. Discourses take form as mutable and plural, rather than oppressively monolithic. Nonetheless, important developments throughout the period challenge and remould predominant assumptions about

[16] *Perfite platforme of a Hoppe Garden* (1574), sig. B3^{b}.

[17] The applicability of the concept of nationhood to early modern England remains contentious. Richard Helgerson, however, has ably explored a range of movements toward the fashioning of national identity, in *Forms of Nationhood: The Elizabethan Writing of England* (Chicago and London, 1992).

[18] For a stimulating analysis of local structures of discourse, see David Rollison's study of 'proverbial culture' in the Vale of Berkeley, Gloucestershire (*The Local Origins of Modern Society: Gloucestershire 1500–1800* (London and New York, 1992), ch. 3).

rural England, and the scrutiny of these movements is my central purpose. I will argue that discursive change progressed through constant interaction with processes of social and economic upheaval. Over the past century historians have maintained fierce debate over the nature and pace of these developments; the transition from feudalism to capitalism in the countryside, the pace and character of the enclosure movement, and the 'revolution' in agricultural practices all remain points of contention.[19] Although I do not intend to engage directly with such debates, my analysis is grounded in a belief that practices of representation are enmeshed with processes of material change. Discourse at once responds to and enables shifts in social and economic practice. Consequently, while the origins of English individualism might well be traced back to the Middle Ages,[20] the effects of a discourse which offered to legitimate and promote such practices and attitudes could be profound. As the individualist farmer was metamorphosed from a covetous canker on the body politic into a godly man of thrift and industry, the meaning of agrarian England shifted accordingly from a site of manorial community and moral economy toward a modern landscape of capitalist enterprise.[21]

The central contests over the representation of the land may be illustrated through a brief analysis of debates in the House of Commons in 1597

[19] Arguments over a shift from feudalism to capitalism date back to Karl Marx's précis of English agrarian development in *Das Kapital*, vol. 1, chs. 27–8. R. H. Tawney developed a more expansive analysis of structural change, in *The Agrarian Problem in the Sixteenth Century*, first published in 1912, while Eric Kerridge constructed his *Agrarian Problems in the Sixteenth Century and After* (London, 1969) as a direct response to Tawney. More recently, see *The Brenner Debate: Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe*, ed. T. H. Aston and C. H. E. Philpin (Cambridge, 1985); and John E. Martin, *Feudalism to Capitalism: Peasant and Landlord in English Agrarian Development* (London, 1983). On the changes in agricultural practice, see Kerridge, *The Agricultural Revolution* (London, 1967); and Mark Overton's historiographical review of arguments in this field, 'Agricultural Revolution? Development of the Agrarian Economy in Early Modern England', in *Explorations in Historical Geography: Interpretative Essays*, ed. Alan R. H. Baker and Derek Gregory (Cambridge, 1984), pp. 118–39. I will outline below some of the principal factors influencing rural change in the period.

[20] See Alan Macfarlane, *The Origins of English Individualism* (Oxford, 1978).

[21] It must be acknowledged that the vast majority of texts represent agrarian England as a field of predominantly masculine labour and responsibility. Although *God Speed the Plough* is necessarily directed by the gendered perspectives of early modern writers, I begin with a belief that such an approach need not perpetuate their apparent gender biases. I aim instead to work within a context of scholarship which is continuing to broaden our appreciation of the status and activities of contemporary English women.

and 1601, over two bills intended to prevent depopulating enclosure and maintain existing rates of tillage.[22] These debates responded to one of the most intense rural crises of the early modern era. The years of dearth and famine around 1596–8 had markedly different effects in different regions; however, many communities, such as the parish of Whickham, four miles from Newcastle, suffered devastating increases in mortality rates in the wake of harvest failures.[23] As the legislators sought to comprehend and respond to the situation, they fashioned divergent representations of agrarian order, which at once highlight central ideals in agrarian discourse, and suggest the influence of certain rhetorical and representational conventions within contemporary society.[24]

Robert Cecil's Commons speech of 1601 appealed to a fundamentally agrarian sense of national identity. The secretary of state proclaimed to the House: 'I do not dwell in the Country, I am not acquainted with the Plough: But I think that whosoever doth not maintain the Plough, destroys this Kingdom.'[25] The basic logic of the argument should not be discounted, especially in the light of historical evidence documenting the dangers for rural communities of specialization in pastoral farming.[26] But Cecil's statement should also be considered within a wider cultural context. Speaking without 'acquaintance' with the countryside, Cecil

[22] The 1597 debates resulted in the enactment of two statutes: 'An Act against the decaying of towns and houses of husbandry' (39 Eliz. c. 1), and 'An Acte for the maintenance of Husbandrie & Tillage', or 'The Tillage Act' (39 Eliz. c. 2). Fragments of the debates may be pieced together from journals and manuscript sources.

[23] Recent studies have demonstrated the significant influence that local factors – including farming conditions and practices, integration within regional marketing networks and levels of communal and interpersonal support – could have upon the impact of dearth in early modern England (see especially Andrew B. Appleby, *Famine in Tudor and Stuart England* (Liverpool, 1978); John Walter and Roger Schofield, 'Famine, Disease and Crisis Mortality in Early Modern Society', in *Famine, Disease and the Social Order in Early Modern Society*, ed. Walter and Schofield (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 1–73; and Walter, 'The Social Economy of Dearth in Early Modern England', in *Famine, Disease and the Social Order*, pp. 75–128). On Whickham, see Keith Wrightson and David Levine, 'Death in Whickham', in *Famine, Disease and the Social Order*, pp. 143–5; and more generally on the crisis in these years, Appleby, *Famine*, pp. 109–21.

[24] The value of the language of parliamentary debates has been recognized, similarly, by Joyce Oldham Appleby, who comments that 'Traditional rhetorical themes mixed with pungent descriptions of commercial realities' in the parliaments of James I (*Economic Thought and Ideology in Seventeenth-Century England* (Princeton, 1978), p. 34).

[25] Sir Simonds D'Ewes, ed., *The Journals of All the Parliaments during the Reign of Queen Elizabeth* (London, 1682), p. 674.

[26] See Walter and Schofield on Appleby's '"thesis of the two Englands", the one vulnerable to famine, the other resistant to it' ('Famine, Disease and Crisis', pp. 21–5); and their assessment of sixteenth-century mortality crises in the north-west (p. 32).

relies upon – and expects his audience to accept – a particular representation of agrarian conditions. In this respect, his symbolic use of the plough draws upon its conventional association not only with grain production, but also with an entire socio-economic model based around the national primacy of arable farming and the ideal of a stable manorial structure.

In the parliament of 1597, Francis Bacon introduced the bills with the claim that they are 'not drawne with a pollished pene, but with a polished harte free from affeccion'. He argues that although

> it maie be thought ill and verie prejudiciall to Lordes, that have inclosed great groundes and pulled downe even whole Townes, and Converted them to Sheepe pastures, yett Considering the increase of people and the benefitt of the Common wealth – I doubt not but everie Man will deeme the Rivall [i.e. revival] of former Motheetten lawes in this poynt a prayse-worthy thing . . . for inclosures of groundes bringes Depopulacion, which bringes .1. Idlenes. 2 decay of Tillage, 3. Subversion of howses and decrease of Charitie, and charges to the poores mayntenance. 4. the Impoverishing of the State of the Realme . . . And I would be sorrie to see within this kingdome the peece of *Ovids* verse prove true. *Iam seges est ubi Troia fuit*, soe in England insteed of a whole Towne full of people, nought but Greenefeildes a Shepheard and his Dogg.[27]

Bacon develops a conventional attack on covetousness into an extended criticism of the processes of agrarian change. His construction of a strict logical progression charts an inexorable development from enclosure to depopulation, which undermines at once the moral basis of society (causing idleness and a decrease in charity) and the economic success of the commonwealth. His final complaint of towns being replaced by 'nought but Greenefeildes a Shepheard and his Dogg', assumes an essential morality inherent in arable farming within a common-field system, which can only be undermined by the conversion of land into the barren fields of sheep-farming.

Bacon propels his argument with a distinctive tone of complaint, directed against those who are perceived to be subverting the traditional order. A later, anonymous speaker underlines the significance of this rhetorical approach when he reflects upon Bacon's 'first motion that sounded in this place in a kinde of lamentacion', before exploiting this rhetorical potential himself:

[27] Hayward Townshend, 'Hayward Townshend's Journals', ed. A. F. Pollard and Marjorie Blatcher, *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, 12 (1934–5), p. 10.

> it is strange that men can be so unnaturall as to shake off the poore as if they were not parte of the bodye, and because we live not in a savage land, where wolfes can devoure sheepe, therefore we shalbe knowne to live in a more brutishe land, where shepe shall devoure men.[28]

His representation of an 'unnaturall' threat to the traditional order is based on the image of the body politic. Within this model of organic unity, the aspirations of enclosers are inevitably dangerous, analogous to a callous amputation of a 'parte of the bodye'. The image of sheep devouring men reinforces the vision of an agrarian world turned upside down, with a commonplace of agrarian complaint which dates back at least as far as Sir Thomas More's *Utopia*.[29] Later in the speech the speaker offers contrasting images of 'The eares of the greate sheep-masters' which 'hang at the doores of this House', hoping to exploit any leniency in the law, and the 'eyes of the poore' which 'are upon this Parliament . . . and sad for the want they yet suffer'. Parliament, therefore, must protect the passive 'poor' from the devious aggression of the enclosing 'sheepmasters'. He concludes with the declaration: 'We sit now in judgement over ourselves . . . therefore, as this bill entered at first with a short prayer God speed the plough: so I wish it may end with such success as the plough may speed the poore.' Within the order established by God, the land will always have the capacity to sustain the poor; the bills are nothing more nor less than an opportunity to place the force of national law behind that order.

In the same speech, the anonymous supporter of the bills draws attention to an oppositional discourse, focused around 'the Law of propertie, whereby men could say, (This is mine)'. This statement epitomizes the ideological conflict at the heart of the Commons debates. His identification of a 'Law of propertie' highlights the threat posed to moral economics by a discourse that embraces individual economic aspirations. The imperative that every person should 'know one's own', as chapter 6 will demonstrate, promotes radically new representations of the agrarian economy and social order. As many a moralist commented in the course of the period, the legal logic of 'meum and tuum' effectively shatters corporate notions of rural order. The 'law of property' champions the rights of individuals to develop and expand

[28] Hatfield MSS, vol. 176 (11); BL microfilm M485 (47). See also J. E. Neale, *Elizabeth I and Her Parliaments 1584–1601* (London, 1957), p. 340.

[29] *Utopia: The Complete Works of St Thomas More, Volume Four*, ed. Edward Surtz and J. H. Hexter (New Haven and London, 1965), pp. 65–7.

their own resources, free of the social duties and restraints that dominate the traditional order.

Henry Jackman, who opposed the bills in 1597, was at once a likely advocate of the 'law of property', and a particularly vulnerable target for the proponents of the legislation. J. E. Neale describes him as 'an independent type of man, resistant to mass emotion'; yet through his occupation as a London cloth-merchant and his representation of Wiltshire boroughs, he was also directly linked to the interests of the 'great sheepmasters'.[30] Indeed, it is perhaps partly a self-consciousness about these vested interests, coupled with an awareness of the cultural orthodoxy of his opponents' arguments, that causes Jackman to adopt a stiflingly defensive tone in his speech. He protests that, 'this Bill cannot without suspicion of impietye, cruelty and partialitye be impugned as thoughe the contradicts therof went about to take the use of the ploughe from the bowells of the earth, or the nourishment of bred from the bellyes of the poore'.[31] Despite his readiness to be counted among the reviled 'contradicts' of the bills, however, Jackman appears almost unable to enunciate his argument for want of an accepted oppositional language. His most clearly polemical statement exists only in the bold simplicity of his notes, where he writes, 'Men are not to be compelled by penalties but allured by profite to any good exercise.'[32] Here his belief in self-interest as a positive force signals an allegiance to an individualist ethic. Further, his use of the phrase 'good exercise' carries a crucial ambiguity, as it echoes language traditionally used to argue the moral value of labour within a subsistence economy, yet also prepares the way for a new ideology, within which 'good exercise' would suggest a more flexible concept of agrarian practice – for the 'good' of both individual and nation.

The contributions of Sir Walter Raleigh in 1601 present the most coherent and strident opposition to the bills. In fact Raleigh was particularly active on agrarian issues in 1601, as he took up the theme of regional specialization in another debate, declaring, 'I do not like the Constraining of Men to Manure, or use their Grounds at our Wills; but rather, let every Man use his Ground to that which it is most fit for, and therein use his own Discretion.'[33] In relation to the Tillage Act he focuses

[30] Neale, *Elizabeth I and Her Parliaments*, p. 341.

[31] BL Lansdowne MS 105, fol. 202[a]. [32] BL Lansdowne MS 83, fol. 198[b].

[33] The debate is over 'an act touching the Sowing of Hemp' (Hayward Townshend, *Historical Collections: or, An exact Account of the Proceedings of the Four last Parliaments of Q. Elizabeth* (London, 1680), p. 188).

more particularly on the individual farmer:

> I think this Law fit to be repealed; for many poor men are not able to find seed to sow so much as they are bound to plough, which they must do, or incur the Penalty of the Law. Besides, all Nations abound with Corn. *France* offered the Queen to serve *Ireland* with Corn for sixteen shillings a quarter, which is but two shillings the bushel; if we should sell it so here, the Ploughman would be beggered. The *Low-Country* man and the *Hollander,* which never soweth Corn, hath by his industry such plenty that they will serve other Nations. The *Spaniard* who often wanteth Corn, had we never so much plenty, will not be beholding to the *English* man for it, neither to the *Low-Country* men, nor to *France,* but will fetch it even of the very Barbarian. And therefore I think the best course is to set it at liberty, and leave every man free, which is the desire of a true *English* man.[34]

Raleigh begins with the tropes of the poor farmer and the plough, but overturns their traditional associations as he represents the legislation as a clumsy imposition on independent producers. Consequently the plough becomes symbolic of poverty rather than sustenance, and the ploughman an economic agent requiring only a free market in which to prosper. His concern with an international economy extends this process, placing English agrarian production in a broader context in an attempt to undermine his opponents' insistence on the nation as an insular, self-sufficient unit. His final, climactic sentence proffers a construction of national identity radically different from that of Cecil. Raleigh has struck the keynote of English capitalism, which would reverberate through the centuries to come.

The parliamentary debates aptly demonstrate the anxiety aroused throughout English society by the pressing realities of rural change. Given the importance of these processes for this study, it will be useful to review here the principal features which produced a period of sustained and often disturbing upheaval.[35] Arguably the single most important social development of the period was an explosion in the English population, which grew from a little over two million in 1500 to around five million in 1660.[36] Regional variations and the influence of

[34] D'Ewes, *Journals*, p. 674.

[35] The following outline of social and economic change is intended merely to introduce the field to non-specialists. It is principally indebted to C. G. A. Clay's *Economic Expansion and Social Change: England 1500–1700* (2 vols., Cambridge, 1984).

[36] Clay, *Economic Expansion*, vol. 1, p. 1; E. A. Wrigley and R. S. Schofield, *The Population History of England 1541–1871: A Reconstruction* (London, 1981), pp. 208–9.

internal migration meant that some areas experienced a rise considerably greater than the national average; the population of Leicestershire, for example, increased by 31 per cent between 1524 and 1563, and a further 58 per cent between 1563 and 1603.[37] Largely as a result of the greater pressure on existing resources, prices of basic commodities soared. Again, significant local differentiations and marked short-term fluctuations distort any attempt to generalize; however, the sheer magnitude of average price rises is impossible to ignore. C. G. A. Clay estimates that by the middle of the seventeenth century, agricultural products had risen approximately 600 per cent on the rates of 1500. The average wages for an agricultural labourer throughout the same period rose only by around 300 per cent.[38]

These trends created a pressing need for increased agricultural productivity. Across the countryside, farmers moved to bring into cultivation unused or lightly used land; 'in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries', Joan Thirsk writes, 'men made war upon the forests, moors, and fens with a zeal which they had not felt for some three hundred years'.[39] Further improvements in productivity, on both arable and pastoral land, were brought about by the introduction of new crops, stock, fertilizers and equipment, and by the spread of innovations such as up-and-down husbandry and the floating of watermeadows.[40] The financial incentives provided by an expanding market economy stimulated a concurrent trend toward increased regional specialization. Differences in soil and climate had long divided England into pastoral regions in the north and west, and mixed farming regions in the south and east. This broad distinction was reinforced by the economic developments of the sixteenth century, while certain regions also developed more particular local specialities, such as pig-keeping, horse-breeding or fruit cultivation.[41] A claim in the 1597 Commons debates that Shropshire might serve as 'the Dayrie howse to the whole Realme' remains firmly in the realm of rhetorical exaggeration; however, commercial farming, especially in areas with access to London, inevitably encouraged farmers to concentrate their efforts on produce best suited to their regions.[42]

[37] Clay, *Economic Expansion*, vol. 1, p. 26.
[38] Clay, *Economic Expansion*, vol. 1, pp. 43–5, 50.
[39] Thirsk, 'The Farming Regions of England', in *AHEW IV*, p. 2.
[40] See Kerridge, *Agricultural Revolution*.
[41] Thirsk, 'Farming Regions', pp. 2–5.
[42] 'Hayward Townshend's Journals', p. 16; Clay, *Economic Expansion*, vol. 1, pp. 116–25; Thirsk, 'Farming Regions'.