

PEOPLE, MARKETS, GOODS:
ECONOMIES AND SOCIETIES IN HISTORY

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Landlords and Tenants in Britain,
1440–1660

PEOPLE, MARKETS, GOODS:
ECONOMIES AND SOCIETIES IN HISTORY

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Landlords and Tenants in Britain, 1440–1660

Tawney's *Agrarian Problem* Revisited

Edited by

Jane Whittle



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Abbreviations

BL	British Library
DCD	Dean and Chapter of Durham
DP	Durham Probate
HEHL	Henry E. Huntington Library, San Marino, Calif.
HHC	Hornby Castle estates, uncatalogued archives
HUL	Hull University Library
LA	Lancashire Archives
LRO	Lichfield Record Office
NRO	Norfolk Record Office
ODNB	<i>Oxford Dictionary of National Biography</i>
RPS	<i>Records of the Parliaments of Scotland, to 1707</i>
SA	Sheffield Archives
TNA	The National Archives
TRHS	<i>Transactions of the Royal Historical Society</i>
VCH	Victoria County Histories

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Jane Whittle
University of Exeter, October 2012

Foreword

KEITH WRIGHTSON

Early in my undergraduate career, my Cambridge supervisor in Economic History set two of us an essay on the agrarian problem of the sixteenth century: ‘was it less a problem of enclosures than of rents?’ (a good question). In trying to answer it we were not required to read Tawney’s great book. We read *about* Tawney; not Tawney himself. That did not matter, because we were advised that Tawney was ‘an old sentimentalist’ who had failed to recognise that England was already a ruthless and competitive contract society in the sixteenth century, a society of which our supervisor clearly approved. Much later, I learned from another Cambridge economic historian that the trouble with Tawney was that, along with other ‘reformist’ economic historians, he suffered from ‘middle-class guilt’. Worse, he wrote ‘Mandarin’ prose.¹

When I actually read Tawney’s *Agrarian Problem* for myself, shamefully late, I expected to find it a work with which I would have some sympathy, but which would inevitably be dated in both content and style. What a surprise, then, to find that Tawney’s tone was predominantly cool, authoritative, and not at all sentimental; I thought him rather tough-minded. His purplish passages were justified in context and seemed to spring from indignation rather than guilt. His dominant manner was a sustained effort to explain, in a multi-faceted and at times distinctly distanced way, a set of profound and complex changes. If his sympathies were clearly with the losers in that process, he did not wallow in the celebration of victimhood. As for *content*, I was startled to discover how much that I had previously taken to be the findings of more recent agrarian historians he already knew, or at least intuited (and sometimes presented in a more lucid manner than his successors). I felt, as with so many other ‘classic’ works that are more read about than actually read, that it would be better to get

1 D. C. Coleman, *History and the Economic Past: An Account of the Rise and Decline of Economic History in Britain* (Oxford, 1987), pp. 65, 71. In fairness, one should note that, while critical of Tawney’s interpretative perspective, Coleman recognised the rigour of his scholarship, and thought his prose ‘redeemed by a strength and vigour drawn from the English of the Authorized version’.

students to read key passages of Tawney's argument than the often garbled accounts of those whose expository purpose was to diminish it.

The attractive common feature of the papers in this collection is that their authors have actually read Tawney and sought to engage with him constructively. Inevitably, such a revisiting of *The Agrarian Problem* is likely to highlight those things that Tawney, writing more than a century ago, got wrong, or out of proportion; the issues he didn't pursue; the revisionist implications of placing things in a fuller context that was simply not available to him. Fair enough. One would expect his account of things to be modified and challenged. These essays bring out the importance of a larger understanding of the late medieval context; how tenant resistance could be remarkably successful; how tenants could benefit from enclosure by agreement (if they could bear the costs and risks); how lord-tenant disputes involved far more complex coalitions of interest than the adversarial court pleadings reveal; how tenants themselves could be relatively privileged, aggressive, excluding, entrepreneurial and exploitative; how forms of tenure might be less important indicators of the advance of agrarian capitalism than farm size, grain markets, occupational structures or rent regimes. We might agree that the emergence of agrarian capitalism was a longer, slower, messier business than Tawney imagined; that he exaggerated the impact of the Interregnum and misunderstood the common law attitude to copyhold; and also that in comparison to Scottish tenants, their English counterparts were fortunate in having rights at all.

All this was to be expected. Yet these essays also acknowledge how much Tawney got essentially right. If there is much that he did not, and could not, know in 1912, one remains impressed by what he either did know, or intuited, or suggested. He was prescient in mapping the contours of the 'agrarian problem'. He lacked our knowledge of population dynamics, but grasped the significance of the 'price rise' before it was ever quantified. His views on enclosure were far more nuanced than his critics allow. He lacked our detailed grasp of the process of 'engrossing', but he understood the role of ambitious tenants and the importance of the late-medieval differentiation of holding size. He may have known less about the politics of agrarian change, but he certainly appreciated that the outcome of the processes he addressed depended on cultural and political as well as economic factors. And he knew very well that custom shaped the political struggle between landlords and tenants. One could go on. Above all perhaps, he knew that all parties were struggling to sustain their interests in a complex and demanding field of demographic and economic forces. He quoted, but never endorsed, the simple story of the complaint literature of the age, and he transcended it.

Does this mean that this collection just works out the implications of a century-old reconnaissance that was pretty good? No. That would be to

compare an early estate map to the Ordnance Survey. The details matter. Tawney set an agenda that remains relevant. Yet it is in the detail, amassed partly in response to his inspiration, partly in the effort to prove him wrong, that we encounter the full complexities, ambiguities and ironies of a massive process of change, and its varying chronology and outcomes in particular places. It is also in the detail that we confront, and reassess, the issues of causation and motivation to which he directed attention.

This collection also points, with respect, but without deference, to how we might get closer than Tawney could to one of his central concerns. In his preface he said that the 'supreme interest of economic history' lay in 'the clue which it offers to the development of those dimly conceived pre-suppositions as to social expediency' that most influence peoples actions (often unconsciously).² This was his way of expressing his conviction that economic change also involves cultural and political change. He was very much aware that what he called 'social readjustments to meet the new situation', or the 'regrouping of social forces', involved change in the 'living body of assumptions as to the right conduct of human affairs', even 'great change in men's conception of social expediency'.³

Great change in conceptions of social expediency: that is a formulation that would bear fuller investigation. For while many historians of this period have touched upon it, the extent to which economic change involved forms of normative adjustment remain inadequately explored and as yet unresolved. It deserves attention, for it is a matter of importance in our own time. That we live with changing conceptions of social expediency is one more reason to understand how people coped with them in 'Tawney's century'.

2 R. H. Tawney, *The Agrarian Problem in the Sixteenth Century* (London, 1912; repr. New York, 1967), p. xxiii. All references in this book are to the 1967 edition, unless otherwise noted.

3 *Ibid.*, quoting, in order, pp. 179, 231, 347, 184.

Introduction

Tawney's *Agrarian Problem* Revisited

JANE WHITTLE

One hundred years ago, in 1912, R. H. Tawney published his first book, *The Agrarian Problem in the Sixteenth Century*. Tawney became famous as a socialist thinker and campaigner; his reputation as a historian rests largely on his best-known book, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (1926), and his later contribution to the debate on the causes of the English Civil War.¹ Yet *The Agrarian Problem* has been deeply influential in the economic history of late medieval and early modern England and is still a regular feature on undergraduate reading lists. It remains readable, lively and relevant. Its importance stretches well beyond the history of rural England in the sixteenth century. From at least Marx's *Capital* onwards, changes in the property rights and class relations of rural England between 1440 and 1660 – particularly the enclosure of land and increased landlessness – have been highlighted as a turning point in the development of capitalism, crucial in explaining why England became the 'first industrial nation'. To quote Marx,

The prelude of the revolution that laid the foundation of the capitalist mode of production, was played out in the last third of the 15th, and the first decade of the 16th century . . . the great feudal lords created an incomparably larger proletariat by the forcible driving of the peasantry from the land.²

Tawney was not a Marxist and did not cite Marx in *The Agrarian Problem*. But the topic he chose to focus on was exactly that highlighted by Marx:

1 T. S. Ashton, 'Richard Henry Tawney', *Proceedings of the British Academy* 48 (1962), 460–82; Ross Terrill, *R. H. Tawney and His Times: Socialism as Fellowship* (Cambridge Mass., 1973); J. M. Winter, ed., *History and Society: Essays by R. H. Tawney* (London, 1978); David Ormrod, 'R. H. Tawney and the Origins of Capitalism', *History Workshop* 18 (1984), 138–59; Anthony Wright, *R. H. Tawney* (Manchester, 1987); Norman Dennis and A. H. Halsey, *English Ethical Socialism: Thomas More to R. H. Tawney* (Oxford, 1988).

2 Karl Marx, *Capital*, 1 (Moscow, 1954), chapters 26 and 27.

the loss of land by much of the English population during the sixteenth century. Part I of *The Agrarian Problem* offers a subtle and masterful overview of the relatively prosperous circumstances of the English peasantry in the fifteenth and early sixteenth century. Part II provides a much more controversial argument about the growth of capitalist agriculture causing enclosure, the transfer of land to leasehold, and evictions of customary tenants. Part III ties these changes to the popular protests and legislation of the Tudor period. The book provides an account that not only encompasses the whole of England, but also integrates the economic, social, legal and political changes of the time. The present volume revisits Tawney's *Agrarian Problem* on the occasion of its centenary: the chapters that follow reassess many of the issues that Tawney highlighted. This introduction offers a history of the book itself. It first examines how and why Tawney wrote *The Agrarian Problem*; secondly it looks at how *The Agrarian Problem* has been regarded by historians; and thirdly offers an assessment of what was right and wrong in the arguments Tawney presented. We hope this volume will encourage historians, from undergraduates to experienced researchers, to look again at the vivid history of rural England that *The Agrarian Problem* presents.

I

Tawney wrote *The Agrarian Problem in the Sixteenth Century* in a relatively short period of time between 1908 and April 1912.³ This was a remarkable achievement given the book is over four hundred pages long, and analyses a large selection of manuscripts and printed literature from the period 1440–1660. It is all the more remarkable given that Tawney had no formal training as an economic historian. He had studied History and Classics at Oxford at a time when economic history was not on the syllabus, graduating in 1903. The only Oxford academic who offered a link with the history of rural England was Professor Paul Vinogradoff, whose encouragement he later noted.⁴ After graduating, Tawney spent a period living in East London at Toynbee Hall organising holidays for working class children, but he returned to academia in 1906–8, as an assistant economics lecturer at Glasgow University, before becoming involved in the Workers' Educational Association (WEA).

The WEA commissioned a book from Tawney in 1909 having noted 'the lack of textbooks suitable' for their classes. He was to be paid a salary not

3 Winter, 'Introduction', in *History and Society*, p. 5. LSE archives: Tawney/II/31/2: a letter from the book's printers, 23 April 1912.

4 Terrill, *Tawney and His Times*, p. 25.

only for teaching WEA classes but also for writing the book.⁵ The experience of teaching adult, working-class students for the WEA undoubtedly shaped *The Agrarian Problem*. In the preface Tawney noted ‘two debts which are beyond acknowledgement’. The first was to his wife, and the second ‘to the members of the Tutorial classes . . . with whom for the last four years it has been my privilege to be a fellow-worker. The friendly smittings of weavers, potters, miners and engineers, have taught me much about the problems of political and economic science which cannot easily be learned in books.’⁶

Much of the speed and skill with which Tawney prepared the book must certainly be put down to his intellectual ability and enthusiasm. However, Tawney also had a network of intellectual friends working in related fields, most with Oxford or Manchester connections.⁷ In the preface to *The Agrarian Problem* Tawney thanked Reginald Lennard and Henry Clay for reading the whole book in draft and offering him ‘numberless criticisms and improvements’.⁸ Both were fellow WEA tutors. Lennard graduated from Oxford in 1907 and became a historian of English medieval and early modern agrarian history, later a reader in economic history at Oxford.⁹ Clay wrote a WEA textbook on economics, and was subsequently Professor of Economics at Manchester.¹⁰ Tawney’s correspondence in the year leading up to *The Agrarian Problem*’s publication reveals that George Unwin, Vinogradoff and Gerard Collier also read and commented on significant portions of the book.¹¹ Unwin was Professor of History at Manchester University from 1910 and an expert on sixteenth- and seventeenth-century industry.¹² Gerard Collier lectured in history at Birmingham University before moving to Cornwall in 1917,¹³ and was author of *Economic Justice: A Textbook of Political Economy from a Christian Point of View* (1924). It was Collier who consulted the estate maps in Oxford college archives for Tawney.¹⁴ Others Tawney credited with helping him included Professor F. M. Powicke at Oxford; Lucy Toulmin-Smith, a literary scholar and librarian at Manchester College Oxford and editor of *The Itinerary of John Leland* (1906–10), who lent him a series of court rolls; Lieutenant-Colonel Henry Fishwick, a Lancashire antiquarian who sent documents; and Dr

5 Winter, ‘Introduction’, p. 5.

6 Tawney, *Agrarian Problem*, p. xxv.

7 Tawney lived in Manchester while employed by the WEA.

8 Tawney, *Agrarian Problem*, p. xxv.

9 *Who Was Who 1961–1970* (London, 1972), p. 667; see also his numerous publications.

10 ‘Clay, Sir Henry (1883–1954)’, *ODNB* online.

11 LSE archives: Tawney/II/31/2. On the influence of Unwin and Vinogradoff on Tawney, see Winter, ‘Introduction’, pp. 6–9.

12 ‘Unwin, George (1870–1925)’, *ODNB* online.

13 Philip C. Hills, ‘Father Bernard Walke and Gerard Collier’, August 2007 (walkecollier-cornwallpeace.weebly.com/index.html).

14 LSE archives: Tawney/II/31/2.

George Herbert Fowler, a zoologist, historian and pioneering county archivist.¹⁵

Nor did Tawney claim that all the archival research was his own. He credited two female assistants – Miss Niemeyer and Miss L. Drucker – in his preface, who ‘transcribed for me a large number of surveys and rentals’, as well as his wife ‘who has collaborated with me throughout, and without whose constant assistance this book could not have been completed’.¹⁶ Manorial surveys and rentals provide the backbone of *The Agrarian Problem*. Both Niemeyer and Drucker were published authors. Nannie Niemeyer was the sister of Otto Niemeyer, a contemporary of Tawney’s at Balliol.¹⁷ She was a lecturer in history at the Normal College, a teacher training college in Bangor, and published a series of popular history books from 1917 into the 1930s.¹⁸ Niemeyer wrote to Tawney in October 1911 regarding her attempts to find another suitable researcher: ‘At last I have found somebody for the Record Office. The people I tried first were County History people, because I know that they had some knowledge of history. But I can’t find anyone who is not full up.’ Instead she identified a ‘record agent’: Miss Drucker.¹⁹ Lucy Drucker had been a member of the LSE medieval palaeography group supervised by Hubert Hall in 1902–3, a group which included the historians F. G. Davenport and E. M. Leonard, and produced an edition of the Winchester Pipe Rolls. Drucker charged Tawney £3 1s 6d for twenty-seven hours’ work ‘making lists of tenants etc.’ after spending November and December 1911 transcribing manorial surveys from Northamptonshire and Leicestershire.²⁰ Nor should we overlook the contribution of Tawney’s wife. Tawney married Jeannette Beveridge in 1909 just as he began work on the book.²¹ Jeannette had taken French at Somerville College, Oxford and was the sister of Tawney’s close friend William Beveridge.²² Tawney’s biographers have been dismissive and occasionally insulting about Jeannette.²³

15 Tawney, *Agrarian Problem*, pp. xxv, 126; all are listed in the preface. See ‘Powicke, Sir (Frederick) Maurice (1879–1963)’ and ‘Smith, Lucy Toulmin (1838–1911)’ ODNB online; ‘Fishwick, Lieut-Col Henry’, *Who Was Who 1897–1916* (London, 1935), p. 246; ‘Fowler, George Herbert’, *Who Was Who 1929–1940* (London, 1947), p. 471.

16 Tawney, *Agrarian Problem*, p. xxv.

17 ‘Niemeyer, Sir Otto Ernst (1883–1971)’, ODNB online.

18 (A. F.) Nannie Niemeyer, *Stories for the History Hour from Augustus to Rolf* (New York, 1917); *Stories from History: Henry III to Edward IV* (London, Toronto, 1921); *Piers Plowman Social and Economic Histories*, 7 vols (London, 1921 onwards); *Tales from History* (Collins, 1932).

19 LSE archives: Tawney/II/31/2: Letter from N. Niemeyer to Tawney, 13 October.

20 LSE archives: Tawney/II/31/2: Letters from Lucy Drucker to Tawney, 15 November 1911; 17 November 1911; 22 December 1911.

21 Jose Harris, *William Beveridge: A Biography* (Oxford, 1977), pp. 69–70.

22 Harris, *William Beveridge*, p. 68.

23 Terrill describes her as ‘somewhat pathetic’ and ‘a trial to Tawney’, and criticises Jeannette for keeping an untidy house and her ‘stunning extravagance’ with money:

Yet she was an intelligent woman, the daughter of a pioneer in women's education.²⁴ Jeannette took a serious interest in early modern history, publishing an edition of Richard Baxter's *Christian Directory* in 1925, and was co-author with Tawney of an article on 'An Occupational Census of the Seventeenth Century' in the *Economic History Review* of 1934.

The Agrarian Problem offered the first overarching account of changes in the relationship between landlord and tenants from the mid-fifteenth to mid-seventeenth century. But Tawney was not working in a void.²⁵ Much historical research had already been published. He built on the work of Maitland, Vinogradoff, Davenport and T. W. Page on the medieval manor and serfdom; Savine and Hibbert on the dissolution of the monasteries; Leonard on poor relief; Thorold Rogers on prices; Russell, Powell and Oman on popular rebellion; and Hasbach and the Hammonds on agricultural labourers: all these books are cited in *The Agrarian Problem*.²⁶ Enclosures and the security of copyhold tenures were already topics of discussion. I. S. Leadam's initial research on enclosures was followed by important articles by Edwin Gay and Leonard. Tawney corresponded with Gilbert Slater, and cited Gonner's book *Common Land and Inclosure* which also appeared in 1912.²⁷ Leadam, Gay and Alexander Savine had debated the security of copyhold tenures.²⁸

Tawney and His Times, pp. 108, 110. Ralf Dahrendorf is kinder in his assessment, but dwells on the same issues: *LSE: A History of the London School of Economics and Political Science, 1895–1995* (Oxford, 1995), p. 239.

24 See ODNB entry for her mother, 'Beveridge [née Akroyd], Annette Susannah (1842–1929)'.

25 Winter, 'Introduction', pp. 10–13.

26 F. W. Maitland, *The Domesday Book and Beyond: Three Essays in the Early History of England* (Cambridge, 1897) and 'The History of a Cambridgeshire Manor', *English Historical Review* 9:35 (1894), 517–34; Paul Vinogradoff, *Villainage in England* (Oxford, 1892) and *The Growth of the Manor* (New York, 1905); F. G. Davenport, *The Economic Development of a Norfolk Manor, 1086–1565* (London, 1906); T. W. Page, *The End of Villeinage in England* (New York, 1900); Alexander Savine, *English Monasteries on the Eve of the Dissolution* (Oxford, 1909); F. A. Hibbert, *The Dissolution of the Monasteries* (London, 1910); E. M. Leonard, *The Early History of English Poor Relief* (Cambridge, 1900); J. E. Thorold Rogers, *A History of Agriculture and Prices in England* (Oxford, 1866–87); F. W. Russell, *Kett's Rebellion in Norfolk* (London, 1859); E. Powell, *The Rising in East Anglia 1381* (Cambridge, 1896); Charles Oman, *The Great Revolt of 1381* (Oxford, 1906); W. Hasbach, *A History of the English Agricultural Labourer* (London, 1908); J. L. and Barbara Hammond, *The Village Labourer, 1760–1832* (London, 1911).

27 I. S. Leadam, 'The Inquisitions of 1517: Enclosure and Evictions', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society (TRHS)* 6 (1892), 167–314; Edwin Gay, 'Inclosures in England in the Sixteenth Century', *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 17 (1903), 576–97; E. M. Leonard, 'Inclosure of Common Fields in the Seventeenth Century', *TRHS* 19 (1905); Gilbert Slater, *The English Peasantry and the Enclosure of Common Fields* (London, 1907); E. C. K. Gonner, *Common Land and Inclosure* (London, 1912) cited in Tawney, *Agrarian Problem*, p. 8.

28 I. S. Leadam, 'The Security of Copyholders in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth

At the heart of *The Agrarian Problem* is a large collection of manorial documents. Tawney achieved wide geographical coverage with a carefully directed approach. Writing before the establishment of county record offices, he relied predominantly on the manuscript collections of 'the Record Office', later the Public Record Office, now the National Archives. These were supplemented with a wide range of documents already in print as a result of the activities of local historians, record and antiquarian societies, and the Victoria County Histories. He did not go rifling through the attics of country houses, the only other way of gaining access to manorial documents in this period, although he did thank the Oxford colleges of All Souls and Merton, the Earl of Leicester and the clerk of the peace for Warwickshire for allowing him access to manuscripts.²⁹ The manorial documents he used were overwhelmingly surveys, although he did make use of some court rolls.³⁰ These were supplemented with an impressively wide range of literature from the sixteenth century.

The circumstances in which Tawney wrote *The Agrarian Problem* have many parallels in early twenty-first-century academic life. He wrote to a tight deadline using research assistants to collect much of his primary data. The book was delivered late and over-length to the publishers and shows some signs of hurried production: the footnote references to secondary works are wonderfully inconsistent, and in the appendix Tawney notes data from a manor 'of which I have mislaid the name'.³¹ Yet the use which Tawney made of the materials available to him was exceptionally thorough. These were synthesised into a readable, clear and perceptive account of agrarian change.

II

The reputation of *The Agrarian Problem* as a work of historical research has waxed and waned over time. The immediate reception was very positive, with favourable reviews by leading historians. Its low point was the 1960s, after Tawney's death in 1962, when his reputation as a historian was

Centuries', *English Historical Review* 8:32 (1893), 684–96; Edwin Gay, 'The Inquisitions of Depopulation in 1517 and the "Domesday of Inclosures"', *TRHS* 14 (1900), 231–303; Alexander Savine, 'Copyhold Cases in Early Chancery Proceedings', *English Historical Review* 17:66 (1902), 296–303 and 'English Customary Tenure in the Tudor Period', *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 19 (1905), 33–80.

29 Tawney, *Agrarian Problem*, p. xxv. The Earl of Leicester gave him access to the Norfolk manors in the Holkham manuscripts.

30 Tawney, *Agrarian Problem*, p. 299.

31 Tawney, *Agrarian Problem*, p. 424; LSE archives: Tawney/II/31/2: letters from Longman's to Tawney dated 2 December 1911 and 6 March 1912.

attacked by Geoffrey Elton and Eric Kerridge. Yet the tide turned back in favour of *The Agrarian Problem*. Robert Brenner revamped Tawney's main arguments and placed them at the centre of a new debate over the causes of England's long-term economic development. Textbooks of the economic and social history of the sixteenth century, from Hoskins, Youings and Clay, to Overton and Wrightson, continued to cite *The Agrarian Problem* as essential reading.³²

The Agrarian Problem was quickly reviewed in the major history and economics journals of the time. In the *English Historical Review* of 1913, economic historian J. H. Clapham was enthusiastic, noting Tawney's 'solid contribution from the documents', and that he was 'always alive to the complexity of the agrarian and legal problems in hand'. He found Tawney's judgement to be 'balanced; though he sometimes sneers, and in the section on the poor laws there is an excess of invective'.³³ Another economic historian, W. J. Ashley of Birmingham University, offered fulsome praise in the *Economic Journal*, describing it as 'a substantial, most useful, and altogether notable book' as well as 'balanced and fair-minded . . . We feel that now we really know the agricultural life of the sixteenth century in its fullness and complexity.' Ashley's criticisms were all on minor points of interpretation.³⁴ S. F. Bemis, an American diplomatic historian, stressed the book's 'deep insight into English history, afforded by the discussion of the social revolution brought about by the agrarian changes and their reaction on the state', although he doubted Tawney's figures on the extent of enclosure.³⁵ Conyers Read, a Tudor historian at the University of Chicago, wrote a long and detailed review agreeing with all *The Agrarian Problem's* main arguments. He noted Tawney's careful reading of existing research as well as his 'painstaking and profitable labor in the sources', and considered that, unlike most economic historians, Tawney had actually made the material 'at once convincing and delightful'. Read did, however, note that Tawney could have given more consideration to the positive economic impact of landlords' actions on farming techniques.³⁶

The most critical review came from a historian of rural England, H. L. Gray at Harvard, who must have been in the finishing stages of writing his

32 W. G. Hoskins, *The Age of Plunder: The England of Henry VIII, 1500–1547* (London, 1976); Joyce Youings, *Sixteenth-Century England* (London, 1984); Christopher G. A. Clay, *Economic Expansion and Social Change: England 1500–1700*, 2 vols (Cambridge, 1984); Mark Overton, *Agricultural Revolution in England: The Transformation of the Agrarian Economy, 1500–1850* (Cambridge, 1996); Keith Wrightson, *Earthly Necessities: Economic Lives in Early Modern Britain* (New Haven, Conn., 2000).

33 J. H. Clapham, review, *English Historical Review* 28:III (1913), 567–9.

34 W. J. Ashley, review, *Economic Journal* 23:89 (1913), 85–89.

35 S. F. Bemis, review, *American Historical Review* 18:4 (1913), 794–95.

36 Conyers Read, review, *Journal of Political Economy* 21:4 (1913), 363–67, quotation from p. 367.

book on field systems, published in 1915.³⁷ He noted that *The Agrarian Problem* was the best of a group of books, such as those by Slater, Johnson and Gonner, which summarised and popularised English agrarian history but contrasted the 'scanty nature of the evidence upon which many of the generalizations are based' in Tawney's book with the 'extensive research' by Savine on copyholds, and Gay on enclosures. Gray noted the geographical bias of Tawney's selection of manors, and that they 'very inadequately represent the thousands' for which records existed, also pointing out the wealth of information in manorial court rolls which Tawney had largely ignored. However, even Gray concluded that it was an 'eminently sane and readable book'.³⁸

There was little further criticism of *The Agrarian Problem* during Tawney's lifetime. Beresford's *The Lost Villages of England* (1954) substantially revised a major part of Tawney's arguments, demonstrating that more villages were depopulated, and that depopulation occurred earlier than Tawney had thought. But Beresford held Tawney in great respect, and gently rebuked him rather than attempting to dismantle any of his wider arguments.³⁹ Rather, *The Agrarian Problem* seems to have slipped gradually from popularity, epitomised by the volume of essays presented to Tawney on his eightieth birthday, which contains not a single footnote reference to the book.⁴⁰ Tawney himself was partly responsible for this: realising its shortcomings, he refused to allow *The Agrarian Problem* to be reissued until he had made revisions, which unfortunately he never did.⁴¹

Tawney's death in 1962 unleashed a barrage of sharp criticisms of his historical work. Those who had the most substantial criticisms to make were kindest in their approach. Reginald Lennard, an old friend and colleague, included Tawney amongst those who had succumbed to the 'pitfalls' lying in wait for agrarian historians. He stressed the implications of Beresford's research for *The Agrarian Problem*'s key conclusions and noted the large-scale sheep farming of the medieval period.⁴² Lawrence Stone, another Tawney supporter, wrote the introduction to the new edition of *The Agrarian Problem* in 1967 and highlighted the degree to which knowledge of population change now undermined other

37 H. L. Gray, *English Field Systems* (Cambridge, Mass., 1915).

38 H. L. Gray, review, *American Economic Review* 3:4 (1913), 904-7.

39 Maurice W. Beresford, *The Lost Villages of England* (London, 1954), especially p. 150.

40 F. J. Fisher, ed., *Essays in the Economic and Social History of Tudor and Stuart England in Honour of R. H. Tawney* (Cambridge, 1961).

41 Ashton, 'Richard Henry Tawney', 464.

42 Reginald Lennard, 'Agrarian History: Some Vistas and Pitfalls', *Agricultural History Review* 12:2 (1964), 85-7.

elements of the book's argument.⁴³ Yet neither was entirely complementary about Tawney. Lennard portrays *The Agrarian Problem* as the work of a naïve young man overly influenced by his moral and religious views; while Stone begins his introduction by implying that Tawney's Christian socialism and 'aristocratic distaste' for 'the rise of a new and vulgar monied class' coloured his opinions.⁴⁴ These comments are put in the shade by Geoffrey Elton's declaration in his inaugural lecture that 'there is not a single work which Tawney wrote that can be trusted' because 'everything he wrote was written to a propaganda purpose', and 'his history was not good, not sound, not right, and not true'.⁴⁵ This was followed by Tawney's former student, Eric Kerridge, writing in the introduction to his book *Agrarian Problems in the Sixteenth Century and After* (1969), which was published in a series edited by Elton, that 'Tawney the politician barred the way to Tawney the scholar' and that 'he tended to see the whole world past and present in terms of socialist dogma', which led him to 'his wholly untrue picture of early capitalism as cruel and greedy'. Tawney had 'led whole generations of history students into grievous error'.⁴⁶

We will return to the substantive historical arguments in section III, but these attacks were not just about the historical arguments made in *The Agrarian Problem*. Rather, they were about styles of history and political differences. Tawney's approach to history had fallen from fashion: instead of painting vivid pictures of everyday life in the past and employing empathy, history was flirting with pretensions to be 'scientific'. The great debate over the scientific nature of history was carried out in the 1960s between E. H. Carr, who argued against, and Elton who argued for its scientific and objective nature.⁴⁷ Stone reveals the common assumptions of the time when he wrote in his introduction that 'the problems of economic history' were now being 'tackled in a more objective and more statistical manner'.⁴⁸ This trend crossed the political divide: the new, and at that time

43 Lawrence Stone, 'Introduction to the Torchbook Edition', in Tawney, *Agrarian Problem*, p. xi.

44 Lennard, 'Agrarian History', 85; Stone 'Introduction', pp. vii–viii.

45 Geoffrey R. Elton, *The Future of the Past: An Inaugural Lecture* (Cambridge, 1968), pp. 15–17; see also William Lamont, 'R. H. Tawney: "Who Did Not Write a Single Work Which Can be Trusted"?' in *Historical Controversies and Historians*, ed. William Lamont (London, 1998), pp. 107–17.

46 Eric Kerridge, *Agrarian Problems in the Sixteenth Century and After* (London, 1969), p. 15.

47 E. H. Carr, *What Is History?* (London, 1961); Geoffrey R. Elton, *The Practice of History* (London, 1967). See also John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History* (Harlow, 2002), pp. 164–203 for a longer view.

48 Stone, 'Introduction', p. xi. See also Coleman, *History and the Economic Past*, pp. 63–92.