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A WEST COUNTRY VILLAGE: ASHWORTHY

ANTHROPOLOGY AND ETHNOGRAPHY

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ASHWORTHY

Family, Kinship and Land

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To 'Nipper'
and the people of Ashworthy

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INTRODUCTION

'ASHWORTHY' is a pseudonym for a small rural community in the West Country. Sociologists working in Britain have learnt the somewhat painful lesson that their studies bring unwelcome and often 'sensational' publicity from certain national newspapers, which offends the many people who have helped them. For this reason, the identity of Ashworthy and of its people has been very carefully disguised. All the personal and place names used in this study are fictitious. All the dates, ages of individuals, sizes of farms and many other factual details have been systematically altered. Ashworthy is not a parish, although it is so described below, and the boundaries shown on the maps are not parish boundaries. All the maps and the statistical data refer to an area which is not an administrative unit. These changes have, however, been made in a way which retains the validity of the material for analytical purposes.

Ashworthy was chosen for study during a pilot survey made in the summer of 1957: the field work was carried out in the summer of 1958. The aim of the pilot survey was to find a community which would form a suitable base for the study of the effects of rural depopulation on family and kinship. It was therefore necessary to seek a community which had experienced a declining population for a relatively long period, at least a century: the community had to be large enough to make a study worthwhile and yet small enough to be intensively studied as a complete whole. A population of between five hundred and seven hundred inhabitants was taken to be a suitable size. An adequate collection of documents covering the recent history of the community—Parish Registers, Tithe Awards, etc.—was a prerequisite for study. It was also desirable that the community should be as free as possible from extraneous influences, such as those which might come from the presence of a large town or factory near by, or from an annual invasion of tourists. Remoteness was not in itself considered to be

absolutely necessary, but it was essential that the community should be *rural*, that is, based on an agricultural economy.

Four communities were chosen which appeared at a distance to fit these requirements very closely. The first was rejected because, in fact, it did not: the second was suitable but seemed, on intuitive grounds, 'unpromising': the third was Ashworthy. The field work in the following year showed it to be an admirable choice; its people were remarkably kind, hospitable and helpful. It is not, however, in any sense a *typical* rural community; such a vague entity does not exist. This study is of one small area with its own special features: the generality of the conclusions which have been reached can only be tested by similar studies elsewhere.

The initial aim of the research was, then, to examine the effects of rural depopulation as a process on the structure of family and kinship within one small rural area. General studies had been made of rural depopulation, notably John Saville's *Rural Depopulation in England and Wales 1851–1951*,[1] but almost nothing was known of its social effects in detail. In this respect the study was intended to break new ground. However, as the field work progressed, new and clearly important problems emerged which, while related to the original theme of the investigation, made it necessary to re-examine the basic orientation and underlying assumptions of the study and this led in turn to a complete re-appraisal of existing rural community studies in Britain.

Before I went to Ashworthy my view of English rural social structure was based partly on the experience gained in studying Gosforth, a parish in Cumberland[2] and in making a survey of rural craftsmen on a regional scale,[3] and partly on the small number of published studies of rural communities in Great Britain and Western Europe. Both my own and these other studies portray rural society as conservative, traditional, resistant to outside pressures and above all slow to change. It is in

[1] Dartington Hall Studies in Rural Sociology (London 1957).

[2] *The Sociology of An English Village: Gosforth* (London 1956).

[3] *The Country Craftsman*, Dartington Hall Studies in Rural Sociology (London 1958).

short a stable social system. In Wales, for example, it is said that in the rural way of life:

> 'Much of what is distinctive is an inheritance from the pastoral and tribal past. . . . Viewed from without, the old social life displays a remarkable tenacity, and, in spite of the spread of machine-made goods, recreation and entertainment are still almost entirely home produced.'[1]

In a more recent study of four Welsh rural communities we are told that (in a Montgomeryshire parish)

> 'Even though the district is less isolated today than it was a generation or two ago—the railway came here in 1868—much of the peasant way of life has been retained'; while in the Llŷn peninsula the 'survival of ancient loyalties may serve as a token to express the unbroken unity of the area from very early times on to the present day. . . .'[2]

In the same way, C. M. Arensberg's classic study of County Clare stresses the conservatism of rural Eire:

> 'When I first came to Luogh I knew only that in this remote little community of small farmers I should find something of the old tradition still alive.'
>
> 'We have followed the countryman a long way . . . He is part of an intricate social system which patterns his life along definite channels, which brings him rewards, gives him incentives, and deals its own punishments. The traditional patterns of old custom have a place in this system; folklore surrounds it as in the dichotomy between men's and women's work. But tradition is not all its secret; it is a living structure with a balance and a growth of its own.'[3]

In the western Isles of Scotland:

> 'The significance of Island life—not so much for the past, which cannot be changed, as for the future which can—lies in the intensity of its communal traditions, extinguished elsewhere.'
>
> 'Comprehension of this break-up of community brings out the

[1] Alwyn D. Rees, *Life in a Welsh Countryside* (Cardiff 1960), pp. 162 and 168.

[2] Elwyn Davies and Alwyn D. Rees (Eds.), *Welsh Rural Communities* (Cardiff 1960), pp. 176 and 187. Glan-llyn, the Montgomeryshire parish, was studied by Trefor M. Owen, and Aberdaron in the Llŷn peninsula by T. Jones Hughes.

[3] *The Irish Countryman* (London 1937), pp.22 and 69-70.

value of the enduring elements of communal life still recorded, remembered and surviving in the "Outermost" Hebrides, at the core of "the North and West".'[1]

The same point of view can be seen in studies of rural communities in England and in continental Western Europe:

'*Closed* This type of society is by far the most common in the area (i.e. in the west of England). There appears to be no disharmony within the society, but harmony is maintained by mechanisms which exclude external influences. Such societies present a compact impenetrable front behind which life is carried on in well-defined grooves. The mechanisms whereby it is effected vary, however, from locality to locality.'[2]

'It would be misleading to say that rural England has undergone no social change at all, but it is nevertheless true that over a long period of years change has been slow, and has failed to alter the essential social structure. . . . In other words, speaking generally, we may say that rural society has been characterized by a low degree of social change whilst modern urban society has undergone a high degree of social change.'[3]

'Side by side with, and perhaps in part due to, the oneness of the village form, there has grown up amongst village people a sense of belonging to the village and to each other as a community. This has taken many centuries to develop and has grown out of the dependence of village inhabitants on the village for the various services necessary and/or desirable in their season. The sense of community has persisted in spite of present-day forces, the majority of which are antagonistic to its creation or preservation.'[4]

'Hence Château-Gérard is still very really Gallia Belgica et Romana, is even yet a village under the crusading monks while it is being drawn more and more into the money market of Seraing steel.'

'The long continuity of Château-Gérard's culture is undoubtedly pushing it ahead, while the possibilities inherent in ancient

[1] Arthur Geddes, *The Isle of Lewis and Harris* (Edinburgh 1955), pp. 14 and 22.

[2] G. Duncan Mitchell, 'Depopulation and Rural Social Structure', *Sociological Review*, Vol. XLII (1950), p. 81.

[3] G. Duncan Mitchell, 'The Relevance of Group Dynamics to Rural Planning Problems', *Sociological Review*, Vol. XLIII (1951), p. 5.

[4] H. E. Bracey, *English Rural Life* (London 1959), p. 24.

Walloon metallurgy can be thought of as projecting into the beyond and constituting a pull from the future.'[1]

These short extracts reveal a common orientation; their authors may be well aware that social and economic change does take place in the countryside, but they regard it as modifying a way of life which is tenaciously stable. Many (if not all) of them appear to accept a view of country life as fighting a stubborn rearguard action against antagonistic external forces, perhaps urban in origin. This dichotomy, first elaborated by Ferdinand Tönnies,[2] is still found in studies which are explicitly concerned with social, economic and technological change in rural areas. There is a strange reluctance to abandon the notion of the unchanging, traditional countryside:

'There are still people who believe that the farmer—perhaps it would be better to say the peasant—should continue to live his quiet life on his farm in his village community, as little touched as possible by the outside "urban" world. He should try to maintain the old social structure and organization of his neighbourhood and his village. In this way the traditional values of rural life and rural culture in general, as opposed to the urban culture, would be kept alive, and preserved for posterity. The number of those who take this point of view is diminishing, but it would be wrong to underestimate their influence in some countries.'[3]

'Le progrés rapide et incessant vient de pénétrer la vie des campagnes françaises qu'il est en voie de transformer radicalement. Certes, l'apparente stabilité des sociétés paysannes traditionelles n'interdisait pas toute innovation; . . . mais il s'agissait toujours d'un progrès lent; ces transformations suivaient la méthode empirique, faite d'essais et d'erreurs, d'échecs et de réussites. . . . Les différents aspects du conflit entre les exigences d'un progrès technique continu et des structures datant d'un époque de rela-

[1] H. H. Turney-High, *Château-Gérard. The Life and Times of a Walloon Village* (Columbia, South Carolina 1953), pp. 279 and 281.

[2] In *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* (Second Edition, Berlin 1912). This book was first published in 1887.

[3] E. W. Hofstee, 'Rural Social Organization'. Presidential address to the Second Congress of the European Society for Rural Sociology, in *Changing Patterns of Rural Organization* (Oslo 1961), p. 18.

tive stabilité représentent un champ d'études nombreuses et variées pour toutes les sciences sociales.'[1]

Indeed, in some Mediterranean countries the traditional peasant way of life is often attributed with virtues that are important to the well-being of the nation, and agricultural reform is designed deliberately to foster and preserve them.[2]

Seen from this point of view, an examination of the effects of rural depopulation on the life of Ashworthy would be in terms of the decline of a traditional social system. However, during the field work and in the period of analysis which followed, it became more and more evident that Ashworthy was not a stable community of the kind I had expected. Moreover, a re-examination of my own field material on Gosforth and the published studies by Rees, Arensberg and others suggested that rural life is characterized by conditions of 'dynamic equilibrium', i.e. that while the social structure *as a whole* appears relatively unchanged and unchanging in the absence of external stimuli, within it constant and irregular changes are in fact taking place. Country life, as exemplified by Ashworthy, is subject to piecemeal changes, is constantly in a state of internal adjustment between one part and another. This is a much less neat and tidy concept than the orthodox 'Gemeinschaft' view of rural social structure.

Once this general approach had been formulated and the evidence roughly assembled, the central problem was seen to be the maintenance of equilibrium. In other words, how is continuity of social life achieved within such an "unstable" framework? This led in turn to considering the nature of this framework, which was seen to be ecological. The social and economic life of Ashworthy has always been based on the land, which families have farmed for centuries. Family farming has persisted from one generation to another, so that a balance has been maintained between people and land—but in conditions

[1] H. Mendras, *Les Paysans et la Modernisation de l'Agriculture* (Paris 1958), p. 7.

[2] See, for example, the various publications of *Servicio de Concentracion Parcelaria, Instituto de Estudios Agro-Sociales* and *Instituto Nacional de Colonizacion* (for Spain) and of SVIMEZ (for Italy).

where individual families die out, split up, move from one farm to another: where people leave the parish and others enter; where the ownership and occupation of land has changed constantly; where farms are split up, amalgamated, or alter their shape.

This view of Ashworthy as a dynamic ecological system has two important consequences. First, it makes it virtually impossible to use the results of the very considerable study of urban social life, characterized by the analysis of rapid change, since—in Britain at least—it pays little or no regard to the environment.[1] Secondly, it has very largely determined the form of this study and in particular the emphasis which has been given to the land, its occupation, use and ownership. Sociological studies of rural areas in this country and elsewhere have paid far too little attention to analysing in detail the *spatial* relationships of social and economic change. The first Part of this study documents these relationships in the context of family farming; the second Part is largely devoted to the original aim of the research, i.e. the effects of demographic change on the structure of family and kinship within one small community. In accordance with the general orientation outlined above, rural depopulation is regarded as one of the processes of change within an ecological system. It is merely one aspect of the dynamics of rural life.

This concern with the spatial and environmental aspects of the social structure of Ashworthy has also led to re-appraising existing 'community studies' from another point of view. The notion of a rural community as a social isolate has become progressively abandoned in recent years as the importance of relationships with 'the outside world' has been realized.[2] However, the geography of these relationships has been very largely

[1] With some rare exceptions, for example, Terence Morris, *The Criminal Area* (London 1958). For ecological studies of urban societies in general, see George A. Theodorson (Ed.), *Studies in Human Ecology* (Evanston, Ill. 1961), where their status within the general field of social science is fully discussed.

[2] This is clearly demonstrated in the various contributions to *Changing Patterns of Rural Organisation*, which gives a conspectus of recent trends in West European rural sociology. See, for example, the paper by Dr. H. Morgen on West Germany, pp. 83–92.