

“England Changing Hands”: Land Sales in England 1918-1921, the Country Landowners Association and the Decline of English Landed Society in a European Context’

In 1921 *The Estates Gazette* announced that around one quarter of land in England and Wales had ‘changed hands in four years’, which, if accurate, equated to around 6-8 million acres. This figure, first estimated by F.M.L. Thompson and more recently re-examined by John Beckett and Michael Turner, represented the most extensive transfer of real property since the dissolution of the monasteries in the sixteenth century, possibly since the Norman Conquest. This would be, if accurate, a ‘revolution in landownership’, one perhaps akin to the continental revolutions that had removed the nobility from their exalted positions, albeit one of a more peaceful and capitalistic nature. The sales, mainly to sitting tenant farmers on these estates, ushered in a new cohort of owner-occupiers in British agriculture and a sharp decline in the rentier system of landownership and farming. The land sales between 1918 and 1921 reflected, it has been suggested, a declining confidence amongst landed society, declining confidence in the economic returns from rentier landownership and in the social status of country house life, a decline that had started back in the early 1870s. This was a decline predicated on agricultural depression, democratisation and the threat of land nationalisation from new radical politicians and parties, a decline catalysed by the First World War, which had robbed the landed establishment of so many of its sons and witnessed the victory of industrial brute force over honour. By the 1952 edition of Burke’s *Landed Gentry* two thirds of families had sold their estates. The ‘Old Order’ had witnessed its own demise.

Such has been the historical orthodoxy in our understanding of English landed society in this period since Thompson first noted the surge in sales in the early 1960s. With hindsight, in his Presidential address to the Royal Historical Society in 1990 and during a period of better conditions for those landowners who had survived, Thompson retracted his estimate of the scale of these land sales and suggested the collapse could have been more muted. The data on land sales after the First World War, when analysed by John Beckett and Michael Turner, was found to be incomplete and flawed. It has been noted by me and others elsewhere that the mortgages through which farmers purchased their estates were frequently provided by their previous landlords, looking to maintain or even augment their share of landed wealth, part of a broader strategy of diversification rather than of declines in overall wealth. Estates were sold off in pieces, landowners often retained the core lands and country houses remained open for the business of conspicuous sociability. As Thompson himself noted, the process actually looked like more one of a group self-liquidating itself rather than of an embattled elite making its last stand, an intelligent manipulation of resources behind the façade of ‘business as usual’ rather than the death throes of a dying elite. ‘The Strange Death of the Land Question’, a political issue that had been a burning issue for radicals such as David Lloyd George in the Edwardian period, had been as much the result of this self-liquidation as it had the declining energies of Liberal radicalism. According to Clare Griffiths the Labour Party saw in the new and rising owner-occupier farmers the potential for state intervention in farming and rural society without the need for the compulsory expropriation of landed estates or larger scale nationalisation. The class of smallholders had been created through the natural processes of free trade. For many, not least the readers of the Estate’s *Gazette*, the

landed establishment was in need of support rather than vilification and in a new era of conservation and rebirth in the interwar period such became the function of organisations such as the National Trust.

So we have moved from death throes to shape-shifting, from decline to diversification, from power to prestige, from the critical nostalgia of Brideshead Revisited to the sickening deference of Downton Abbey. But to what extent does this new orthodoxy move our understanding of these events forward? Are we any closer to understanding what actually happened here, why so many families chose to sell their estates or to reach broader conclusions about the response of the aristocracy and the gentry to the changed conditions of interwar Britain? In this paper I want to begin to approach these issues from a new perspective, one less concerned with individual families and more focussed on ‘group responses.’ To do this I’ll examine the ideology and politics of the Country Landowners Association, the most important of a series of political pressure groups seeking to adapt to new climates. In the conclusion I draw on recent research on the European nobility in this period to provide a wider context within which to interpret the English experience, to attempt to clear what David Cannadine described as ‘fog on the channel.’

My argument is twofold. Firstly, I think, as Henry French has argued in his paper, that we should put the decline back into histories of landed society. What looked like a gloomy picture in 1963 to Thompson, looked more promising to him in 1990 but we can all agree the age of nobility is over in Britain. We should start from basic principles and accept that whatever the scale of land sales after the First World War, a very significant volume of land was sold and this should alert us to the hugely significant changes such sales signified. We witness here the decline of a social group, one that had previously been readily identifiable by their wealth, power and status, not least in terms of their ownership of vast tracts of land. Bereft, as Thompson stated, of a group dynamic and a will to power they were shattered into atomised pieces. Even if those pieces of the group fared well, which many individual families did, the *group’s* power to determine its own fate was at an end. No political party, by the interwar period (or even the late nineteenth century), not even the Conservatives, were willing through any kind of concerted policy strategy, to persuade landowners that they still might have a fighting chance.

My second point, though, is that we also need to formulate a more accurate framework with which to begin our interpretation, what exactly we are dealing with across the period of decline in landed power, exactly what the landed establishment was before they decided to up sticks and move on. Too many of our interpretations of this problem in the past have been predicated on quaint and nostalgic stereotypes of the ‘ideal landed order’ preceding the period of decline – a cosy and arcadian rural idyll of benevolent landowners with a tight grip on power and a swagger of noble authority, resented but applauded by a bourgeoisie lacking the entrepreneurial spirit to really challenge them and adored by happy if poor agricultural labourers. But lots of research over the years has shown this was a carefully managed stage production rather than a mirror for reality. It was a production in which radical critics of landownership understood the script, even if they did not play along with the positive platitudes and sentiments. The aristocracy and gentry had actually been undergoing a long process of adaptation across the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the hollowing out that Henry French referred to. Whether this be diversification of assets, investments in new industries and infrastructures, intermarriage with non-landed

groups, the adoption of new family forms such as the small family, which I have analysed in the past, change was ever-present amongst these elites. If this was self-liquidation it had been going on for some time because landed society had always moved with the times, even if appearances suggested tradition and stability. The landed order's primary concern to maintain their wealth and status, even if this meant losing their land and some of their power, and groups such as the Country Landowners Association were a clear expression of this. This would be a new order but not one that met much resistance from landowners, not because they were very English about it and accepted it like the 'good eggs' they were, but because it was one they helped to create.

I.

I want to start this section by emphasising the diversity of landed elites and their response to the crisis of the early C20, and to do this by way of explaining changes that have been made to this paper. As I began my research it quickly became apparent that the structural forces of decline cannot readily be mapped onto their experiences, which emerged as complex bundles of demography, finance, politics and psychology. Mapping this diversity through the kind of cohort analysis would be perfectly possible and profitable. But that's not something at this point that I'm going to explore because for the purposes of this paper my simple point is that diversity very much defines this group in interwar Britain. I believe at this point a far more satisfactory way to approach the issue is through an analysis of group political responses in the form of the CLA, particularly in terms of the positioning these findings into a wider European context.

The Country Landowners Association was established in 1907. Walter Long MP stated during the inaugural meeting that year, at the suggestion of the Lincolnshire landowner, author, architect and agricultural reformer Christopher Hatton Turnor and after discussions with his co-founder Viscount Charles Bledisloe (1867-1946). Turnor had 'for some time...been contemplating the desirability of drawing together all classes interested in the land in order that we might have not only a policy of defence for ourselves and the interests we represent but that we should if possible agree on some kind of policy of progress.' Long emphasised that the organisation expressed the desire of landowners '...to act in accordance with the spirit of the times.' 'What we really want', the report stated, '...is that the agricultural industry in this country be organised as every other industry in this country is organised.'¹

These early sentiments of the CLA reveal much about their overall ideology and intentions, which were at the same time defensive and progressive. There was much to be wary of. They were established in the midst of an ongoing agricultural depression and in the wake of the huge defeat suffered by the Conservatives at the hands of the Liberals in 1906. The Liberals were elected on a platform of radical reform, which included a super-tax on the wealthy and redistributive policies, amongst talk of radical land reform and land taxes. Perhaps most worryingly this

¹ Museum of English Rural Life (M.E.R.L.), Reading, Papers of the Country Landowners Association SR CLA/AD2/4 Report of Proceedings of the Inaugral Meeting of the CLA, 3 July 1907.

election had included a pact between Liberals and the new Labour Party, whose support from the trades unions and socialist ideology suggested a popular wave of anti-landlordism. The Conservatives, increasingly focused on obtaining the support of the urban middle classes rather than their old landed allies, and focused more singularly on Tariff Reform and Ireland, were no longer the natural home of landowners. Recent years had seen the unionisation of the countryside with the formation of the National Union of Agricultural Labourers and the National Union of Farmers. It appeared, in this period, that a fragmentation of rural hierarchies and a hostile group of politicians in Westminster, bent on taking apart the landed system through taxation and expropriation, were the political realities facing the aristocracy and the gentry.

But from the beginning there were signs that the CLA would be highly innovative in its approach to these perceived problems, to insure that landed society remained relevant. At a Committee Meeting on 10 July 1907 it was suggested that ‘greater prominence’ should be given to encouraging the members of the organisation to study agriculture ‘as one of the subjects for degree at the University.’² These were to be professional agriculturalists, not privileged and leisured nobles. Equally, the CLA sought to create connections with the Farmers’ Union and with County Agricultural Associations in an attempt to construct a broader rural political movement. The CLA aimed to ‘make every possible use of existing county associations. To collect views and opinions of those in localities and channel these through a local chamber of agriculture...These views could then be used in Parliament.’³ The CLA had, very early on, decided not to form a political party, as Earl Onslow stated in the inaugural meeting in 1907, ‘like the Labour Party or the Home Rule Party’ because, he stated ‘we believe our object can best be attained by getting support in all the constituencies of England from those interested in agriculture and the prosperity of agriculture.’⁴ The non-partisan nature of this group, albeit with Conservative leanings, was emphasised by the inclusion from the beginning of Francis Dyke Acland, a Liberal MP with radical pretensions. This was to be a modern, democratic political pressure group, drawing on the wider views of people in the constituencies and using these to represent the interests of rural society at County Councils and at Westminster. A complex system of county branches was established to pursue this cause. They even suggested, in December 1907, co-opting ‘certain Radical gentlemen’ to seek their service in an ‘extended committee.’⁵

The issue of smallholdings was discussed in these early meetings. Earl Onslow complained about the ‘rather stick in the mud attitude on the part of some landowners’ who ‘still look upon the land as a peculiar form of property that has rights and very few privileges.’ He continued:

² SR CLA/AD1/1, Minutes Concerning the Formation of the Central Landowners Association, 10 July 1907.

³ SR CLA/AD1/1, Minutes Concerning the Formation of the Central Landowners Association, 10 July 1907.

⁴ SR CLA/AD2/4 Report of Proceedings of the Inaugral Meeting of the CLA, 3 July 1907.

⁵ SR CLA/AD1/1, Minutes Concerning the Formation of the Central Landowners Association, 10 July 1907.

We all complain of the pressure of the burden upon the land but depend upon it the only way by which we are likely to get the Imperial Parliament to listen to the complaint...is by increasing the number of voters who are dependent on the land.⁶

Not simply a cynical policy, then, of warding off the nationalisation of land through less radical approaches to landownership, but a progressive means by which rural affairs would become more central to political life in Britain. By 1909 smallholdings had become one of a number of central policy concerns within the CLA, along with rural housing, land taxes, improving the status of the Board of Agriculture, local rates and agricultural holdings.⁷ At this time membership had grown from the original 130 members to 859, and was set to increase to 3,541 in 1921. Eventually the CLA could boast 10,000 members by 1945 and, in its jubilee year of 1957 32,000. These are indications, confirmed through analysis of various county membership lists, that the CLA was attracting farmers as well as gentry and aristocracy.

What then, was the CLA doing and concerned about in the period following the FWW. These are best found in the regular circulars the CLA sent out to its members. There was more of a sense of urgency by this period. The Labour Party had become a force to be reckoned with. The majority of candidates stood outside of the coalition in the 1918 Coupon Election, winning over 20% of the vote. Circulars repeatedly told members the CLA was ‘fighting the nationalisation of land’ by Labour.⁸ In Lord Bleisloe’s address to County Presidents and representatives of branches in November 1921 he had this to say:

The times are critical for agricultural landowners. It is only by their effective organisation in every county in England and Wales that they can protect themselves against unfair treatment at the hands of the Government...or indeed against any possible expropriation under the organised pressures of the extreme party in the state...United we stand; divided we shall assuredly fall.⁹

The ‘Great Betrayal’ of 1921 (the repeal of the Corn Production Act) had seen government support for agriculture withdrawn as part of the Geddes Axe in government spending and in the context of a deep post-war depression. Whilst they frequently referred to the need to reduce government expenditure, in order to reduce the tax burden, they sought to focus government specifically on the suffering of rural society and the need for investment there, a cause which they said was central to the ‘national interest’, something which undoubtedly had increased resonance after the food shortages of the FWW. They were focused on various pieces of legislation with a view to reducing national expenditure, particularly the unemployed insurance act of 1921, and reforming taxation on local rating, income tax, super tax, death duties,

⁶ SR CLA/AD2/4 Report of Proceedings of the Inaugral Meeting of the CLA, 3 July 1907.

⁷ SR CLA/AD2/5 Report of Proceedings of the Second AGM of the CLA, 15 July 1909.

⁸ For instance see SR/CLA P2/A1, CLA Circulars 1920-2, Quarterly Circular May 1920.

⁹ SR/CLA P2/A1, CLA Circulars 1920-2, Quarterly Circular November 1921.

along with policies focused more specifically on agriculture, the reduction of taxation on agriculture and capital investment in agriculture.¹⁰

The message to members, other than one of ceaseless and tireless work on the part of the leading members of the group, was to innovate. In a circular of November 1920 they called for landowners to become more like ‘managing directors’, using farm managers but ‘taking in hand and farming as much of their own land as they conveniently can.’ ‘The need for the adoption of a business-like policy, in developing to the full the resources of an agricultural estate’ the circular continued, ‘is every day becoming more apparent, not only for securing a larger revenue to the owner, but in the interests of national welfare and stability.’¹¹ Such progressive and quite radical lines of thinking, focused around tariff reform and the preservation of the British Empire, also emerged in various deputations to Ministers of Agriculture and in private correspondence later, in 1925, between Lord Bledisloe and the PM, Stanley Baldwin, although there is not the space here to discuss this I’m happy to answer any questions on this.

III.

By way of a conclusion I would like to summarise my thoughts on the successes and failures of the CLA, before moving on to wider thoughts drawing on recent research on European nobilities, all of which take us back to my original arguments in the introduction. The very existence of a pressure group for landowners reflects the depths to which landed society had plummeted by our period. Here we have families with generations of political leaders arranged neatly in their portrait galleries in their fine country houses persuading and lobbying the political elite to consider their interests, even to consider them as an important policy priority. They were not the most influential to be doing so either. The CLA never achieved the level of membership and support that the NFU did, nor the level of influence the NFU did, becoming the main agent of negotiation with the government and the central mouthpiece for rural affairs. The NFU counted their membership in the hundreds of thousands by the interwar period, while it took the CLA almost forty years before they reached 10,000. Here then is decline and it is decline that we must readily accept and work with.

But equally the ‘self liquidation’ that Thompson referred to is only of partial utility here. Yes it explains various social and cultural process (such as the rise in the divorce rate, the decline of country house sociability, rising rates of marital endogamy and so on). It also describes in some ways the loss of political power. But as Henry said, there never truly was a ‘landed party’ in Britain so there was no ‘political bloc’, as such, to liquefy. The CLA, though they represent decline, also represent a group will and a group dynamic to help shape the terms of the new world of interwar Britain, to be one of the mouthpieces for change on terms agreed by the old elite, to be an emblem for nationhood and national well-being. One effect of the sales of land between 1918-21 was that what had been a problem for the aristocracy and the gentry became a wider one of landownership shared by the new owners too, many of whom

¹⁰ SR/CLA P2/A4, A Brief Summary of the Effect of Recent Legislation, 1921.

¹¹ SR/CLA P2/A1, CLA Circulars 1920-2, Quarterly Circular November 1920.

joined their ranks. The CLA recognised this and used the modern mode of pressure group politics to mobilise supporters and engage with it. Their influence may have been secondary to the NFU but it was important nonetheless, particularly in terms of the taxation of land, and where their interests combined they were a combined force to be reckoned with.

This brings us to the European context of noble decline. The CLA were part of broader attempts on the part of Europe's old order to adapt to changing political and economic conditions in the twentieth century. Until very recently perspectives on the European nobility, such as there have been, tend to plot a trajectory of decline or rebirth and trace the path of national nobilities through this process. As Henry has said, often, in the cases of Meyer and Wasson, this has favoured a rebirth of noble power. There have been renewed attempts more recently, particularly led by Ewald Frie and his team in Tuebingen, Germany, to reconsider this approach and find more meaningful ways of understanding this history.

Frie has posited the general response of landowners, both European and non-european, in this period as one of 'noble ways and democratic means.' Nobilities across the world were responding to democratisation in various contexts and through various methods, but many of them did so by adapting 'noble ways' of a 'shared willingness to act in defence' of their position. They did this by co-opting 'democratic means' to do so, in the form of mass political participation, mobilisation and communication, including the use of new democratic political forms. One feature of this was the closer focus paid by them to their identities as landowners, that they could be a force for stability in rapidly changing societies. Thus Frie sees nobility in the period of revolution and reform as vital to and central in the process of state formation, a trick owing not little to their own guile and adaptive instincts.

I think we can seat the English aristocracy and gentry very comfortably within this model, particularly when we take account of organisations such as the CLA. The kind of *revolutionary* shock-waves Frie deals with in discussing his European nobilities did not reach the shores of Britain, but it was hardly status quo either. Following the revolution calls for reform, both within parliament from the Whigs and outside parliament on the part of mass movements for change, were repeatedly heard. The Swing Riots of 1830, with their attacks on landed property, were one among a number of rural protest movements to sweep the English countryside, and in an urban context the Chartist movement, later the new Trades Union movement, were determined to have their voices heard. Landowners needed to respond to this and respond they did by precisely the means Frie suggest, 'democratic means'. In the nineteenth century, as Jorg Neuheiser has pointed out, this involved popular mass conservatism led by 'gentlemen leaders' communicating messages of moderation. By my period this meant modern pressure group politics, focused on the economic function of landowners as agriculturalists, but emphasising their leading role in developing the modern state and defending it against calls for more radical reform. Both the CLA and the wider European context of noble life shows, I hope, new ways of thinking about the aristocracy and gentry in this period, which accepts decline as a political reality, but accepts in a more meaningful sense the group dynamic that continued to burn amongst this once so powerful elite group, moving, as the CLA suggested themselves in 1907, with the 'spirit of the times.'

