THE LOTHIAN FARM SERVANT

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Fashions change in historical studies and in other intellectual activities such as music and philosophy in the same way as the more observable physical changes in dress taste and dress sense. In the last twenty or thirty years, the emphasis in the study of history has moved away from political and constitutional history, and from what might be called narrative history, towards social and economic history or sociological studies. The consequent widening of the field of historical studies has introduced technical difficulties which the disparity of sources can present, but social historians at least have tried a more far-reaching synthesis and have been drawing on historical sources hitherto unexploited.

Never was the poetic comment 'for Scotland's greatly altered now' truer than of the present, or so we feel within our own experience or the experience of our immediate forebears whose traditions we have inherited. This sort of feeling is necessarily subject to many qualifications but with the confidence inspired by the new social history, it prompts us now to examine the lives of our forefathers and of identifiable groups such as the farm servants of the Lothians; it prompts us especially to examine the lives of those who have previously been beneath the gaze of the old guard political and narrative historians and even of the avant-garde economic determinists. Even the old-style Marxist historian would dismiss the Lothian farm servant as of negligible importance in the march of history because he failed to play a significant role in the class struggle and did little to promote the labour theory of value because he rarely enjoyed the fruits of a money wage.

One important reason for studying such a group in our community has had very little airing. The dominant fact of the history of the countryside in the last two hundred years is the so-called 'agricultural revolution' which began the changes which made the countryside what it is today. The success of these changes depended on numbers at a time when labour was abundant and cheap. The new husbandry was labour intensive, with a range of new crops such as turnips, and the

Figure 1. Spring work on a Midlothian farm in the mid-eighteenth century as depicted on a table tombstone at Liberton Kirk. The heavy Old Scotch Plough is drawn by a team of horses and oxen. In the background, the man broadcasting the grain one-handed from a sheet is followed by the harrows to cover up the seed.

care of these crops requiring extra labour for up to three-quarters of the year. The agricultural revolution therefore had little to do with machinery. Yet we have little insight into the lives, attitudes, strengths and weaknesses of the rural workers on whose broad backs the agricultural revolution rested. So far, historians have made little of this subject probably because most social historians have been economic historians and they are not happy dealing with the numberless whose wages even are not susceptible to tabular treatment, being wages in kind even into the present century.

We now tend to turn a more sympathetic and penetrating eye on those who previously seem to have been excluded from history, those groups such as the farm servants who had little opportunity to express themselves adequately enough for the history books to take any notice; they were after all unenfranchised until within the last hundred years, until the third Reform Act of Gladstone's last Ministry in 1884. Much of the evidence on which we are forced to depend has a strong administrative bias because it is written from above and because the

farm servants were anonymous. It is rare to find for example anything comparable to Alexander Somerville's *Autobiography of a Working Man* (1848). This is a complicated story which tells us much of the labourer's life in Berwickshire and the Lothians. Somerville is unequivocal in his criticism of human nature and makes the point that there was no monopoly of tyranny and repression amonst the aristocracy, but that it was blatantly practised at all levels of society. He suffered in particular from the strongly entrenched social distinction between the artisan and the labourer. Another comtemporary autobiographical work, incidentally much more sentimental than Somerville, shows us how farm servants stood in the kicking order:

> 'Her father, in the prime of life, had been a farm-servant, but from increasing years and infirmities, he had lately abandoned this employment for the more humble occupation of a labourer.' (Bethune 1884, 64).

Farm servants have of course been known to have cultivated a form of self-expression, which has given them a firm following and has been the object of recent revivals of interest. This was the bothy ballad or corn-kister, that rough and ready expression of independence which belonged more typically to the north-east of Scotland. But it may be fair to claim that the unmarrried farm servant, horseman or ploughman living in the bothy was not necessarily the archetype of Scottish farm workers. Because the bothy indweller has attracted his own brand of glamour, we fail to realise that he was not typical of farm workers, and the real pattern of regional variation in types of farm service has consequently been masked.

The employment of unmarried farm servants in some areas of the country was governed by what has been called the 'Bothy System' (Skirving 1878, 138-144). The large arable farms of Perthshire, Fife, Angus, and the Mearns or Kincardineshire hired large numbers of men who were lodged in a sparsely furnished room or rooms in the steading. Bothies were widely denounced in the nineteenth century as immoral by the moralists such as the parish ministers, and unsanitary by the growing band of sanitation and public health experts in the period when there was a growing feeling in the face of Malthusian doctrines that the welfare of the people should be an object of communal responsibility. In other areas of Scotland such as the north-east and

south-west, areas of small family farms, the 'Kitchen System' was the custom by which one or two unmarried farm servants were fed and boarded in the farm house. This was a more intimate arrangement probably comparable with earlier times, and remained as typical of these areas until within living memory. In a letter to his son in 1911, a Lanarkshire farmer descibed the complement of his household:

> 'We have four Irishmen at present all to meat, two servant men and a servant girl, grandmother and the family which at present includes James, John, Tom and Alick. She has all the cooking and baking to do for these besides the wakening of them in the morning.' (Richens 1981, 46).

The distinction between the Bothy System, the Kitchen System and the Family System, the employment that is of predominantly married farm servants, really established themselves during the period of agricultural improvement in the late eighteenth century.

In the Lothians, it was the Family System which governed the employment of farm servants. Here, as in other areas of south Scotland and the Border country, the principal farm servant was the *hind*, an Old English term signifying a domestic servant or member of the household. In the Lothians, he was specifically a skilled farm servant, generally married and himself providing labour for seasonal work. This labour was considered as part of the wages of his house. He was housed in a cottage on the farm and received money wages, wages in kind and certain perquisites in addition. Depending on the size of the farm, the hinds' cottages would often be laid out in a row, and together with the houses of other farm workers such as the steward and the shepherd, would form a substantial community. Both the name *hind* and the status in rural society are known from the late Middle Ages onwards to our own time.

For the subject of farm work in the Lothians, we are fortunate in having a document of enormous importance which has survived from the period of the seventeenth century which is often characterised as a time of civil war and religious bigotry. Indeed this document suggests that conditions in the countryside had never been more settled, that a degree of farming improvement and enclosure had taken place, and that there was a relatively large and stable population of farm workers in the Lothians. It is an 'Assessment of Wages made by the Justices of

the Peace for the Shire of Edinburgh' in the year 1656. Aside from this particular period of the Commonwealth, from the Cromwellian conquest of 1651 until the Restoration in 1660, when different conditions obtained, Justices of the Peace were generally ineffective during the seventeenth century because of competing jurisdictions such as the courts of Barony and Regality. These were abolished during the regime of the Commonwealth, and in 1656, Justices of the Peace were appointed to every Sheriffdom with a wide ranging jurisdiction in criminal and civil cases and, most importantly from our point of view, to fix wages and to set prices on craftsmen's work. These were of course fixing maximum wages and prices, and not minimum levels. The Justices of the Peace defined the work of the Lothian farm servant in the following terms:

> 'A Whole Hind or Labourer of the Ground ... should perfectly know everything belonging to husbandry and should also be able to perform all and every manner of work relating thereunto: As to plough, to sow, to stack, to drive carts etc. He is commonly called a Whole Hind because he is to keep and to entertain with himself an able Fellow-Servant, and so undertakes the labour of a whole plough.' (Firth 1899, 405).

We should be careful not to read too much into this fussy document, drawn up at a time when the new Justices of the Peace were defining their responsibilities and extending their new jurisdiction and generally interfering in all spheres. The level of wages at least was bound to vary unbeknown and beyond the control of the Justices, probably falling down to subsistence rates rather than rising. The wages stipulated seem high by the standards of their time although they are wages in kind and therefore subject to changes in value as the price of grain rose and fell. According to contemporary documents, for most areas of the country including the Lothians, wages did not rise to or above the 1656 level until the second half of the eighteenth century (See for example Fenton 1966, 35-44). The statement or job description however of the farm servants whose wages were being regulated is probably reasonably true to life. The *whole hind* as distinguished from the *half hind* had to provide the able fellow servant because the management of a plough and a plough team of oxen and horses was a task for more than one man. The heavy wooden plough, known to later writers as the 'old Scotch plough', was held by one man walking between the stilts and handles, and was drawn by a team of

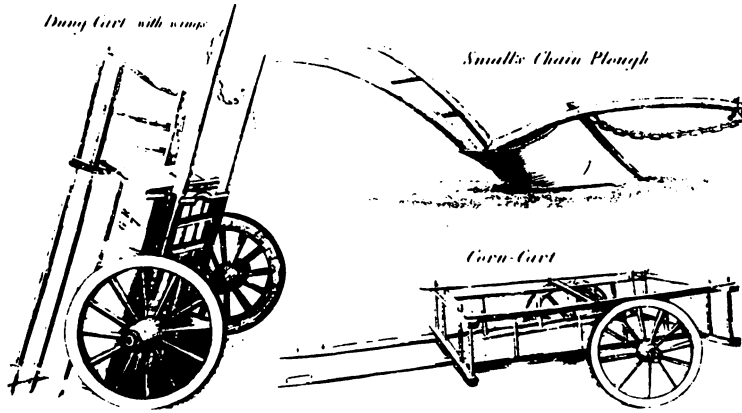

Figure 2. James Small's improved swing or chain plough made at Ford, Midlothian, c 1785, with wooden beam and stilts and cast-iron mouldboard. Also shown are an improved box cart with a frame to increase the loading capacity and a hay or corn cart of a Midlothian type sometimes known as a 'rung cart'. George Robertson, *General View of the Agriculture of the Country of Midlothian*, Edinburgh 1795.

four, six or more animals yoked in pairs and controlled by the other man. A third man or a laddie might be kept busy keeping the coulter and breast of the plough clear of stones, turf and debris.

The larger 'mains' farms farmed by the laird or a principal tenant, with a high arable yield and a large work force, normally afforded the employment of a man to thrash the grain through the year. He was the barnman, also known as the *tasker* or *lotman*, who threshed the grain from the straw with the wooden flail on the clay or wood threshing floor of the barn. A distinguishing mark of his employment was that he was paid by the piece, and by extension, the name was often given to a labourer who received wages in kind according to the amount of work which he performed. The minister of Whittinghame parish, East Lothian, described the taskers at the end of the eighteenth century:

> 'The *taskers* are those who are employed in threshing out the corn; and they receive one boll of every 25, or the twenty-fifth part for their labour; and this has been their fixed and stated wages, as far back as can be remembered.' (Ewan 1792, 353)

This was the end of the existence of this breed of farm servant whose job was taken over by the threshing machine, the first successful model of which was patented by Andrew Meikle of East Lothian in 1788. In the following decade, threshing mills were built all over the Lothians to deal with increased arable acreages and increased yields.

The tasker was generally one of the unmarried farm servants of the farm who fed in the farm house and slept there or in the stable. It could be a convivial gathering round the goodman's board; the master and his family sat at the head and the house servants, inservants or farm servants below them, a scene which Scott described so graphically in *Old Mortality*:

> 'The Laird of Milnwood kept up all old fashions which were connected with economy. It was therefore still the custom of his house, as it had been universal in Scotland about fifty years before, that the domestics after having placed the dinner on the table, sat down at the lower end of the board and partook of the share assigned to them in company with their masters ... Old Robin who was butler, valet-de-chambre, footman, gardner, and what not in the house of Milnwood, placed on the table an immense charger of broth, thickened with oatmeal and colewort, in which ocean of liquid was indistinctly discovered by close observers two or three short ribs of lean mutton sailing to and fro. Two huge baskets, one of bread made of barley and pease, and one of oatcakes flanked this standing dish ... The large black jack filled with very small beer of Milnwood's own brewing, was allowed to the company at discretion, as were the bannocks, cakes and broth, but the mutton was reserved for the heads of the family ... A huge kebbock, a cheese that is, made of ewe's milk mixed with cow's milk, and a jar of salt butter were in common to the company.' (Scott 1893, 96-97)

As the mid seventeenth century regulations stipulated, the hind was bound to provide a woman whose labour at harvest paid the rent of his house and who was to be on call as a day labourer whenever required. This would be an important condition periodically to help with the threshing and cleaning of grain and its preparation for market, or to bring in the fuel, coal if the farm was within reach of the coast or peat if it was inland. The married hind was always the important unit of farm labour in the south of Scotland and parts of the Border country until within living memory and the labour which he was obliged to provide was assumed to be his wife, his sister, his daughters or other members of the family. If, by chance, he had no able-bodied female relatives, he had to engage one or two women or girls to 'live in'. The

women outworkers were known as *bondagers* in south-east Scotland and their work as *bondage work*. These terms do not appear in the 1656 Assessment but the conditions of work are outlined and in general terms, they still held good for the late nineteenth century. In the seventeenth century, the woman worker was expected to:

> 'Shear dayly in Harvest; while their Masters corn be cut down ... to be assisting with their husbands in winning their Masters Hay and peats, setting of his lime-kilns, Gathering, Filling, casting and spreading their master's muck, and other sort of Fuilzie, fit for Gooding and Improving the Land ... to work all manner of Werk, at Barns and Byres, to bear and carry the stacks from the Barnyards to the Barns for Threshing, carry meat to the Goods from the Barn to the Byres, Muck, Cleange and Dight the Byres and Stables, and to help to winnow and dight the Cornes.' (Firth *op cit* 406)

The 1656 Assessment lists the constituents of the farm servant's wages in a year as a cot house and a kailyard, fifteen bolls of oats (a quantity amounting to something over half a ton), six firlots of peas, ground for sowing six firlots of oats and a firlot of bere, and grazing for two or three cows. No money wages are mentioned although the large quantity of oats could perhaps be converted into money either by the farmer or by the farm servant. There might have been circumstances when the farmer would convert the wages in kind into money, if for example the prices of grain were low after a good season. This seems the more likely when as Lord Belhaven complained the Lothian farmers had to pay their rents entirely in grain. We have no evidence for this, but we do know that, at least in later years, the hinds converted quantities of their oats into cash by selling it to local merchants or bartering it for other goods. Payment in kind had the added disadvantage for the farm servant of being affected by the rise and fall in grain prices adopted annually by the striking of the *Fiars* which were the prices fixed legally in each county. If grain prices remained static, then wages tended to remain the same, perhaps for a period of up to a century, a notion almost inconceivable at this moment in time.

Payments in kind constituted the largest and most important element in the wages of farm servants until the late nineteenth century, and they were consequently the major influence in shaping diet. For centuries, oatmeal was the most important constitutent of people's

diet and it is of course a pale reflection of this that the eating of porridge is still regarded humourously as a trait of national character. In the parish accounts of the late eighteenth century, written when agricultural improvement was well advanced in the Lothians, the wages of farm servants seemed to be showing little tendency to rise although they were in receipt of new perquisities such as potatoes and coal. The minister of Dirleton described the practice in his parish in 1792:

> 'The farmers have both servants in their houses, and cottagers, for the purposes of agriculture. The latter are considered to be more steady and less given to change; and are generally trusted with some degree of oversight on the farm. The wages of these cottagers, or *hinds* as they are here called, is 9 bolls of oats, two bolls of barley, two bolls of pease, a cow maintained summer and winter; and if they sow and stack the grain, one firlot of wheat and a pair of shoes. All servants, day-labourers and hinds have their diet in harvest.' (Glen 1792, 197)

One of the more enduring and doggedly persistent images with which the study of our past has been saddled is that of the Middle Ages as an unbroken continum with feudalism as a universal social system and farming as unsophisticated, primitive and unchanging. This image was the creation of eighteenth century 'Enlightenment' and the agricultural writers of the improving period. They commended themselves to their heirs and successors by casting the lives and work of their forebears in a bad light. Agricultural change and advance, which was to be so prominent in the Lothians in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, was in fact preceded by a long tradition of change, adjustment and innovation.

A set of *Reports on the State of Certain Parishes in Scotland* describes nine East Lothian parishes in 1627. It is clear that the value of land was rising in this period at the end of the reign of James VI, and this was due not only to a measure of inflation but also to economic activity. What emerges from these *Reports* is that lime was being used on a large scale in these areas especially where lime was available, and that crop yields and value of land were also rising; lime was presumably here being applied to the outfield as much as the existing infield arable ground. (Macgrigor 1835, 44, 51, 67, 91.)

An anonymous pamphlet published in 1699, *The Countrey-Man's*

Rudiments or Advice to the Farmers of East Lothian, gives us an insight into farming in the Lothians in the late seventeenth century. The author of this has been reliably identified as John Hamilton, 2nd Lord Belhaven, whose stormy political career made anonymity a sensible expediency for a neutral subject such as husbandry (Watson and Amery 1931, 62-63). He describes a relatively advanced scheme of cropping on the infield with four breaks of pease, wheat, bere or barley, and oats in this order. The inclusion of wheat and legumes was a considerable advance on the assumed infield limited rotation of bere, oats and oats. All the manure went on the rigs of the infield which were growing wheat and bere. He recommended the practice of keeping the outfield in fallow, liming it and folding beasts on it in small turf enclosures; he discouraged the taking of more than three crops in succession off this ground subsequently. While outfield was regularly dunged and limed therefore, it could be treated as infield for practical purposes. If we assume that Belhaven was observing known practices, one of the main changes of the period of agricultural improvement, the intaking and enclosing of outfield, was prefigured a century in advance of its generally accepted chronology.

If many country folk were depressed in society through the economic circumstances of late medieval Scotland, some were enabled to scramble upwards and to set themselves up in independence and relative comfort. In the sixteenth century for example and especially in the years before and immediately succeeding the Reformation, the process known as the 'feuing of kirklands' transformed many tenant farmers into landowners and created the class known as 'bonnet lairds'. (Sanderson 1982.) This group in Scottish society was later strengthened by wadsetting which introduced another group of semi-owner occupiers between lairds and tenants, those who as creditors occupied land as a security in return for the loan of money and received the rents. At the same time, tacks or written agreements were common by the eighteenth century, and were customarily becoming longer. Arguably therefore, Scottish rural society had already acquired a class of some dynamism and motivation, secure in its possessions and responsive to market forces.

For rural Scotland, the period of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was a period of great change, if not of greater

change than that which the present generations have experienced. Today we are inclined to look back to an earlier age with a sentimental eye, and works of history and literature encourage this. The writers of the period of agricultural improvement were not generally sentimental about times past but were energetic publicists of new systems. Scott at least was trying to capture the atmosphere of times past. His younger contemporary, John Galt (1779-1839), explained his reflections and insights on contemporary Scottish society as 'theoretical histories' rather than novels, a fair distinction when the 'novel' as an art form was still in its infancy. In his *Annals of the Parish* published in 1821, Galt chronicles the changes in a Lowland parish between 1760 and 1810. It is a fair reflection of the educated or professional viewpoint that Galt makes his narrator, the parish minister, approve of the changed circumstance of rural life. Rev. Micah Balwhidder, sometimes impressed, sometimes bemused by the changes taking place in his day, is a traditionalist, a conservatively inclined observer, who sees much good coming from 'improvement' and 'social progress':

> 'The laird was advised to let the policy out as a farm, and the tack was taken by Mr Coulter, than whom there had been no such man in the agriculturing line among us before ... Of the stabling, Mr Coulter made a comfortable dwelling-house; and having rugget out the evergreens and other unprofitable plants, ... he turned all to production, and it was wonderful what an increase he made the land bring forth. He was from far beyond Edinburgh, and had got his insight among the Lothian farmers, so that he knew what crop should follow another, and nothing could surpass the regularity of his rigs and furrows. – Well do I remember the admiration that I had, when, in a fine sunny morning of the first spring after he took the Breadland, I saw his braird on what had been the cows' grass, as even and pretty as if it had been worked and stripped in the loom with a shuttle.' (Galt 1910, 53.)

Agricultural improvement does of course sound hackneyed but we must remember that it was the catch-phrase of an age. It was the creation of eighteenth century Scottish philosophers, a bland and optimistic attitude the development of which made Edinburgh the Athens of the North and honed the Scottish intellect hopefully to contemporary minds to disregard its provincial past. Among other strands of the philosophy of the day, there was a keen enthusiasm for the theory of man as a social being whose motives for action were fundamentally constructive though selfish, and were susceptible to the manipulations of the learned in order to achieve progress and the

maximisation of the public good; this was known as *improvement*, and agriculture was a part of this self-conscious pursuit of social progress. Many of those who sought to reform eighteenth century Scottish man were practical men and knowledgeable farmers like Sir John Sinclair.

The movement of course had its sinister side however as far as agriculture was concerned because its proponents failed to see that progress was not universally kind. In his 'County Report' published in 1805, Robert Somerville described the decline of the joint-tenancy farmtouns, the conversion of infield and outfield into enclosed farms in the preceding half century, and some of the social consequences. Among his contemporaries, he is unusual in admitting that the changes were not universally applauded:

> 'Of late years the size of farms has been considerably augmented ... About 50 years ago the farms were very small, and the houses, in place of being distinct each in the middle of its own land, four, five or more together, with their different cottages and dependents enjoyed certain liberties, not quite consistent with the mode in which modern husbandry is carried on. A great part of these villages are now in a state of decay and, in their place, the distinct farm-house, with its own offices and cottages, is almost everywhere to be seen. This change and the separation of the inhabitants, has contributed not a little to increase the general and unfounded clamour that has been raised against large farms.' (Somerville 1805, 51.)

We speak of the Highland Clearances but have ignored the Lowland Clearances. The changes of the day were catalogued in the monumental and multi-penned Statistical Account of parishes of the 1790s and 1840s master-minded by Sir John Sinclair, but the strains and stresses of agricultural improvement on the society of the day find little space in its pages apart form ministers' complaints of the expanding parish poor rolls and the increasing need for assessment of the heritors,what amounted in the polite society of the day to a social blunder by the minister rather than a dire necessity. If we look at the pages of the Old Statistical Account of the Parish of Ancrum for example, we read of social and moral progress but learn nothing of the painful details described in the autobiography of one of the parishioners, John Younger. He and his family were ejected in what he described as:

> 'the improvement of laying six or ten small farms into one'.

Local farming improvement he characterised as:

> 'the ideas floating on the surface of a baronet's fancy, under the tuition of a land doctor, expounding his projections of improvement'.

The new enclosed farm was let to one of the sitting joint tenants who, acting the emperor, shot the Youngers' hens for straying over his newly ploughed ground. As Younger concluded this sad episode:

> 'These matters, so frivolous in comparison with the crash of empires, were as great in our little cottar family as the loss of North America was just previously to the British Crown.' (Younger 1881, 56-7, 59.)

Subjective comment seemed to make little impression unless it was the opinion of an improving laird or a scientifically-minded minister. The sensationalism of pens such as Younger's failed to make newspaper headlines or to shake established thinking. Objective comment was generally heard or read with approval and was rarely controversial. It is difficult therefore for the historian to produce a balanced account of the changes of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, to catalogue the respective fortunes of the winners and losers, and to learn of the victims of agricultural improvement whose fates were never chronicled by the perpetrators and the publicists. One commentator is read and quoted by historians today as avidly as his work was devoured by his contemporaries. William Cobbett, the political journalist, was not afraid of controversy; he courted controversy. In October 1832, on one of his travels round the countryside of Britain, he seems to have paused on the south-eastern verge of the Lothians and recorded his impressions.

He wrote in a vivid and colourful style and what he saw were 'factories for making corn and meat carried on principally by means of horses and machinery'. He wrote in a tone of mingled admiration and anger:

> 'Just at the little village of Cockburnspath, we get into the County of Haddington ... and such cornfields, and fields of turnips, such turnips in those fields, such stackyards and such a total absence of dwelling houses as never, surely, were seen in any county upon earth. You very frequently see more than a hundred stacks in one yard, each containing an average from fifteen to twenty quarters of wheat or of oats; all built in the neatest manner; thatched extremely well, the thatch bound

down by exterior bands, spars not being used owing to the scarcity of wood. In some of these yards the threshing-machine is worked by horses, but in the greater part by steam; and where coals are at a distance, by wind or water; so that in this country of the finest land that ever way seen, all the elements seem to be pressed into the amiable service of sweeping the people from the face of the earth.' (Watson and Hobbs 1951. 57-58.)

The excitable Cobbett had come to Scotland to sniff out material to feed the fires of political radicalism. In those heady years of the great Reform Bill and the beginnings of extension of franchise, he might be justly indignant of the state of the rural work force but he misjudged the Scottish situation. He was of course exasperated that the Scottish farm servant was not in revolt like his southern neighbour. Prices, demand and wages had continued to fall in the years following the end of the Napoleonic Wars. Work became scarce and in a classic expression of discontent, workers destroyed machinery such as threshing mills, the technology which had robbed them of their work with the flail, and attacked the property of the farmers in revenge for the employers' conspiracy in holding down wages to starvation levels. There was no expression of discontent in Scotland comparable to the so-called 'Captain Swing' riots in southern England in 1830 and 1831, not that the Scottish farm worker was especially protected from the effects of the capitalisation of farming. Cobbett interpreted the Scottish farm workers' quiescence as subjugation although by comparison with England, the wage level of Scottish farm workers had not dropped back so sharply, even though by the early 1830s, grain prices and hence wages in kind were falling back to pre-Napoleonic War levels. Apart from an active prejudice against Scots, Cobbett was of course a man with a political cause and he must be read with caution. Where else can we turn for a balanced account of the period from contemporary pens?

The agricultural grand tour became a popular pastime in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. These grand tours were written up and provide us with excellent accounts of the state of husbandry of the day. We should remember that, apart from the personal entertainment of the authors, they were designed either to praise or to scorn the object of their view, in so far as the author was looking at advanced methods of farming or traditional methods. It may be significant that the most famous grand tourists from England were

skilled pens but useless farmers. The English tourists' motives for visiting Scotland were mixed. The much vaunted Arthur Young, the colleague of Sir John Sinclair on the Board of Agriculture created in 1793 and its first Secretary, is the father of agricultural journalim. He is much given to hyperbole and we should not lay great store by his opinions and pretty prosy observations, although they have been frequently served up as satisfactory contemporary descriptions of the countryside. As we might expect, he praised what he saw as enterprise, usually of course a moneyed effort, and upbraided ignorance and sloth – the typical self-righteous moralising of the 'improving' era and a persistent theme of improving literature which has tended to govern our view of the past.

The Scottish agricultural writers were altogether in a different class. Shrewd observers to a man, they drew lessons from where they could and were sympathetic to their fellow countrymen rather than unreservedly scornful. Of considerable interest to us although not as well known as they ought to be, are the writings of John Wilson, the able son of a tenant farmer on the Earl of Findlater's Banffshire estates. The Earl paid John Wilson to go on the agricultural grand tour. Wilson took the opportunity to check out contemporary primary sources and visited the great Arthur Young. While acknowledging his power of penmanship, Wilson was candid about his lack of success as a farmer. (Symon 1959, 145-6.) Another writer of this period is Andrew Wight, tenant of the Murrays between Pathhead and Humbie, who was employed first by the Commissioners for the Forfeited Annexed Estates to survey the Jacobite properties and make suggestions for their improvement. Such was his success with this work, that in 1773 and in the succeeding nine years, he travelled the country during the summer months for the Commissioners covering in all about 3,000 miles. His tours were published in six substantial volumes by the Commissioners with the title *The Present State of Husbandry in Scotland*. In some ways, the first tour makes the most interesting reading because he describes everything which he saw, both the old and the new, and it is significant that apart from the Lothians, most farmers in most areas still farmed in the traditional and well-tried ways.

In July 1776, Andrew Wight was in East Lothian, presumably

taking the chance of a lull in farming operations between the hay and the harvest to leave his own farm. His description of the area bears out the comments of the time that the advanced 'Norfolk system' of agriculture had been adopted and that unlike almost every other area of Scotland, arable predominated over grazing and animal husbandry. He begins:

> 'East Lothain possesses the unrivalled honour of having led the way in Scotland to the improvement of husbandry, of enclosing and of artificial grasses. The soil indeed, and climate, are inviting, being preferable to any I have found in my surveys. ... their general bent has been to the culture of grain. As their rents are paid in kind, and as the country is narrow, the same mode of husbandry prevails everywhere, especially among the oldest farmers.'

Later, he reports on the wages prevalent in the area, showing that though farmers' rents were paid in kind, farm servants' wages were mixed and comparatively high:

> Labourers wages here have arisen to ten pence per day in summer, and seven pence or eight pence in winter. The wages of an ordinary ploughman is, beside maintenance, three pounds six shilling and eight pence yearly in money, one firlot barley, three shillings for a pair of shoes, and the carriage of a cart-load of coals. Where the ploughman is not maintained in his master's house, he gets, weekly, two pecks oat-meal, and four pence.' (Wight 1778, 130,174.)

Agricultural improvement had raised at least the status of the hind. The handling of the plough became a skilled and demanding job. The heavy Old Scotch Plough was replaced in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries by lighter two-horse ploughs of the type patented by the Berwickshire ploughwright James Small in 1767. The laying out of the enclosed fields and the setting up of the furrows depended on a variety of factors such as soil and weather conditions, the crop to be planted, field drainage, and the use of the field for pasture or crop rotations. The skills required were recognised by the holding of ploughing matches which rewarded these with silver medals and money. Such were the standards of work and the enthusiasm generated that the prizes were extended in the course of the nineteenth century to the 'dressing' of the horses, that is for the condition and decoration of the harness, and by implication to the breeding and handling of horses. The numbers attracted to these events grew and grew and prizes were even given for the first man on the field or the

best-looking ploughman or the ploughman with the largest family. All the main elements of agricultural improvements began in the Lothians and the fact that the Lothians led the field was generally recognised.

The work horse of this system was the Clydesdale. Its precise origins as a breed are shrouded in mystery, the mystery being compounded slightly in order to give it roots independent of our southern neighbours, to demonstrate that it owed nothing to the Shire Horse of England whose ancestors after all had carried the heavy armoured knights against our footsoldiers at Bannockburn and Flodden. They have always been regarded as placid and good-natured animals and generally easy to break in, and obedient, responsive and intelligent when broken in and accustomed to the work. They were seldom vicious and if they were, it might be fairly said that this was a reflection of their master. The bad horse was one that had been badly handled. Horsemen invariably speak warmly of their charges and often express their admiration of the horse's innate skills. Mr. Allan Hamilton of Edinburgh and East Lothian paid the following tribute and his description has been echoed by many old hands up and down the country:

> 'We used to set up what we called feering poles; ye went tae a great big stubble field and started ploughing and ye would set up these poles right across the field and ye'd have your horses at the end of the field. And they would stand there until you'd set the poles and come back. And you'd set them facing the poles across the field, and they'd go straight as a die. Straighter probably than what you'd do yourself. And I always admired that about them.' (Hamilton 1981.)

As the farms grew larger, they created their own communities. A visit to large farms in East Lothian such as Fenton Barns will demonstrate the force of this development. They increased their arable acreages, most notably during the Napoleonic Wars and then after a period of recession in the 1830s; and they diversified their systems of husbandry. By the 1840s, the Lothians were experiencing the increasing cultivation of potatoes and the full development of a 6-course rotation with a full 'break' of potatoes and one of turnips. This rotation usually went with a large winter stock of sheep and cattle, often more than could be fed of the roots and consequently many farmers incurred large bills for winter feed such as oil cake. But the stock made a mountain of muck as well as a tidy profit, and the muck

which was handled with a religious intensity was ploughed back into the rotations. Permanent grass and pasture were unknown in the coastal country except of course for the rye-grass and clover of the 6-course rotation.

As the agricultural improvements progressed the farmer aspired to a small and genteel neo-classical mansion house and separation from his farm servants. Apart from what one assumes to be social attitudes and pretensions, there was the more pressing need to accommodate more workers from the 1780s onwards, and especially during the period of the Napoleonic Wars when the prices of farm produce rose so dramatically and handsome profits were being made. In the second half of the eighteenth century therefore, master and farm servant were separated. Moralists tended to regret this change and we find some of the minister-authors of the Statistical Accounts complaining that the domestic refinements of the farmer's way of life had exercised a steadying influence and the necessary degree of moral control in the lives of farm servants. It would probably be wrong to assume that sexual licence on the farms therefore dates from the beginning of the nineteenth century. It was as easy to have a fling within the farmhouse as out of it and the very proximity of the farm servants, male and female, in the farmhouse no doubt encouraged this. It is worth noting that some of the so-called bothy ballads as published by John Ord in his *Bothy Songs and Ballads* (1930) and those collected earlier by Gavin Greig in the north east appear in similar or slightly different form in earlier collections such as David Herd's *Ancient and Modern Scots Songs* (1769-1776). Certain themes such as love and courtship are obviously timeless and pre-date the development of the bothies and farm servants' rows.

The new enclosed farms were relatively isolated from each other and from the growing centres of population. Some could draw their workers from the villages which always provided a vital reservoir of labour for the intensifying seasonal round of farm work. The farms thus acquired larger workforces which in the Lothians were housed in the hinds' or cottar house rows. Characteristically, one of the last improvements to be made in farm buildings was the housing of farm servants. The contemporary farming press indulged in considerable discussion with a proto-scientific bias over the the best layouts of cattle

Figure 3. Double hinds' cottage in Midlothian, c. 1790. Each section forms a single-roomed dwelling which might be subdivided with a box bed or two. The roof is thatched with straw. George Robertson, *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Midlothian*, Edinburgh 1795.

courts and the relative merits of different sorts of roofing materials such as slates or pantiles. But farm labourers' accommodation was not altogether ignored and bodies such as the Highland and Agricultural Society of Scotland were offering prizes for the design and upgrading of housing in the first half of the nineteenth century.

Alexander Somerville's description of his early years in a farm row in East Lothian in the second decade of the nineteenth century was not untypical of the time. He was born in a single roomed dwelling in a hinds' row at Springfield in the parish of Oldhamstocks. It was about 12 ft. by 14 ft. with a clay floor. The low roof was open to the rafters and therefore lacked the nicety of a ceiling and insulating roof space. A simple devision of the living space was effected by box beds. What might be regarded as fitments such as windows or even window panes were removed by the tenants when flitting, as were also the iron bars which formed the grate of the fire. Father and mother and eight children huddled in that small space. (Somerville 1951, 7.)

None of the hinds saw fit to comment on these comfortless dwellings, or at least comment such as Somerville's is otherwise unknown to have survived in print. Improvement in this area of farming was slow if we are to judge by the comments of later writers on the subject. Towards the middle of the century, labourers' dwellings were beginning to become notorious as the public health movement began to gather strength. The growing concern was reflected in the publication in 1842 of Edwin Chadwick's *Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain*. But unlike the appalling housing conditions in the growing towns, rural housing had always by modern standards been poor and was more easily accepted as such. Much the same description of hinds' houses was given by the concerned Rev William Stephen Gilly writing of his Border parish in 1841. Even on the more advanced farms, the hinds' houses were mere huts or hovels or sheds. He laid the responsibility for this state of affairs with the farmer and the landlord who would not improve the houses because the families rarely stayed in one place longer than a year. The improvement of housing Gilly saw as stabilising the rural population with the net result of giving people a proper home in which they would invest time and effort, and also their children a proper education (Gilly 1841, 6-18). Flitting was both the cause and the effect of the unsavoury conditions.

Mobility was of course the keynote of the existence of the farm servants, which may seem strange when circumstances such as limited horizons, and means of communications, and few personal or family resources militated against their moving from the farm-towns, the village or the parish. But farm servants kept on the move for many reasons: they were looking for better conditions and pay, or positions as second or first horsemen. They hired themselves to farms where the reputation of the horses or the implements was good; or, as the ballads described, they wanted to escape from the penny-pinching, slave-driving farmer; often they moved at the term just as a matter of form. As the boom conditions of Scottish farming in the middle years of the nineteenth century brought many new agricultural engineering firms into existence, the lure of good, modern machinery became a new factor in the tendency of farm servants to move.

Farm servants were hired by the year and unmarried farm

servants were commonly hired for six months. Masters and men came together at the hiring fairs usually held in the towns; bargains were struck by word of mouth and this constituted the contract. This verbal agreement was sealed by the formal advance of a token sum to the worker, known as *arles*. Fairs were held in the market towns on fixed dates, some weeks before engagements would come into force, that is before the term days of Whitsun and Martinmas. In most parts of the country, the fairs for married servants were held in the spring, the engagements taking effect from Whitsun. Hiring fairs and changes of master were an important corrective to the isolation which was a very real factor in most farm servant families' lives. Attempts to suppress hiring fairs were rarely supported by the workers, at least because the fair days were highly valued as holidays, often the only ones people got apart from Sundays and New Year Days. Incipient farm servants' unions in the last decades of the nineteenth century tried to unionise their workers. By this date, town workers in most trades were unionised and within reason, their work and wages guaranteed. In agriculture of course, wages were far from uniform and the conditions of work largely unregulated. The early farm servants' unions failed to make an impression because the shifting and dispersed farm servant population was impossible to organise.

While the hind hiring system was ruled by the one-year contract, it was also ruled by the obligation to provide an out-worker, a custom which was still not unknown between the World Wars. The practice was perpetuated by the need of the big arable farms for labour, and so, as has been pointed out, a man who could not readily provide a bondager had to hire another woman or girl to live in, no easy arrangement in the cramped conditions of the hinds' rows. The bondager's work was still regarded in the late nineteenth century as paying the rent of the cottage in which the hind's family lived. It was for example the accepted custom in the Lothians for the ploughman's wife to work for twenty one days in harvest in exchange for the rent-free house.

The Bondage System was falling into disuse by the turn of the century although the term 'bondager' persisted until after the First World War. The report of a Parliamentary Committee of 1893-1894 described the process:

Fig. 205.—*Winnowing corn in olden times.*

a Fanner.
b Driver.
c Woman feeding the hopper.
d Woman taking up corn.
e e Women riddlers.
f Corn-basket.
g Wooden shovel.
h Besom.
i Light corn.
k Chaff.

Figure 4. Bondagers working in the barn cleaning grain using a winnowing machine or fanner, mid-nineteenth century. Henry Stephens, *Book of the Farm* 4th Edition Edinburgh 1889.

> 'The increase in the number and the improvement in the character of labourers' cottages (which took place between 1850 and 1870 in the Lothians, rather later in the Borders), the gradual but decided migration of women from country to towns, and the extinction or dying out of bondage service seem to have been contemporaneous. Bondagers were common in East Lothian between 1850 and 1860, the system lingered on up to 1875, but since then it has disappeared. (PP 1893-4, 484.)

The 'uniform' of the women outworkers or bondagers survived in these areas into within living memory. The characteristic and distinctive dress of the bondager consisted of a large bonnet, a head 'hankie', shawl, blouse, protective sleeves, striped petticoat or skirt of a locally made drugget material, apron or *brat*, black stockings, leggings and strong boots. (Scott 1976, 41-48.) It is interesting to note that this style of dress, strongly localised in the Lothians and Borders, seemed to owe little to prevailing fashions of the late nineteenth century. The large head hankie or wimple, very noticeable in all the old photographs as covering most of the woman's face, can be traced to the fourteenth century and must have been retained because of its practical nature. It was probably adopted first from bourgeois fashion and not then discarded when fashions changed. The large bonnets

were also the survivors of earlier fashions. The Berwickshire hat was a straw hat not unlike other rural straw hat types from other parts of Britain. An important detail was the trimming of black and red material round the crown of the bonnet. The finishing of this and other aspects of dress was a skill which was the basis of friendly competitiveness and pride of appearance. In East Lothian, the popular type of bonnet was the *ugly*, so-called from the earlier fashionable English bonnet the *ugly* which had been considered, in the taste of the time, as unattractive to look at. The sun bonnet or *ugly* of the Lothians was still used between the Wars and the traditional way of making it is still known and practised. It was usually made of gingham or coloured cotton cloth stretched over a high cane or wire framework with an extended brim and a protective drape over the neck to act as shields against the sun and wind. It was well-known that a tanned complexion turned into a weather-beaten and wrinkled face. It was also well-known that a fair unblemished complexion was an indicator of social status.

Within reason, the bondager did most of the same work as the menfolk; it might be fair to claim that they often had the worst of it because they did not have the status and responsibility of managing their own 'pair of horse'. But just as there was a ranking among the horsemen and ploughmen, there was a pecking order among the bondagers. Many old hands remember the row of men and women and laddies slowly moving across the field in echelon singling or weeding out the growing turnip crop.

In the Lothians, the spread of roots or 'green crops' had been more significant than in any other area of the country and for this reason among others, the farmers' labour needs expanded more than proportionately. The demand for farm workers increased steadily until the 1870s and this demand was less and less satisfied by the local communities of villages and smallholdings which were simultaneously losing their younger generations to the growing towns. During the nineteenth century, the supply of farm workers in the Lothians was augumented from immigrant labour. An important reserve of labour lay to the north. Each year by the late eighteenth century, large numbers of Highlanders were coming south into the Lowlands and were hired at fairs which became established fixtures, especially for

example for the hiring of harvest workers. In the summer, weekly markets for hiring shearers for the harvest were held in different parts of the Lothians such as Edinburgh and Haddington.

We tend to see the history of the Highlands and Islands in this period as being dominated by one cataclysmic event in the Clearances. Though it is of course, the symptom of the greater tragedy, from about 1780, Highlanders were flooding south and the contemporary press was beginning to show great concern about it. Population was certainly on the move, many people under duress, but in terms of overall numbers, the seasonal migration of Highlanders to the Lowlands, returning again after a season of farm work, was probably more significant.

The farmers now had work for female Highland workers from the spring, weeding and singling or thinning turnips, through the harvest to the potato lifting time. This great seasonal upheaval of labour which filled the old parliamentary roads in spring and autumn, is not now even a faint memory but at the time, just like the seasonal migration of Highlanders and Islanders to the east coast herring fisheries, it created a sense of excitement and adventure and camaraderie. It also did much to reduce the number of monglot Gaelic speakers as the young workers picked up a second language in the south. Perhaps for some, it was a welcome escape from home and a widening of horizons as a Gaelic song from the Islands suggests.

At the same time, the number of Irish workers coming into Scotland was increasing dramatically. Text books on this subject have tended to describe the Highlanders as losing their jobs to the Irish in the years after about 1820, but the facts of the case do not support this. The number of Irishmen coming across, taking advantage of the low steamship fares, rose to a height of about 25,000 a year in the 1840s but thereafter declined. But even Parliamentary Reports have tended to exaggerate the numbers coming over from Ireland to work in Scotland with the thinly veiled aim of trying to curtail the movement. What we see here is not necessarily facts but barely concealed polemics – these are the pitfalls of history. From the 1840s onwards, the numbers of Irish seasonal migrants declined but this was still a period of expanding agricultural activity and the demand for labour continued to increase.

In central Scotland, from Ayrshire across to the Lothians, Irish seasonal labour predominated by the mid nineteenth century. They were using the new type of larger scythe hook rather than the old sickle and, for the work of shearing the crop, the Lothian farmers preferred them.

Until the deepening agricultural depression of the 1880s and the adoption of mechanised harvesting, the superfluity of labour was a boon to the Lothian farmers. A well-known song from the north east, 'The Lothian Hairst', tells us that men and women also went from Deeside to the Lothians on contract work in the harvest, which began and finished earlier than in the north and allowed the gangs to return north to take in the harvest at home:

> On August twelfth frae Aberdeen,
> We sailed upon the Prince;
> And safe arrived at Clifford's fields,
> The harvest to commence.
>
> For six lang weeks the country roon',
> Frae toun tae toun we went;
> An' I took richt weel wi the Lothian fare,
> And aye was weel content. (Ord 1930, 264.)

In the 1880s, the population of the countryside was at its greatest and thereafter began to decline. This trend of rural depopulation, of migration and emigration, has continued with fluctuations to the present. The Lothian farm servant has succumbed to new methods of husbandry. The last of the old style horsemen and ploughmen were disappearing by the 1950s. The arrival of the tractor signalled the beginning of the mechanisation of farming, and mechanisation brought the reduction of the farm workforce. You may still hear the names 'hind' and 'bondager' though they are now all but a memory. With them have gone the hind's 'rows' and all the cottar folk and the busy sense of community which pervaded the Lothians a hundred years ago. Nothing symbolises the disapparance of the rural community more than the harvest field; a huge machine controlled by one man works away swiftly in late summer in the fields which were once filled with fifty or more men, women and children shearing, gathering and stooking the harvest.

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