

The Working Class

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“Folks,” observed Jorrocks, the well-to-do Cockney grocer in Robert Smith Surtees’ popular novels about foxhunt-

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ing, the sport that often brought noblemen and commoners together in a common pursuit, “talk about the different grades o’ society . . . but arter all’s said and done there are but two sorts o’ folks i’ the world, Peerage folks and Post Hoffice Directory folks.” Although the statement accurately reflected a widely held social opinion, it was, of course, wrong: for below the middle class, whose names were duly listed in the Post Office Directory, lay what was by far the largest portion of the English population.

In earlier centuries, it was called simply “the poor.” Now it was “the masses,” “the million,” “the working class,” “the lower ranks,” “the laboring population,” “the industrious class,” “the inferior orders,” “the laboring poor,” and, increasingly, “the people,” although at first this term was normally confined to the middle class in its broadest aspect. These were the laborers in the fields and factories, the unskilled and semi-skilled as well as those more expert in their occupation, who were a group apart, because their work was steadier and in good times they could earn twice as much as the unskilled. (The frequently met term “mechanic” was originally applied to skilled industrial workers, including machine builders and repairmen, but later was downgraded to become almost synonymous with “machine tender.”) Menial domestic servants, of whom there were no fewer than a million in 1851 (as compared with 1,790,000 in agriculture and 1,670,000 in the textile industry), belonged to the working class, but farm stewards and house-keepers-- positions Dickens’ paternal grandparents had had at Lord Crewe’s Staffordshire home-ranked higher. Although historical sources and fiction provide much less evidence on the point than exists for the middle class, the workers seem to have had their own informal system of distinctions. A skilled handloom weaver like Silas Marner, though out of work, as more and more of them became, clearly outranked a comparatively well paid but rough “navvy” (itinerant construction worker, member of the gangs that built canals and railways). A consumptive piecework

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tailor employed in a sweatshop still was better than a road mender.

“The million” claim attention in these pages for two reasons. One is that working-class life was the subject of a particular genre of fiction, especially prominent in the 1840’S and fifties (the industrial novel) and again in the eighties the nineties (the novel of proletarian London life). The other reason is that in the nineteenth century life among the masses became for the first time a serious concern of the classes above them. The fundamental questions of human values it raised engaged the minds of numerous Victorian social critics. The workers’ emergence into startled, often horrified view, in all their ignorance, squalor, frequent brutality, and pathos, after centuries of relative obscurity, reverberated in every corner of Victorian life-- its politics, social creed, culture, and, not least, its literature.

There had been plenty of misery among peasants when they were tied to the land. Country laborers in every period were accustomed to living from hand to mouth. Their homes were hovels built of mud, lath, and plaster, with floors of dirt or stone, and rafters instead of ceiling under the leaky thatch. Domestic fowl and animals such as pigs shared these dark, damp, sparsely furnished quarters with the family. There was no sanitation, and often there was no adequate heat. It had been a hard, grim life, whose only purpose, year after year, was somehow to extract the bare essentials of diet and clothing from field and pasture. It was lightened only by the occasional holidays and fairs that punctuated the march of the seasons and by an oral folk culture of stories, songs, and superstitions. The "merrie England" conjured up by Christmas cards and popular art is a figment of sentimental sociology, for which some Victorians, in their understandable desire to dramatize present misery by contrasting it with past contentment, must be held responsible. There never was a rural English society in which snug honeysuckle-covered cottages, plum puddings, fresh-faced village maidens, and hearty, rubicund squires joined to form

a picture of utter bliss. Arcadia must be sought elsewhere in the annals of the race.

In the nineteenth century, largely because of the spread of the enclosure system, farm laborers were apparently worse off than they had been for several generations. From time beyond reckoning, they had had the free use of commons where they grazed a pig or cow and fed a few fowl, and of strips of arable land where they grew crops for their household needs. Now deprived of meat and vegetables, the rural family's diet became even more scanty and monotonous, consisting only of bread, potatoes, and tea. The landowners did not raise wages to compensate for this loss of the common land, so there was widespread destitution. Seven or eight shillings were all that the drudgery of six long days could earn. There were no prospects for improvement, because the supply of labor was more than adequate, especially in view of the fact that children did not have to go to school-- if there were any school in the vicinity.

The consolidation of farms into large estates under a single owner meant that many independent farmers (yeomen), undercompensated for selling their freehold, had either to become tenant farmers or, failing that, to lapse into the wretched condition of common laborers. The decline of the yeomen as a class was among the most regrettable developments that drastically changed the nature of rural society, for it was they who, in George Eliot's words in *The Mill on the Floss*, "dressed in good broadcloth, paid high rates and taxes, went to church, and ate a particularly good dinner on Sunday, without dreaming that the British constitution in Church and State had a traceable origin any more than the solar system and the fixed stars." For centuries the yeomen had represented solidity, prosperity, decency, independence; they had been beholden to no man; in time of national crisis, their courage made them the very personification of the English "hearts of oak." Now, dispossessed of their acres, they were joined by other disemployed workers, village craftsmen, principally spinners and weavers, who

had been thrown out of work by machines. All shared a common demoralization but it was perhaps worst among the field laborers, whose loss of what had hitherto been property for communal benefit deprived them of such small but important sense of self-sufficiency as they had enjoyed.

Again there was much regional variation in the size of the labor force and the wage scale. In some areas, such as the Midlands and the north, where factories, iron works, and coal mines paid better wages, farm hands could make double the sum they could earn in less competitive regions. They could also afford to be slightly more independent. But irrespective of what they earned when the sun shone, nobody made anything when the weather was bad or the season wrong. The Victorian countryman's lot was unenviable, to say the least. One of its few redeeming features was the occasional solicitude of the landowners, whose main form of philanthropy was replacing some of the ruinous habitations with cottages that were neater, more spacious (two rooms up and two down), and healthier. Dorothea Brooke in *Middlemarch* occupied her leisure drawing plans for such "model" cottages.

Even palatial housing, however, would not have reduced the countryman's bitterness toward his squire on the matter of poaching. When the common land was lost, the obvious substitute for the food formerly raised there was the part-ridges and hares abounding in the hedges and copses. But, by an exercise of property rights even more arbitrary than enclosure, the landowners made poaching one of the most heinous of crimes. Since their position as magistrate enabled them to act as judge as well as prosecutor, the poachers they convicted received stiffer sentences than did men guilty of much graver offenses. A hungry cottager caught with a net at night could be transported (sent to a penal colony in Australia) for a long term of years. Some of the most severe hazards and penalties, it is true, were removed before the Victorian age began: the deadly mantraps and spring guns, for example, devices which could mutilate or kill anyone

unlucky enough to trip them, were made illegal in 1827, and the law limiting the shooting or catching of game to the squire and his eldest son was repealed four years later. But enough game laws remained in force, and the memory of the others was sufficiently fresh, to make the poaching issue a lasting source of enmity between classes. The continued existence of a black market in protected game tempted many a countryman to join one of the numerous poachers' gangs or to take a pheasant or two on his own. Whatever rich men's delicacies he caught, he could stealthily barter for his own table's necessities.

Apart from figuring in the newspapers as convicted or injured poachers or as participants in radical demonstrations, rural laborers were the forgotten people of the era. George Eliot, to be sure, was praised for her portraits of life among the country people, and such somewhat earlier novels as Disraeli's *Sybil*, Kingsley's *Alton Locke* and *Yeast*, and Mrs. Gaskell's *North and South* had paid at least tangential attention to the pervasive "agricultural distress," but Thomas Hardy was the first major novelist to portray in realistic detail the life of the humble rural laborer. Yet in the middle of the century more than a quarter of all Englishmen over the age of twenty worked on the land. Wretched as they were, it was not their condition but that of the workers caught in the toils of industrialism which aroused the early Victorian social conscience.