

Reviews

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Eric L. Jones, *Landed Estates and Rural Inequality in English History: From the Mid-Seventeenth Century to the Present*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2018. 9783319748689. £44.99. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-74869-6> ebook. £35.99

This latest book by Eric Jones reopens debate about the English landed estates in a most telling, forthright and sustained way. The great estates, and their survivals today, have of course been assessed, defended or challenged in many ways. They have been politically the subject of intense debate – one thinks, for example, of some of Lloyd George’s speeches and policies. However, I cannot recall having read such a negative appraisal of them as is contained in this book. The argument here is made on almost every conceivable front: economic, social, cultural, political; in terms of wasted or misallocated resources; the misdirection of industrial or social ambition to landed holdings; social morality or its supposed absence among the landed class; the dissipation of effort into hunting and rural sports; the avoidably low rural wages; poor housing; the eschewal of education for the labouring poor; the clearance of villages by emparking and other means; the closure of access and footpaths; the perpetuation of gross inequality; and so on.

On the issue of emparking and gardens, for example, Jones writes that ‘One aim of this book is to counter the bland nature of so much literature on parks, estates and great houses – the roses which disguise the rural dunghill on which they were erected and on which the nostalgia and tourist industries rely’ (p. ix). Thus one gains the impression that much of the literary and touristic appreciation of Capability Brown, Humphrey Repton *et al.*, let alone the ‘country house’ genre, misses the dominant issues: those of the persisting long-term power structures, inequality and landed appropriation that summoned such designs into play. The author asks what were the opportunity costs of this kind of Arcadian scenery? On the issue of economic misallocation, estates apparently were ‘perpetually dragging against change and causing resources to be sunk in rural gentility’ (p. 9). They held back English economic growth, were often socially cruel or inhumane (one chapter title includes the word ‘rapine’), and were owned by a class of paramount selfishness – ‘the landed class had no social conscience’ (p. 64) – whose overriding concern was to exclude others.

Much of this argument is pitched in general terms, with varied regional examples and some particular case studies, though often from Wiltshire (very noticeable in the index) where Jones’s labouring family were historically connected. The book is one of the Palgrave Studies in Economic History, with ‘sources and further reading’ at the end of each chapter, presumably aiming at a wide readership. I found the sustained attack on estates lively, thought-provoking, encompassing in criteria, sketchy in method, and unexpected from this author. It has the tone of some left-wing historians of the

1960s, or of much earlier radical Liberal attacks on landed estates. E. L. Jones has had a very impressive publishing career. There are (famous) articles by him dating back to 1964 or earlier, and I cannot think of any other living British rural historian with such outstanding longevity of publication, nor one who has seemingly moved in such a radical direction. Perhaps this has been the influence of Australia – Jones affiliates to La Trobe University. F. M. L. Thompson, Gordon Mingay and other estate defenders would turn in their graves, though murmurs of appreciation would occur in the comradesly section of Highgate Cemetery. Prince Charles would groan at this book, though I know some short-lease tenants of the Duchy of Cornwall who would quietly exult at reading it.

One could make contrary arguments to some of those found here – for example on the efficiency of agricultural or road organisation, or the roles of some land agents, or the woodland preservation linked to hunting. And there were some benevolent aspects to many estates that could have been alluded to, complex though they may be to judge, given the nature of deference and ideas of belonging among the poor. The Vernon family in Sudbury (Derbyshire) for example, an estate village I have studied in depth, attracted intense loyalty into recent years among long-established villagers, for well-attested historical reasons, and there were others like this. It would have been useful to make wider comparisons, to countries beyond ‘Scandinavia’ where smaller units of ownership predominated. Britain *did* industrialise first, despite (or because of?) the landed inequalities and injustices described in this book. And the twentieth-century rise of a ‘new yeomanry’, the subject of an entire book by James Wentworth Day (published as early as 1952), might have received more attention. Is it really the case that the British State was, perhaps above all else, the guarantor of rent extraction: government as ‘a massive rent-seeking machine’? (p. 109). Alternatively, if one wished to intensify arguments about abuse of power, an extraordinary world of sexual abuse and rape on some nineteenth-century estates could have been opened up via Walter’s *My Secret Life*.

However one assesses or adds to the arguments, Jones has provided a valuable work that marshals the adverse case against English landed estates and their owners. The book must be commended for that, and should be pitched into debate as saliently representing that standpoint. We now have about 0.05 per cent of the population owning over half of all rural land. What does it take for many of the English to question their polite reverence for country estates, great houses and gardens? How does the National Trust acquiesce in this? Do such attitudes serve any useful aspirational purpose? In a post-CAP farming environment and with priorities of industrial, digital and scientific innovation, let alone with issues of rural housing and countryside access, these assessments of the landed estates and their surviving long-term owners may assume much importance in public and political discussion. Will such estates continue and should taxation and inheritance policies be firmly adjusted, as for example in Japan under Douglas MacArthur from August 1945? Can or will the contrary arguments be made, and would anyone now be brave enough to try? It will be interesting to see.

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