

STUDIES IN THE
AGRARIAN HISTORY
OF ENGLAND
IN THE THIRTEENTH CENTURY

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STUDIES IN MEDIAEVAL HISTORY

Edited by GEOFFREY BARRACLOUGH

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It is hoped that this Series, intended in the first place for students in the Universities, may help to bridge the gap between the textbooks and the learned monographs in which English and continental scholars of the present day are re-writing the story of the Middle Ages. Its object is less to furnish an outline of facts, than to introduce the student to major problems of interpretation.

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PREFACE

IN my *English Village in the Thirteenth Century*, published in 1935, I summed up the results of my research on English agrarian history, some of which had already appeared in Soviet historical journals. In 1947, this work, revised and supplemented as a result of fresh research, was republished with its present, more suitable title, and is now offered (in a somewhat abbreviated translation) to the English reader.

It has not been my aim to give anything like a complete picture of the agrarian structure of medieval England. All that I wished to do was to illuminate certain questions which seemed to me to be particularly important for the understanding of English agrarian development. I mean such questions as types of manorial structure; the part played by free tenures; the divisions among the English peasantry (in particular with regard to the size of their holdings); the various ways in which the labour force on the thirteenth-century manor was exploited. I was also particularly interested in the special features of the small estate as compared with the big manors of the great (especially ecclesiastical) feudal lords. For the prevailing ideas about the manorial régime were based largely on a study of the big estate. It seemed to me, therefore, that a study of the small estate would advance our understanding of English medieval social and economic development.

I have used quite a limited group of sources in these studies, the most important being the Hundred Rolls of 1279. This material has never been the object of special study, although Vinogradoff pointed out as early as 1883 how important it was for the study of English social history. The special characteristics of the Hundred Rolls, which I have analysed in these studies, are such that they are particularly suitable for tackling the problems I have mentioned. In particular, they are irreplaceable for the study of the small estate. Furthermore this material enables us to use the statistical method over a considerable area. It will be noticed, however, that I use these

statistics without trusting them overmuch. Yet the problems on which they shed light are hardly soluble by other means.

I have supplemented the information derived from the Hundred Rolls by using the Inquisitions *post Mortem*. This is a very difficult source to use, as well as being very unreliable. Here again, with proper care the inquisitions can be made to yield important information. Other sources, such as extents, manorial court rolls, and ministers' accounts have only been used on occasion as a check on the main sources. Other documents, too, had their use—Domesday Book, for instance, allows one to extend the chronological framework of one's investigations; the records of the royal courts illustrate the forms which the conflict between classes assumed in the thirteenth-century village.

My work has been written on the basis of Marxist-Leninist method, and in it I use Marxist terminology. Work done in England by such Marxist historians as M. H. Dobb, R. H. Hilton and C. Hill has already to some extent familiarized the English reader with this terminology. Even so, I feel I must say more about the meaning of certain fundamental terms.

I deal here with a number of problems of English feudalism. Now by 'feudalism' Marxists mean a definite 'mode of production' which was predominant throughout medieval Europe. Its distinctive features were:

1. A special type of landed property which was directly linked with the exercise of lordship over the basic producers of society, the peasants, though of course with considerable variation in the degree to which that lordship might be exercised.
2. A special type of class of basic producers with a special connection with the land—which remained, however, the property of the ruling class of feudal lords.

It must, of course, be understood that the predominance of the feudal mode of production—as in the case of all other modes of production—was never 'absolute'. And so in thirteenth-century England we still see some survivals of pre-feudal relations, remnants of the old free peasant communities. We can also see germs of new relationships, signs of the developing

changes within feudalism towards a new mode of production—the capitalist—and with it the characteristics of new ‘relations of production’. We can see these new relations when the basic producers appear as hired labourers, deprived of their land and of all means of production.

Feudal property achieves its economic realization in feudal rent—dues (of whatever form) which the dependent peasant hands over for the benefit of the feudal landowner. In a broad sense, feudal rent includes everything which the proprietor gets from the peasant. However, in most cases the sources reveal only the basic part of the rent, that which the peasant pays over, more or less related to the size of his holding, in labour, kind, or money.

The traditional organization for the appropriation of feudal rent is the feudal estate—the manor. But the manor assumed great diversity of type according to the form of rent predominant, resulting from local economic, historical or geographical conditions.

The classics of English economic history have given us an analysis of the typical large manor, based on servile labour rent. In my work I have been mainly concerned with phenomena which might be called ‘non-typical’—with manors whose structure departs from the typical, with free holdings and free rents, with money rent, with the small estate, with hired labour (in the limited sense in which it is found in the feudal manor). But it is precisely in these ‘non-typical’ phenomena that we may see the germs of the new relations of production.

Of the reviews which the second edition of my book received, the most thorough is that of the well-known economic historian, Professor M. M. Postan, published in the *Economic History Review* for 1950. I think that this review most completely sums up the objections which my book might provoke among non-Marxist English historians. Therefore the preface to the English edition of my book seems to me the right place for a reply to this criticism.

Professor Postan makes very large demands of my book. Whilst this is very flattering, it opens a very wide field to criticism. Therefore from the very outset I should emphasize

again that I have never claimed to offer an exhaustive, much less a 'classic' study of the history of the English countryside in the thirteenth century. I intended only to subject to critical review some of the problems which seemed important and at the same time incorrectly or insufficiently treated by previous historians. Hence when Professor Postan indicates a series of problems which I have not touched in my book, I can only answer that I did not set myself such broad aims. I shall be satisfied if I have cast new light on those problems to which I have consciously limited myself, and which seem to me to be important. My book does not deal with problems of agricultural technique, with the influence of climate and soil on the character of the economy, or with the relations between cultivation and live stock breeding. It does not deal with problems of demography, with forms of settlement, internal colonization, land hunger, and the struggle for land; it does not treat of the character of the market, the influence of price fluctuations and the value of money.

This list of problems which are not dealt with at all, or are only incidentally touched upon, could be further enlarged, but for their solution it would be necessary to write a completely new work.

The problem of the manorial system lies at the centre of my work. Professor Postan thinks that this problem is not so significant as was formerly believed. He considers that 'the manor is an established convention of Marxist historiography'. Here Professor Postan is incorrect. The manor is rather an 'established convention' of the classical school of bourgeois economic historians of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The manor interests the Marxist historian only as the concrete form in which the productive relations of the feudal period (feudal property and the forms of exploitation flowing from it) are usually embodied. We see the manor not as an 'established convention', but as a real fact, characteristic of the medieval countryside, provided, of course, that one does not attribute to it the narrow significance which the classical school headed by Seebohm and Vinogradoff did. My aim, in fact, has been to show that over-simplification in this regard is misleading, and to reveal the extreme complexity of the manorial pattern characteristic of feudal England. But

even taking account of all the additional problems which Professor Postan has indicated, the problems of feudal property and exploitation, of their emergence, development and decay, and of the concrete forms which these foundations of feudalism adopted, remain, as before, a central question in the history of feudal society.

The study of agricultural technique, demography, the market, prices, and the like, must not be allowed to distract us from this central problem or be substituted for it. I hope that I have succeeded in bringing greater precision to our conception of the manorial system. However, I am far from claiming that I have discovered something new when I refer to money rents, the differentiation of peasant allotments, and cottars. The existence of these factors has long been known. But it seemed worth while to define more closely the problems they raise. In particular, the question of the dominant form of rent remains unsolved, and disagreements on this point still exist among historians.

Of all the criticisms made by Professor Postan the most substantial seems to be that of the absence or inadequacy of chronological perspective. This criticism has often been made in the U.S.S.R. as well. In fact, the main source which I have used, the Hundred Rolls, relates to a specific year, 1279, and the other sources I have used also relate to approximately the same time. I refer to an eleventh-century source (*Domesday Book*) only occasionally, in order to make certain comparisons. Why, then, did I think it possible to base my conclusions on the study of this type of material? I have tried to answer this question in my book. I think that any moment in history contains elements of both the past and the future, and that the study of any particular moment sheds some light on both preceding and subsequent developments. But here I am concerned with answering the charge that as a result of an incorrect historical perspective I am tied by the conception of 'continuous movement away from the pure forms of natural economy and manorialized agriculture towards the freer and more capitalistic forms of economic life'.

I hope that I have made it clear in my book, that I in no way share this conception. If this was in fact the fundamental line of development in the Middle Ages, that is not to say that it was

a 'continuous' line. In the first place I am far from holding over-simplified notions about the correlation between natural economy and the manorial system. In a number of cases the development of the market leads to the temporary strengthening of the 'manorial system', that is, of labour rents and serfdom. I have emphasized more than once that the strengthening of the manorial system, of labour rents and the exploitation of the serfs, was a response to the development of market relations in the thirteenth century. I think that the manorial system was more developed in the thirteenth century than in the eleventh or twelfth, and that, in fact, it then reached its apogee in England. This primarily relates to the large manors of the lay and ecclesiastical lords.

The small manor, on the other hand, as is shown by its structure and the nature of its rents, evidently never attained full development as a feudal manor, and adapted itself to the requirements of the market by other methods which were a definite step towards 'more capitalistic forms of economic life'. A special chapter is devoted to this problem.

In the transition to more capitalist forms an important role was played by peasant and especially large-scale peasant economy. But I did no more than draw attention to this side of the matter, since the break-up of the large feudal manor and of the manorial system as a whole took place as late as the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and therefore lies outside my period of study.

Professor Postan also ascribes to me the view that the 'size' of manors was the determining factor in their structure. He refers to the contradictions to which this conception leads when taken in conjunction with the conception of 'continuous development'. But since I do not support either of these theories I am unable to observe in my conclusions the contradictions to which Professor Postan refers.

The diversity in the structure of manors does not, of course, depend only on their size. I am quite well aware (and I refer to this fact) that considerable variations can be observed in the structure of both large and small manors, and that the structure of the manor and the type of economy adopted in it are determined not only by its size, but also by a number of other conditions. These include the historical origin of the particular

manor, the predominance of pastoral or arable farming, the conditions of the market, the distance from the centre of the estates of the particular lord (this applies to both small and large manors), and the internal struggle taking place in the manor.

I merely pointed out that the typical 'serf-labour rent manor' is to be observed in the thirteenth century chiefly among large manors; as regards small manors, they manifest some peculiarities of structure, both in the relative size of the demesne and in the social composition of the peasantry and the nature of rent.

Changes in the general character of feudal economy, whether they make for the strengthening or for the weakening of the manorial system, are not necessarily accompanied by changes in the quantitative relation of large and small manors or in their average size, and Professor Postan is wrong in drawing this conclusion from my work. The strengthening of the manorial system in the thirteenth century was the result of the strengthening of labour dues in the large manors. I see no contradiction in the fact that the proportion of large and small manors did not undergo substantial change and that the average size of the manor remained approximately as before.

There is no over-simplification in holding that the lay and ecclesiastical magnates owned large manors and the small feudal lords owned small manors. I have made a special examination of this problem and have reached the conclusion that large manors are in fact concentrated on the estates of the great lords and small manors on the estates of the small lords. But I am well aware of exceptions, including the peculiarities of the estates of the Templars and the Hospitallers; nor do I ignore the special features of ecclesiastical estates, whether of the old or the new religious houses. But if the student should not simplify and schematize his material, he should also not lose sight of the fundamental guiding lines because variants exist.

In conclusion, I should note that Professor Postan, in his criticism, several times attacks the Marxist conception of historical development. It seems to me that these remarks spring from an over-simplified conception of Marxism, and often miss the point. As I have already noted, he is wrong in seeing

in the manor an 'established convention of Marxist historiography'.

The divergence between us and the historical school to which Professor Postan belongs is, I think, rooted not so much in the evaluation of the historical role of the manor as in the denial by this school of features specific to the feudal mode of production as a whole.

The Marxist conception of a 'natural economy' is seen by Professor Postan in an over-simplified fashion. He says: 'The notion of the Middle Ages as a period of natural economy may still linger in Marxian writings, but has very few adherents elsewhere'. This is said in connection with my conclusions on the predominance of money rent in thirteenth-century England. But a natural economy is in no way conceived by Marxist historians in an over-simplified way, i.e. as consisting merely in the absence of a market and of money-circulation, or of money rent.

The exaggerated contrast between a 'natural' and a 'monetary' economy is a source of considerable theoretical errors, and is characteristic, not of Marxist, but of the crudest nineteenth-century bourgeois historiography. It provided a basis for the equally crude counter-assertions of Dopsch and his school. The Marxist conception is opposed to over-simplified views of either type. Exchange and money, and with them elements, too, of money rent appear at extremely early stages of development, during the predominance of a natural economy, i.e. an economy in which the product is produced not for sale, but directly for consumption. But certain surpluses over consumption can go for sale and become commodities. According to Marxism the opposite of a natural economy is not a 'monetary', but a 'commodity' or a 'commodity-monetary' economy, in which the product is produced as a commodity. Urban production in the Middle Ages was, from the very beginning, primarily of a commodity type. Agricultural production, predominant in the Middle Ages, gradually became more and more commodity production, though long preserving the basic features of natural economy. At the end of the medieval period, the dominance of *simple* commodity-production, already a transitional stage to capitalist production,

was characteristic. Capitalist production only begins when labour-power is also transformed into a commodity. It should at the same time be noted that capitalist relations are gradually generated *within* the feudal mode of production.

Furthermore, money rent, according to Marx, is not at all a 'non-feudal rent'; it is only the last stage of development of feudal rent. Elements of it can appear very early, but its predominance already signifies the breakdown of the feudal mode of production. Marx makes a definite distinction between feudal money rent and capitalist rent, which has completely different economic characteristics and can only arise in capitalist society.

Professor Postan thinks that the conception of continuous development which he finds in my book, is characteristic of Marxism. As I have already stated, I do not adhere to this conception, and it is certainly foreign to Marxism. The transition from a feudal (or 'manorial') economy to 'more capitalistic forms' does not represent a direct line of development, and the growth of the market can, in certain circumstances, be accompanied by an intensification of feudal exploitation, as Marx showed.¹ The development of the productive forces, also, does not appear in the shape of a continuous progress. Here, too, halts and setbacks due to varying conditions both of a natural and, more often, of a social character are possible, while, quite often, the strength and duration of natural retarding factors are determined by social conditions. Professor Postan is wrong in thinking that a fatalistic faith in the automatic progress of mankind is a feature of Marxism; a faith in continuous evolution is even less characteristic.

If I succeed in completing my plans, I shall try to link the analysis of the *relations* of production in feudal England, which I have given in my book, with an analysis of the productive *forces* and trace, in the conditions of medieval England, the operation of the economic law of the necessary correspondence of the relations of production with the character of the forces

¹ *Capital*, Vol. i, 'The Greed for Surplus Labour. Manufacturer and Boyard'. Engels speaks of the same thing, calling it 'second serfdom'. Many Soviet scholars refer to this, for example, B. D. Grekov in his *Peasants in Rus*.

of production.¹ But this is a new, large, and complex task. The present book only partly carries out this theme.

However, I hope that I have succeeded in posing in a new way a number of questions of fundamental significance for the history of medieval society.²

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I should like to add a note to express my gratitude to my former teachers, Academician D. Petrushevsky and Professor A. Savine, under whose guidance I began my work on English agrarian history. I owe my thanks as well to many English scholars, some of them unhappily no longer with us—Dr. Hubert Hall, Professor Eileen Power and Miss E. Levett.

I enjoyed the constant help of my fellow-workers whilst I was at that incomparable repository of archives, the Public Record Office, and Professor Postan's knowledge of the English historians was of especial assistance in my work.

Finally, I must extend sincere thanks to Professor Barraclough, General Editor of the series *Studies in Medieval History* in which my book appears, to Dr. Hilton, the editor of this English version of my book, and to Miss Ruth Kisch, the translator.

¹ As formulated by J. V. Stalin in his last work, *Economic Problems of Socialism in the U.S.S.R.*

² I am very grateful to Professor Postan for the detailed analysis of my book. But I should like to point out certain of his inaccuracies. I have never asserted that 'leases of demesne among peasants became frequent as early as the beginning of Edward III's reign'. I spoke, of course, of the reign of Edward I. The upper limit of arable in small manors I considered to be not 100 but 500 acres. On pp. 263 and 367 of my book (Russian edition; or pp. 205-6 and pp. 296-7 below), there are no such assertions as those to which Professor Postan makes reference. But these, of course, are details.

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

EVGENY ALEXEYEVICH KOSMINSKY'S name is well known to historians of medieval England as the author of three articles published in the *Economic History Review* in 1928, 1931 and 1933.¹ The first of these deals with a theme often taken up by Kosminsky—the traditional interest shown by Russian scholars in English history; while the second two deal with the problems of thirteenth-century English agrarian history which are more fully examined in this book.

Kosminsky stands in the tradition of Vinogradoff, Savine and Petrushevsky and like them has been closely linked with the teaching of medieval history in Moscow from the date of his graduation in 1915 in the Faculty of History and Philosophy at the University. His research and teaching at various historical institutes culminated in 1934 in his appointment as head of the department of medieval history at Moscow University, a post he held until 1949. At the same time (1936–52) he was head of the medieval section of the Institute of History of the Academy of Sciences of the U.S.S.R. He was also, for a period, in charge of a group in this Institute which was concerned with the promotion of Byzantine studies. In 1939 Kosminsky became a corresponding member, and in 1948 a full member of the Academy of Sciences of the U.S.S.R., the highest academic honour in the country. Much of his activity of late has been curtailed through ill-health, but it is characteristic that he should have been chosen in 1952 to be editor-in-chief of the journal *News*, devoted to a cause dear to his heart, the furthering of understanding between his own country and the English-speaking world.

In addition to making his own contribution to historical knowledge Kosminsky has been responsible for the formation of a younger generation of medievalists. The strong bent of these younger historians towards English history may be seen in the pages of the periodical *The Middle Ages*² and in the new

¹ *Economic History Review*, vols. i, iii and v.

² Issued by the Institute of History of the Academy of Sciences of the U.S.S.R. Four volumes have so far appeared.

History of the English Revolution, a work of collaboration between Kosminsky and some of his pupils.

If Kosminsky continues a great Russian historical tradition, he does not mark time in the footprints of his predecessors. Whilst appreciating their contribution he also criticizes their conclusions, not only because of the appearance of fresh evidence, but also from the theoretical standpoint. Kosminsky is a Marxist, while his predecessors were not.

It is not necessary either to be a Marxist or to have an extensive knowledge of the Marxist historical method to appreciate Kosminsky's work. However, the writings of Kosminsky and his school can be better understood if one has some acquaintance with its approach and terminology. The author, in his preface, has endeavoured to explain some of the terms he uses, and occasional editorial footnotes attempt further clarification. It may also be useful to indicate here some of the most important sources of Kosminsky's method, particularly some Marxist writings which are not widely known in this country.

* * *

The first volume of Marx's *Capital*, and especially its historical chapters, is clearly very important in the formation of the theoretical background of Marxist historians. It has been well known to English students for many years, as have a number of other expository works dating from what may be called the first period of the elaboration of Marxist theory.¹ On the other hand the third volume of *Capital*, edited by Frederick Engels and published posthumously, is much less well known outside Marxist circles though its importance in the development of the Marxist historical method is considerable. It contains two historical chapters of great interest. These are Chapter XX, entitled 'Historical Data Concerning Merchants' Capital', and Chapter XLVII, entitled 'Genesis of Capitalist Ground Rent.' Briefly their argument is as follows. In the first, Marx analyses the part played by merchant capital in historical development, with critical implications for the theory in vogue in his day, and since, that it was the develop-

¹ Such as the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848) by Marx and Engels; Marx's *Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859); Engels' *Anti-Dühring* (1877) and *Ludwig Feuerbach* (1886); and other lesser Works.

ment of international trade and the accumulation of money capital that brought about the disintegration of feudal, and the rise of capitalist, society. The second contrasts what Marx calls 'feudal rent' (whether in labour, in kind, or in money) with capitalist ground rent. According to Marx, the level of feudal rent is determined by the degree of non-economic compulsion which the landlords, because of their ownership of the land and their political power, can exercise against the peasant producers. The level of capitalist ground rent, on the other hand, depends only partly on the landlord's monopoly and mostly on the general level of capitalist profit.

It is a fairly widely held misconception that Marx was little interested in the peasantry. His earliest political battles had been in defence of the common rights of the Rhenish peasantry, and towards the end of his life he became very interested in the revolutionary potentialities of the Russian peasants. Even so, it was primarily the Russian Marxists who developed the theoretical analysis (from the general Marxist standpoint) of the peasantry as a class in feudal and capitalist society. It was a practical political problem for them. Although they opposed the peasant utopianism of the Populists (the Narodniki) in order to emphasize the importance of the small but highly concentrated industrial proletariat, they could not ignore the fact that Russia was primarily a peasant country. It was essential for them to explore peasant society, and to examine the social and economic tensions in the Russian village which would make revolutionaries of some peasants and reactionaries of others.

This was a problem which V. I. Lenin studied a great deal in the early days of the Marxist movement in Russia. His two chief works on the subject were 'The Development of Capitalism in Russia' and 'The Agrarian Problem in Russia at the End of the Nineteenth Century'.¹ Based on official statistical material, his analysis owes much to the chapters in the third volume of *Capital* already mentioned. Since conditions in the Russian countryside, even after the liberation of the serfs, were amazingly medieval in many ways, it is natural that Soviet historians in approaching medieval English agrarian history should have the history of their own peasantry in mind.

¹ Lenin, *Selected Works* (English Edition), i.