Studies in Labour History

Nicholas Mansfield

English Farmworkers and Local Patriotism, 1900–1930

ENGLISH FARMWORKERS AND LOCAL PATRIOTISM, 1900 – 1930

Dedicated to my family

English Farmworkers and Local Patriotism, 1900 – 1930

NICHOLAS MANSFIELD

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Note on Nomenclature

For the sake of convenience, the trade union founded in Norfolk in 1906, from which the present day farmworkers' union traces its direct descent, is referred to throughout this book as the NUAW (National Union of Agricultural Workers). This union was founded as the Eastern Counties Agricultural Labourers' and Small Holders' Union. Despite its regional remit, in its personnel and centralising tendency, it was the direct heir to Joseph Arch's National Agricultural Labourers' Union (NALU) of the 1870s. In 1910 it claimed a national role and became the National Agricultural Labourers' and Rural Workers' Union. This was simplified to the National Union of Agricultural Workers in 1920, and the 'Allied' suffix added in 1968. In 1982 the union joined the descendants of its old rivals, the Workers' Union (WU), in the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU), the WU having joined the TGWU in 1929. Both unions now form part of the Rural, Agricultural and Allied Workers Trade Group of the TGWU.

The National Union of Railwaymen is referred to as the NUR throughout, despite being known as the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants until 1913. The National Federation of Discharged and Demobilised Soldiers and Sailors – the radical ex-service organisation which existed in the countryside between 1917 and 1920 – is referred to throughout as the Federation, despite the confusing history of this body and its allies, compounded by the inability of the press to publish its name correctly.

Abbreviations

AWB	Agricultural Wages Board
DLB	*Dictionary of Labour Biography*
EC	Executive Committee
ILP	Independent Labour Party
KSLI	King's Shropshire Light Infantry
MFH	Master of Fox Hounds
MRC	Modern Records Centre
NFU	National Farmers' Union
NMLH	National Museum of Labour History
PPC	Prospective Parliamentary Candidate
RCA	Royal Commission on Agriculture
RHC	Rural History Centre
SMSOHC	Shropshire Museums Service Oral History Collection
SRRC	Shropshire Records and Research Centre
SWLM	*Shropshire Within Living Memory*
VCH	*Victoria County History*
WI	Women's Institute

Note: In the footnotes, where no other location is given, the place of publication is London.

Introduction

As a small boy and the youngest grandchild, I was fascinated by the pictures and objects in the seldom-used front room of my grandmother's terraced house. On one wall was a faded sepia postcard of a smooth-faced teenager, self-conscious in ill-fitting khaki, contained in a coloured embossed frame of generals, flags, battleships and aeroplanes. On the other wall, hung a crude oil painting of a sunlit and flowered war cemetery. These were hawked door-to-door by a penniless woman artist in the early 1920s, who filled in name, rank, number and regimental badge to order. Two brightly polished brass shell cases completed the shrine to her son, my uncle Walter, a private in the Machine Gun Corps who was killed, alongside a comrade from Chester-Le-Street, in a random German shelling outside Le Cateau in October 1918.

Whilst Walter was said to have eaten soap in a bid to fail his medical and avoid call-up, his elder brother Charlie had volunteered in 1914. A railwayman, he somehow sneaked into the 'gentlemen's club' of the Suffolk Yeomanry, before being put to running trains behind the lines in France. Here he met and married a young Frenchwoman and settled in France after the war. Until the 1960s, he would return on leave from his job as a gardener with the War Graves Commission, an exotic figure in paysan beret, who lapsed into the patois of the Pas de Calais when his wife's English – itself embellished with Tommies' slang – was not quite up to the conversation.

Other images of the Great War were passed on to me in narrative form, like those of my father's three uncles, casualties of the first day on the Somme, only one of whom survived into wheezy, wizened old age. All the elderly men on my street shared memories of the conflict: Sam Fairweather, another railwayman, walked the 27 miles to Bury St. Edmunds to enlist, Mr Needham described relieving an Ulster battalion 20 yards from the German front line and Mr Catlin showed me the hole in his shoulder caused by a piece of shrapnel at Passchendaele. My parents' generation – small children at the time – also contributed their recollections. My father told me how he leaned out of an upstairs window to watch a column of German prisoners marching to bathe in the river; my mother, how she was met out of school by her brother home on leave. In

old age, she would break into patriotic songs ('We don't want to lose you') in her tremulous soprano.

This book is an attempt to reconcile academic research into aspects of labour history with the inherited knowledge of the patriotism and latent conservatism of many working-class families. Whilst the second conflict of the twentieth century undoubtedly affected working-class communities, mostly in a positive way, curiously the echoes of 1914–18 still reverberate discordantly. In the early 1980s, when carrying out an oral history project into agricultural trades unionism in Norfolk, most of the farmworkers I interviewed were happy enough talking about their union. However, again and again they brought the conversation round to their experiences in the Great War, in which invariably they served as infantrymen on the Western Front. They viewed their early life as a seamless whole, and saw no incongruity in being active trade unionists while volunteering for the armed forces. Yet this contradictory behaviour continues to puzzle researchers into working-class life in the twentieth century.

Whilst on one level this book is a contribution to the 'new labour history'– a portrait of trade unionism in its regional society – it also attempts to grapple with a problem: 'to explain why a generation of countrymen went off to be slaughtered for a cause about which they knew little. The rush to join up ... was not simply a result of some insidious government plot.'[1] The book also contends that the extraordinary growth of rural radicalism at the end of the war was diffused by popular conservatism. This 'local patriotism' was itself a product of wartime militarism, and linked old parochialism with a new sense of loyalty to county and to the nation, specifically England.

The book is arranged in seven chapters. Chapter 1 provides a brief overview of the literature on farmworkers and their trade unions and reflects on their stereotyping as representative of the English rural idyll and the whole English nation. Chapter 2 is a portrait of rural society in the chosen geographical area of study, the Welsh Marches of the English west Midlands. As well as examining the structures of the agrarian economy, it covers the class divisions, local loyalties, cultural institutions and political organisations existing there before the Great War and how these affected farmworkers. Chapter 3 describes the early growth and distribution of agricultural trades unionism in Shropshire and the surrounding Marches. Some explanations for these patterns are suggested with an assessment of

[1] Howkins, 'Passchendaele', *History Workshop Journal*, 16 (1984), p.185.

its relative impact in the Marches compared with other parts of rural England.

Chapter 4 provides an account of the recruitment of rural volunteers on the outbreak of the Great War. The reaction to Lord Kitchener's appeal is examined not only in the Marches, but also in Norfolk, Cambridgeshire, and other parts of rural England. The response of farmworkers is compared with that of the gentry, farmers and other social groups. It argues that these processes both strengthened local patriotism and also highlighted class tensions in rural society. Chapter 5 examines the wartime pressures on the rural poor and the consequent tremendous growth of agricultural trades unionism in the Marches. Supported by railwaymen and ex-service organisations, this movement briefly offered a radical vision for the countryside until the agricultural depression of 1921. The reaction of rural élites to these events is covered in Chapter 6, which describes the persistence of traditional paternalism and the creation of new dynamic village institutions which helped stabilised Marcher society. In the period following the Great War, these organisations drew their strength from local patriotism and were rapidly assimilated into a national conservative consensus. It contrasts the weakness of the emerging rural Labour Party with the strength of mass Conservatism in the Marches. Chapter 7 argues that the period 1900 to 1930, influenced by wartime experiences, saw a change in rural society from parochial concerns to county pride and national identity. Those who could not identify with the conservative agenda of this local patriotism – particularly farmworkers – migrated or were marginalised. The hegemony of conservative forces in the Marcher countryside was complete.

Nick Mansfield
Manchester

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Chapter 1

Farmworkers, Rural Life and England

Sources and Stereotypes

Researching farmworkers' history is like panning for gold, rather than hewing the rich seam of sources which most labour historians expect from their subject. Given the spread-out work force, the patchy incidence of trade union organisation, the high turnover of membership, the dependence on the commitment of a minority of activists, and the poor housing and living conditions of most farmworkers, very few manuscript sources survive. Even in a comparatively strong union county like Norfolk, which boasted over 300 branches in its heyday, the number of surviving branch minutes can be counted on one hand. The only known remaining minute book of the Norfolk and Norwich Amalgamated Labourers' Union of the 1890s, was collected accidentally by George Ewart Evans, the oral historian, in the 1950s. However, the relevant pages had been removed, and the empty ones filled with 'horsemen's recipes', a clear indication of the owner's view that posterity was unlikely to be interested in the contents. Writers of recent histories of the farmworkers' unions in Wales, Essex, Gloucestershire and Scotland have encountered the same problem.[1]

Given these conditions, it is unsurprising that there are no known surviving farmworkers' union records in the Welsh Marches region on either side of Offa's Dyke. The historian must use documents of indirect relevance, either extrapolating from available national records, or from those of opposing employers' organisations. Even relevant national records are incomplete or missing, and so non-manuscript sources, such as newspapers, annual reports, trade directories, and material culture must be used to help fill this gap. The wider political movements in the Marches are similarly poorly served for manuscript sources, with only the records of one

[1] The three branch minute books are at the Rural History Centre (RHC), and the George Ewart Evans papers are at the Faber and Faber Archive, Harlow. Pretty (1989); Brown (1990); Scotland (1991); Richard Anthony, *Herds and Hinds – Farm Labour in Lowland Scotland, 1900–1939* (East Linton: 1997).

Conservative Association and a single minute book from a constituency Labour Party surviving. Oral sources, used by the author in other projects, proved difficult to obtain because it was ten years too late to interview farmworkers active in the unions in the key periods. However, other sources like the local press, proved fruitful. In addition the growing secondary sources on farmworkers have been complemented by material usually considered outside the sphere of trade union or labour history, culled from military histories, folklore, memoirs, landscape and cultural studies.

The representation of farmworkers as stereotypes in English literature has a long history, stretching from Chaucer to Thomas Hardy. Some of these have originated from the Marches, as in William Langland's *Piers Plowman*, the verses of A.E. Housman, George Farquhar's play *The Recruiting Officer* and the novels of Mary Webb. Generations of writers have asserted the essential purity of country living compared to crowded and unnatural city life. Farmworkers – often bucolic or comic figures – were depicted as victims, rather than controllers of their own destiny. Even in realistic depictions of working-class life, farmworkers were stereotyped as worthy, in touch with their roots in the uncertainties of the modern world, but powerless. At the turn of the twentieth century, historians like Thorold Rogers and the Hammonds saw farmworkers as heroic, but sadly doomed to failure at the mercy of forces beyond their control. Whilst farmworkers as a group have been reasonably well documented – perhaps as well as most other groups of workers – by the general efforts of historians and sociologists, the resulting descriptions are often couched in a slightly condescending tone, even from the most sympathetic writers and fellow trade unionists. This point is well illustrated by historians' treatment of the Dorset labourers who attempted to form a union in 1834, and by the evolution of the very term 'Tolpuddle Martyrs'. A noticeable omission is in authoritative regional or local accounts, especially with detailed explanations, of the working and cultural lives of farmworkers.[2]

[2] James E. Thorold Rogers, *Six Centuries of Work and Wages* (1884); and J.L. and B. Hammond, *The Village Labourer 1760–1832* (1911). See for example *The TUC Book of the Martyrs of Tolpuddle* (1934). The centenary celebrations are analysed in Clare Griffiths, 'Remembering Tolpuddle: Rural History and Commemoration in the Inter-War Labour Movement', *History Workshop Journal* 44 (1997), pp. 145–69.

Literature on Farmworkers and their Unions

Some of the earliest accounts of the attempts of farmworkers to organise came out of the campaigns themselves. The rural trade unions of the 1870s were largely documented by Liberal journalists who sought to influence or participate in the events they depicted. 'Their' farmworkers were to be electoral fodder to challenge the Conservative hegemony of rural politics. This tone even affected Joseph Arch, the leader of the National Agricultural Labourers' Union (NALU) and the first farmworker to write a personal account. His autobiography, *The Story of his Life* (1898), written after his defeat as a Liberal MP, offers a querulous and often embittered version of events. Critics from Hasbach onward have pointed out the blatant inconsistencies in Arch's *Life* and his tendency with hindsight to criticise policies, such as emigration and the failed union benefit society, which he was responsible for introducing. Arch was the supreme showman and self-publicist and without his drive and dedication, agricultural trade unionism would not have taken off in the 1870s. The problem is that later historians, in recognising his importance, have taken the book at face value.[3]

Wilhelm Hasbach's book, *A History of the English Agricultural Labourer* (1894), was a pioneering sociological survey of Victorian farmworkers. It includes information on hours, pay, conditions of work, and local variations, and contains the first systematic account of agricultural trades unionism from the 1870s. His authoritative style has caused later historians to repeat his statements without verification. Some of the details may be questioned, however. For example, he confuses the new Eastern Counties Union – which went on to become the National Union of Agricultural Workers (NUAW) – with the old Norfolk and Norwich Labour League of the early 1890s. Nevertheless, he presents still useful insights into the competition between town and country unskilled labourers, the extension of the franchise and the rivalry between National and Federal unions in the 1870s. He also did not exaggerate the influence of nonconformity, which has tended to preoccupy some later writers.

Two other books on unions appeared at the highpoint of the phenomenal union growth from 1917 to 1920. Again written by middle-class sympathisers working within the campaigns they were describing, they share the 'Heroic March' approach common to much traditional labour history. *Village Trade Unions in Two Centuries* by Ernest Selley was published in the heady post-war days of November 1919. It provides the

[3] Typical contemporary journalistic accounts are Frederick Clifford, *The Agricultural Lock-Out of 1874* (1875); and Edward Richardson, *Cloddy in Buckinghamshire* (Aylesbury: 1872).

first account of the pre-1914 growth of both the Workers' Union (WU) and the National Union of Agricultural Workers (NUAW). It also includes valuable information on wages and membership, which because of the paucity of archive sources, is not available elsewhere. With hindsight, Selley was over-optimistic about the future of the Agricultural Wages Board and the long-term strength of the unions. F.E. Green, the author of the second book, had been actively involved in the pre-war debate on the state of the English countryside, urging the break up of landed estates. His book, *A History of the English Agricultural Labourer 1870–1920*, was published in the latter year. It is particularly informative about the land reform movement and gives a lively description of the war period. This account includes the way the WU insinuated itself onto the Agricultural Wages Board, although Green only hints at the conflict between the unions. As the Labour PPC for Chichester in November 1918 he participated in the events he describes and provides what is still the most complete account of the development of the Labour Party in the countryside. He examines its relationship with the farmworkers' unions and was the first to highlight the role of railwaymen in the growth of the rural labour movement.

It seems likely that Joseph Arch's autobiography was at least partly 'ghosted' by one of his Liberal journalist friends, but the life story of George Edwards is undoubtedly his own work. *From Crow-scaring to Westminster* was published in 1922, shortly after Edwards became MP for South Norfolk. Edwards re-founded the union in 1906, and had the single-mindedness and courage to persevere with it, whilst retaining the personal respect, even of his political enemies. The book is a classic working-class autobiography. Edwards, in old age, traces a moral path from his poverty-stricken childhood, through his conversion to Primitive Methodism, and struggle for literacy, to a successful marriage and career. Like Arch, he was a little vain, and justifies his actions, like the quarrel with the Liberal grandees who dominated the union executive in 1911, and his pro-war stance in 1914. However, the plain prose, coupled with the stirring story, gives it a power even today. Although its account of the growth of the union is almost all concerned with Norfolk, this is compensated for by its inside view of the union leadership. Alun Howkins argues that the book's publication kept the union together in 1922, as Edwards, having just written about his past struggles, led the fight against the new rival Landworkers' Union. Certainly the book had a strong influence within the NUAW. When I was conducting an oral history programme in Norfolk in the early 1980s, every union activist's home had a copy of Edwards' life story, which was reverently brought down when his name was mentioned. Sadly, as the book ends in 1922, it misses the crucial 1923 strike. *Ploughboy's Progress*, a sequel written by George Edwards' son, Noel G. Edwards, was finally

published in 1998. With an introduction by Howkins, it fills in many of the personal details of the last decade of the old man's life.[4]

The years 1925–45 were relatively unfruitful ones for the farmworkers' union and this is reflected in the shortage of literature produced during the period. The Labour landslide of 1945 was a spur to labour history generally and the post-war period produced the book which dominates the historiography of the union; Reg Groves', *Sharpen the Sickle! – The History of the Farmworkers' Union* (1949). The book appeared when NUAW membership was at its zenith, and when Edwin Gooch, the NUAW President, became Labour Party chairman. The farmworkers already occupied an important role in the myths of the labour movement through the Tolpuddle Martyrs. They needed a union history, and the book was published in a cheap members' edition. The choice of Groves – one of the first British Trotskyists – as author, was perhaps an unlikely one. An experienced journalist, he skilfully used material from members to celebrate and inform in a narrative sweep covering Captain Swing, Tolpuddle, Arch, Edwards and the 1923 Strike, as well as what the author wisely calls 'The Lean Years'. Both Groves' left-wing and Gooch's moderate view coincided in a heroic 'March of Labour' approach. In common with many union histories, there is little analysis of problems like Arch's intrigues, the splits with the Federal unions, those workers who did not join the union, and the rivalry between the WU and the NUAW. Despite limitations and eccentricities, after half a century the book still has something pertinent to say about every area where the unions operated. Significantly, *Sharpen the Sickle!* was reprinted in 1981, at the time of the NUAW joining the TGWU.

The period after the Second World War also saw a growth in 'countryside books'. A few of these make reference to the unions, the best being Josiah Sage, *The Memoirs of Josiah Sage* (1951). This is a combative story from a Norfolk activist in both Arch's and Edwards' unions, whose descriptions of grass-roots issues and the local impact of national events makes it important evidence for later historians. In the Marches, Sidney Box's lively, detailed but sometimes confused account of his time as a WU organiser, *The Good Old Days: Then and Now* (1954) occupies a similar position. In contrast, the youthful memoirs of the WU's president, John Beard's, *My Shropshire Days on Common Ways* (1945) is a frustrating travelogue of the Marches rather than a potentially useful account of rural radicalism. Ida Gandy's *An Idler on the Shropshire Border* (1970) whilst

[4] The sparse Edwards papers at the Norfolk Record Office are also dominated by his religious life. Howkins (1985), p. 151.

enlightening about the mindset of border dwellers, is tantalising in its absence of political commentary politics, considering that her GP husband had been chairman of a local Labour Party branch.

It took some time for the post-Second World War labour history movement to become interested in farmworkers. This interest was restricted to the early nineteenth century, with books like A.J. Peacock's *Bread or Blood* (1965) on the 1816 East Anglian revolt, or E.J. Hobsbawm and George Rude's *Captain Swing* (1969) an analysis of the 'Last Rising' of 1831–32. J.P.D. Dunbabin published pioneering articles on the growth and distribution of Arch's union. The only major new work on the farmworkers' unions was Rex Russell's WEA class source book, *The Revolt of the Field in Lincolnshire* (1956). The latter was published in a cheap edition by the NUAW, whose Lincolnshire membership was second only to Norfolk's, but the union was selective on what view of its history it would support. A thesis on the union written by its former Ruskin student, Michael Madden was finished for the union's fiftieth anniversary celebrations in 1956 but remained unpublished. It provides a useful corrective to Groves' work, particularly on the issue of national leaderships, but failed to find favour with the NUAW, though its findings have been skilfully used by Newby and others. This applied also to another ex-Ruskin student, A.J. Peacock, who had his work on Arch's union in East Anglia published, initially under the auspices of the Communist Party.[5]

Pamela Horn's biography, *Joseph Arch (1826–1919) – The Farm Workers' Leader* was published in 1971. Horn's work is essentially descriptive rather than analytical. Her considerable output, on many aspects of nineteenth-century country life, has had the effect of stressing the overriding importance of the NALU and Arch himself in the unions of the 1870s. Richard Hyman's book, *The Workers' Union* (1971), in which farmworkers figure as minor players, covers the shifting story of the various groups of workers, geographically and by trades, who were organised under the WU banner. Perhaps because of the very complexity of its subject, it concentrates more on the union's national leadership than is currently fashionable amongst labour histories. It does recognise the

[5] J.P.D. Dunbabin, 'The Revolt of the Field: The Agricultural Labourers' Movement in the 1870s', *Past and Present* 26 (1963), pp. 68–97; and 'The Incidence and Organisation of Agricultural Trades Unionism in the 1870s', *Agricultural History Review* 5 (1968), pp. 114–27; A.J. Peacock, 'The Revolt of the Field in East Anglia', (1968), in J.P.D. Dunbabin, *Rural Discontent in 19th c. Britain* (1974); and Michael Madden, 'The NUAW, 1906–1956 – A Study in the Development of Leadership', unpublished B.Litt. thesis, University of Oxford, 1956.

conflict between the NUAW and the WU, but tends unconsciously to side with the latter. However, Hyman's book remains the only detailed secondary source for the WU, which as the apparent loser in the contest, has otherwise been written out of history.

Howard Newby's *The Deferential Worker: A Study of Farmworkers in East Anglia* (1977) is a sociological study, based on extensive fieldwork in Suffolk in the early 1970s. The chapter on the history of agricultural trades unionism is a refreshing antidote to the heroic approach, with its willingness to face the harsh realities of the subject. However his work is deeply pessimistic about agricultural trades unionism, which makes some of his conclusions suspect if viewed from a long historical viewpoint. His insistence on the failure of the union if judged by urban standards, may be countered by the view that any rural organisation is remarkable in itself, and some of his conclusions about the NUAW/WU are questionable. Newby's 'deferential' subjects may also be the particular product of their place and time. Suffolk, after the 1874 lockout, was never a very strong union county, and like Shropshire, was a key setting for the NUAW/WU conflict. Also, the early 1970s were an unhappy time for the unions as mechanisation started to bite, membership tumbled, and long-serving organisers were made redundant. A different conclusion might have been obtained had he chosen to study Lincolnshire in the early 1950s or even Norfolk in the early 1980s. Even in the Marches, where most farmworkers came to subscribe to a 'local patriotism', there was little evidence of the 'deferential' about the 'Proud Salopians'.

The old argument, that the British labour movement owes more to Methodism than Marx, has a modern champion in the work of Nigel Scotland. His work, *Methodism and the Revolt of the Field* (1981), argues for the overwhelming importance of nonconformity to Arch's union. Other influences on the unions' growth, such as Alf Peacock's work on emigration agents are ignored. This over-emphasis on Methodism is also found in Scotland's subsequent book, *Agricultural Trades Unionism in Gloucestershire 1872–1950* (1991), which shares with Pretty the weakness of maintaining an account over a long time period. The book is more informative on the 1870s, though he does identify that the strength of certain WU branches in small towns like Stroud was linked to the remnants of the local textile industry. Despite overwhelming evidence that the NUAW and WU were in conflict everywhere else in the country, Scotland maintains that this did not occur in Gloucestershire.

Alun Howkins' *Poor Labouring Men: Rural Radicalism in Norfolk 1870–1923* (1985) is the finest book of its time on the unions. Skilfully using oral history, it has recorded for posterity the testimony of a forgotten generation which formed a rural radical majority in Norfolk in the early

twentieth century. Howkins' sympathetic feel for his chosen geographical area gives added weight to his argument about the importance to farmworkers of the 'local world' and therefore the effectiveness of the 'federal' unions in Norfolk in the 1870s. It accurately reconstructs what farmworkers actually did for a living in the context of the farming year and explains how the 'structural conflict' which this created was reflected in wage bargaining and the character of the union. As a proponent of the infinite variability of English agricultural systems, Howkins does not argue that this model was easily applicable outside the larger corn-growing farms of East Anglia, with its factory-sized workforces. The book has been criticised by Alan Armstrong for exaggerating the level of class conflict that existed in the countryside and frustratingly it ends after the 1923 strike, just before the heyday of the NUAW's electoral domination of Norfolk.

By contrast, David Pretty's *The Revolt That Failed: Farm Workers' Trade Unions in Wales 1889–1950* (1989), is firmly pessimistic. It is a thorough account of the growth and distribution of the unions in Wales and the labour allies of the farmworkers, which here included miners as well as railwaymen. In a country mainly of small family farms, the living-in system lingered longer and Welsh farmers and their employees shared a nonconformist outlook. Pretty shows how these factors made it difficult for the unions to flourish. The exceptions were the arable corn-growing area of Anglesey, which produced its own Welsh-speaking union, linked to the quarrymen, until it joined the WU, and the Vale of Glamorgan, where the NUAW was dominant. It provides some useful comparative material for the Marches, in particular confirming the union allegiances in neighbouring Welsh counties (NUAW in Radnorshire and the WU in Montgomery), but a discussion of the tensions between English and Welsh rural cultures is beyond the scope of the book.

Alistair Mutch's *Rural Life in South-West Lancashire 1840–1914* (1988), contains an analysis of farming close to a city and how this influenced wages. He generally follows Newby's view of the 'centralised' NUAW in the important 1913 Ormskirk strike, but has pursued original work on the role of John Phipps' breakaway union, the Farm and Dairy Workers' Union. Partly because few researchers are now working in Britain on the unions, there has been a recent paucity of academic literature on farmworkers. One recent contribution by economic historians Boyer and Halton examines whether the unions of the 1870s had an effect on

farmworkers' wages, and concludes that in the short term they had a large impact effect, which was maintained to a lesser extent over a longer term.[6]

Local studies of agricultural trades unionism over the last few years, perhaps because they deal almost entirely with the pre-1914 period, continue the optimistic 'Heroic March' approach, where the union is seen as the liberator of the downtrodden farmhand. The best is Arthur Brown's well detailed account *Meagre Harvest – The Essex Farm Workers' Struggle Against Poverty 1750–1914* (1990). He alone of all historians has analysed the factors which made for a strong or weak union branch. For a strong branch this includes a higher proportion of larger farms, the geographical isolation of a community, the presence of sympathetic artisans, the establishment of a nonconformist chapel and a tradition of popular protest. By contrast Brown finds weak branches in what he calls 'controlled' villages, with a high degree of domination by the gentry. He also locates continuities, finding union activists who had been Chartists and identifying links between 1872 and 1914, but the brief introduction from 1750 is not matched by a conclusion of the post-1914 period.

On the 1870s, two local biographies have appeared. Helen Allinson's *Alfred Simmons – Friend of the Farmworker* (Maidstone: 1989), covers the 'Federal' union in Kent, and John R. Milburn and Keith Jarrott's *The Aylesbury Agitator* (Aylesbury: 1988), traces the life of Edward Richardson, a Buckinghamshire activist. Material on Richardson's career as an emigration agent for the Queensland government, is important evidence for Peacock's view that migration rather than Methodism was the driving force behind the 1870s unions.[7] Richard Anthony's recent *Herds and Hinds – Farm Labour in Lowland Scotland 1900–1939* (1997), deals with the separate Scottish farmworkers' union in the context of an economic history of wages and agricultural systems, especially the issue of hiring. Literature on the wider labour movement in the early twentieth century is still sparse, rural areas being treated somewhat as an afterthought by labour historians, although the forthcoming publication of Clare Griffiths' doctorate, *Labour and the Countryside – Rural Strands in the British Labour Movement 1900–1939* (1996), should transform the situation.

The period after 1945 is barely covered by labour historians, who seem more interested in the origins of union activity than the later period when, in places like Norfolk, the rural labour movement had a substantial impact

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[6] George R. Boyer and Timothy J. Halton, 'Did Joseph Arch raise Agricultural Wages? Rural Trade Unions and the Labour Market in late 19th Century England', *Economic History Review* 47 (2) (1994), pp. 310–34.

[7] Another useful recent study of a local dispute is Roy Brazier, *The Empty Fields; the Agricultural Strike of 1914* (Romford: 1989), on the almost syndicalist strikes on the Essex/Suffolk/Cambridgeshire border in the early summer of 1914.

on local government and parliamentary constituencies. This situation has been partially addressed by the new official history. Bob Wynn's *Skilled at All Trades: The History of the Farmworkers' Union 1947–1984* (1993), continues the optimistic 'Heroic March' approach in a detailed, but curiously rambling way.

Farmworkers and Englishness

Several recent 'textbooks' have contrasting opinions of farmworkers and their unions. Alan Armstrong has written a useful and ambitious survey, *Farmworkers in England and Wales – A Social and Economic History 1770–1980* (1988). Inevitably, given such a wide time-scale, it is more informative in some parts than others. It summarises the findings of economic agrarian historians and historical geographers and combines this with an exploration of a range of the farmworkers' concerns – diet, housing, welfare institutions, leisure, technological change and the role of women. It is generally pessimistic about the impact of unions on wages and farmworkers' overall powerlessness. The twentieth-century section is fairly dry and is less accessible than Alun Howkins' *Reshaping Rural England: A Social History* 1850–1925 (1991). Howkins has a better 'feel' for the variations of English landscape and agriculture over time and the place of farmworkers within these. The trade unions he describes are related to the state of local farming and analysed alongside deferential cultural organisations like the Primrose Leagues and friendly societies. Howkins considers the growing importance of the relationship between the town and countryside, covered in issues such as the growth of suburbs, artistic communities and the countryside as recreation, which were also crucial in a shift from local to national concerns. One of Howkins' students, Mick Reed, in a seminal article has suggested that a 'peasantry' survived in many parts of the English countryside well into the twentieth century. This has led to further debate about the comparative importance of day labourers, peasants and live-in servants in the agrarian economy.[8]

The connection between the notion of 'Englishness' and the countryside has a long history. It was a subject which interested nineteenth-century writers like Richard Jeffries, W.H. Hudson and G.H. Sturt. It also preoccupied the 'Georgian' poets, particularly Edward Thomas, and this interest extended into the 1920s with H.J. Massingham, Adrian Bell, and

[8] Reed (1984). The debate is summarised in Alun Howkins, 'Peasants, Servants and Labourers: The Marginal Workforce in British Agriculture c.1870–1914', *Agricultural History Review*, Vol. 42 Pt.1 (1994), pp. 49–62.