

ART. XIV.—*The Poverty of Cumberland and Westmorland.* By Professor G. P. JONES, M.A., Litt.D.

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ACCORDING to the vivid third chapter of Macaulay's *History of England* a large part of the country north of the Trent was "down to the 18th century, in a state of barbarism. Physical and moral causes had concurred to prevent civilisation from spreading to that region" until, first, the establishment of peace in the border country and, secondly, the exploitation of coal mines and the coming of an industrial era, brought immigrants and the arts of life to these hitherto remote and savage regions. For this view, which probably reflects some degree of southern prejudice, he cites little evidence nor does he think it necessary to consider in what civilisation consists. He might otherwise have reflected that a peasant society could have its own way of life which, though less luxurious and hectic than that of cities, might nevertheless merit the name of civilisation. Nor was a rural area necessarily less literate. A generation before Macaulay's *History* appeared it had been maintained, admittedly with some exaggeration, that by 1700 good schools existed "in every parish, and almost in every considerable village, in Westmorland; and education to learned professions, especially to the pulpit, continued the favourite method of the Westmorland yeomanry of bringing up their younger sons"¹ It is no doubt true, as the author just quoted says, that northern men who had succeeded as bankers or merchants in the South, returning to their native districts, brought with them new habits, "one

¹ J. Britton et al., *The Beauties of England & Wales etc.*, xv (1814), 42. For the numbers of schools see C. M. L. Bouch, *Prelates and People etc.*, 241-2.

inlet of that tide of refinement which . . . began to roll into the valleys among the mountain districts'. This, however, was not the introduction of civilisation but a modification of it, and perhaps, not always for the better.

In Macaulay's view the north was barbaric not merely because it was rural but because it was poor. "The air was inclement; the soil was generally such as required skilful and industrious cultivation", unlikely to be found in the absence of peace and settled order. For travellers and others in the 18th century there might indeed be visible evidence of poverty, for instance in the great expanse of unenclosed land, the smallness of the sheep pastured upon it and the poor housing of the inhabitants even of important towns. The first caused Defoe to speak of Westmorland as a "country eminent only for being the wildest, most barren and frightful" in all England and Wales²; and Arthur Young, nearly fifty years later, described the country between Shap and Kendal as a "chain of mountainous moors, totally uncultivated", though the soil itself was "highly capable of cultivation and profitable uses"³, and noted that in some parts of the sheep-rearing north, including the region about Penrith, the average weight of fleeces was only three or four pounds.⁴ As for housing, it is known that many dwellings were of unmortared stone and thatched with straw and that in at least fourteen Cumberland parishes in the late 18th century there were hovels of clay no more commodious than the crofters' cabins of Scotland or the *tai unnos* of North Wales.⁵ It may be added that at the beginning of the century, according to one account, even in Carlisle, "the dwellings of the inhabitants were

² Defoe, *Tour through England and Wales* (Everyman edition) II. 269-270.

³ A. Young, *Six Months' Tour in the North of England* (1771) III. 131.

⁴ A. Young, *op. cit.* III. 104.

⁵ Miss K. S. Hodgson, Rev. C. M. L. Bouch and C. G. Bulman, "Lamonby Farm," in CW2 liii 151. Cf. Jonathan Boucher's Address, 1792 (CW xxvii, 147: "the houses in general in our villages are still thatched, and built of mud or clay." Commenting on this, his biographer, Thomas Sanderson, said that the criticism applied, "if at all, to the Northern and Eastern extremities of the County," to which the fourteen parishes referred to above generally belonged. For these references I am indebted to the Rev. C. M. L. Bouch.

mostly formed of wood, clay and laths, exhibiting singular specimens of poverty and vitiated taste".⁶

The evidence so far cited, it will be noted, is by no means general. However bleak and barren Arthur Young may have found the country near Shap, he added that "about three miles from Kendal you at once look down . . . upon one of the finest landscapes in the world; a noble range of fertile enclosures, richly enameled with the most beautiful verdure"; and, poor as some fell sheep may have been, he found, in some parts sheep with fleeces twice as heavy. Clay houses were probably not found in any large numbers in all parts of Cumberland and Westmorland; it has, indeed, been reasonably suggested that, already in the second half of the 17th century, many of the older houses of yeomen were in existence⁷ and, having regard to the times, were by no means meagerly furnished. It is true that copper mining near Keswick and Coniston was in decline but Alston was still producing lead; Cockermouth was flourishing and the Workington-Whitehaven region was beginning to be important in the export of coal. It is possible that an increasing home trade is indicated by the establishment of at least four new markets during the century, namely Ambleside, during the Interregnum, Whitehaven in 1660, Blennerhasset about 1661 and Orton not long before 1671. At that time, according to Sir Daniel Fleming, the market in Kirkby Stephen was much improved because of the relatively recent introduction of the manufacture of stockings; Penrith market was very active, 400 beeves being sometimes killed for one day's sale; and Kendal, which had recently added druggets, serges, hats and worsted stockings to its older manufacture of cottons, had become "a place of excellent manufacture and for civility,

⁶ J. Britton & E. W. Brayley, *The Beauties of England and Wales etc.* III (Cumberland) (1802), 83.

⁷ C. M. L. Bouch, *Prelates and People etc.* 232. The remainder of this paragraph is based on Book III, Chapter I of that work and on Sir Daniel Fleming of Rydal, *Description of the County of Cumberland*, 1671 and *Description of the County of Westmorland*, 1671 (= this Society's Tract Series, 1 and 4).

ingenuity and industry so surpassing that in regard thereof it deservedly carrieth a great name''.

It would, admittedly, be hazardous to base, on scraps of evidence relating to particular times, places, trades or persons, any very definite conclusion about the prosperity or poverty of these two counties in general. The details given, for instance in the wills of Quakers in and about Kendal between 1686 and 1738⁸, interesting as they are, have little value for our present purpose since they do not give the value of the testators' real property, and, in any event, one cannot tell how far the testators were representative of the inhabitants of the county as a whole. That poverty existed, even among members of a body notable for sobriety of life and simplicity of taste, is evident from the bequests to poor Friends; but some of this poverty, no doubt, was a consequence of persecution. So far as they go, however, these wills do not suggest poverty; it is noteworthy that among the testators were John Dickinson, of Beckhousés, yeoman, who left personal property worth over £344, mostly in bills and bonds; John Shaw, of Kirkland, shoemaker, whose personal property came to £310; and Joseph Grigg, of Milthrop, distiller, who left personal property worth more than £600, including £72 on account of shares in ships. To the same period belongs the will of James Maskew, of Broad Oak, Crosthwaite, yeoman, who left to various relations legacies in money amounting to £180.⁹ As some evidence of prosperity in the same region nearly half a century earlier there may be cited a deed of September 1662, whereby William Knipe of Broughton-in-Cartmel, gentleman, Tobias Knipe, of Flodder, gentleman, Thomas Cocke of Gateside, Miles Rowlandson of the Hawe in Lyth, Thomas Atkinson and John Cartmell, of Crosthwaite, yeomen, between them bought from Anthony Byreley, of Midrig Grange, Durham, the tithes of corn, grain and

⁸ J. Somervell, *Some Westmorland Wills* (Kendal, 1927).

⁹ and ¹⁰ Deeds in the possession of Mr and Mrs Shepherd, of Broad Oak, Crosthwaite, Westmorland.

sheaves in Crosthwaite and Lyth for no less a sum than £983.¹⁰

Why William Knipe and his associates should have chosen to use their funds in that way rather than another we do not know; the noteworthy fact is that they had the resources to use. We may presume that such disposable funds, where they existed, came directly or indirectly from the profits of farming or of a trade or a combination of the two, for the inhabitants of the region in general were no doubt in the condition described by Wordsworth:—

“The family of each man, whether *estatesman* or farmer, formerly had a twofold support, first, the produce of his land and flocks; and, secondly, the profit drawn from the employment of the women and children as manufacturers; spinning their own wool in their own houses (work chiefly done in the Winter season) and carrying it to market for sale. Hence, however numerous the children, the income of the family kept pace with its increase.”¹¹

Their prosperity or poverty would depend largely on the weather, which affected harvests and flocks and herds, and on the demand for raw wool, yarn, cloth, stockings, leather, baskets and charcoal. Too little is known about local conditions to enable fluctuations in this region to be traced with any confidence or in detail but it is unlikely that Cumberland and Westmorland were entirely unaffected by the depression felt elsewhere in the early 1620's, the improvement in the cloth trade by 1630, renewed depression in the 1640's, and the recovery after 1660.¹² On the contemporary authority of a Lancaster merchant, William Stout, we may take it that in 1727-8 sickness was rife, corn dear and the linen manufacture anything but flourishing and that conditions, though prosperous in 1730-31, were bad again in 1739-40¹³; but there is not information available to draw up a useful

¹¹ *Guide to the Lakes* (1835) edited by E. de Selincourt (London 1926) 90.

¹² On fluctuations in general before 1720 see W. R. Scott. *History of Joint Stock Companies* I, chapters IX, X, XII, and XIV.

¹³ T. S. Ashton, *An Economic History of England*⁷: *the 18th Century*, 61-62.

series of local prices over a long period and, in any event, we do not know how conditions in Cumberland and Westmorland compared with those obtaining elsewhere. It is conceivable that a society of the kind described by Wordsworth might be less at the mercy of fluctuations than communities of a more urban and industrial sort containing a greater proportion of dependent mere wage earners; and it may also have been the case that such dependent labourers as existed in Cumberland and Westmorland were already in an earlier period as superior, in frugality and capacity to use their resources, to southern labourers as Eden declared them to be towards the end of the 18th century.¹⁴

Because the considerations so far advanced do not help us to any exact comparison of our two counties with other parts of the realm it is the more necessary to take account of evidence of a different kind, namely the yield of various taxes, which, at any rate at first sight, makes comparison easy. It was on that basis that Thorold Rogers,¹⁵ for instance, declared Cumberland and Westmorland to be poor, meaning by poverty in this connection a low revenue in relation to area. The Ship Money Assessment of 1636, e.g., worked out for all England and Wales at about £1 for every 180 acres, whereas for Cumberland the figure was £1 for more than 1250 acres. It does not follow of necessity, however, though it may often be the case, that a mountainous county's inhabitants must be poorer than those of a county in the plains. Given enough acreage a farmer on the fells or near them might, like the James Maskew already cited, thrive; and it is at least theoretically possible that even the rocky lands of Cumberland might provide, for the average dweller upon them, as much food and comfort as the average inhabitant of London received. A better test, therefore, would be the average

¹⁴ *State of the Poor I* (1797) 496, 524-5, 554.

¹⁵ *History of Agriculture and Prices V*, 70. Cf. the map at the front of S. R. Gardiner. *The Puritan Revolution*.

amount of wealth per head. Unfortunately it can hardly be applied, since we can only guess the size of the population before 1801 and have no precise idea of aggregate wealth. We can, however, form some notion of the average amount of tax per head in the country as a whole and then compare the amount with the figure, similarly calculated, for Cumberland and Westmorland. The result tends to confirm the conclusion that, on the average, people in these counties were poorer than those in the south or, at any rate, that they were so treated.

The idea that the northern counties had a low taxable capacity goes back to the late 14th century, for in 1389 Northumberland, Cumberland and Westmorland, on the ground that they had been ravaged by the Scots and were much impoverished, successfully petitioned for remission of tax arrears. The same counties were exempted from a tax in 1488 and again, with the addition of Durham, in 1555.¹⁶ A similar tale of poverty was told in 1636. For Westmorland: Kendal Ward was rated for Ship Money at £156, Lonsdale Ward at £65, East Ward at £152, West Ward at £123, Kendal at £15 and Appleby at £5:—

For that the latter is most miserably poor, and Kendal not rich; and the clergy were assessed but in £18, in regard of their small benefices, great charge and the directions of the Council for their favourable usage. The whole assessment was £534, but very many little sums imposed on the poorer sort, both of the clergy and the laity, cannot be gotten in.¹⁷

Charles Davenant, writing in 1695¹⁸ held that "the favour which the north and west have met with in land-taxes is a little older than the civil war" and clearly the favour was not limited to that tax.

The relative lightness of taxation (in proportion to population) is illustrated in the examples given below. For purposes of calculation, the population of England and Wales in the latter part of the 17th century is

¹⁶ S. Dowell, *History of Taxes and Taxation in England* I. III, 128, 144.

¹⁷ *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic* 1636-37, 20.

¹⁸ *Essay on Ways and Means* (in *Works*, London 1771 I., 33).

estimated at 5,500,000, that of Cumberland at 66,360¹⁹ and that of Westmorland 28,400.²⁰ An assessment of 4s. in the pound in 1693 worked out as follows:—

For all England and Wales, average per head ...	7s.	2½d.
Cumberland		11½d.
Westmorland	2s.	1½d.
Lancashire	2s.	0d.
Bedfordshire	11s.	0½d.

It will be noted first that the average for the whole country was markedly higher than those for the three northern counties, and secondly, that the yield in Cumberland was less than half of that for Westmorland. Similar differences are shown in the yield of poll taxes. Thus the Poll Tax of I William and Mary showed:—

For all England and Wales, average per head ...	1s.	0½d.
Cumberland		4½d.
Westmorland		6½d.

The Poll Tax of 4 William and Mary showed less difference:—

For all England and Wales, average per head ...	2s.	2d.
Cumberland	just under	7¾d.
Westmorland	just over	1s. 2½d.

The story is rather different when we consider the Excise, and it is perhaps significant that the collectors of that tax may be presumed to have been less subject to local influence than, for instance, the commissioners connected with the land tax.

The Beer and Ale Excise of 1689 worked out as follows:—

For all England and Wales,		
average per head, just under	2s.	6¼d.
Cumberland	just under	1s. 9d.
Westmorland	just over	1s. 7½d. ²¹

This is, no doubt, better evidence with regard to expenditure than with regard to income; but, unless Cumberland and Westmorland people were more inclined

¹⁹ The aggregate of Denton's estimates for 1688.

²⁰ Taking the number of houses and multiplying by 4½.

²¹ For these and other tax figures see Davenant, *op. cit.*, I. 38, and Thorold Rogers *op. cit.*, V., 104-25.

than those of other parts to consume dutiable malt liquors,²² we may, possibly, regard their expenditure as some indication of what, on the average, they could afford to pay for such comforts, and it will be observed that their standard did not fall far short of the average for the whole country.

The tax collection system of the 17th century was in several ways imperfect. There had been little or no uniformity as between districts in the rating for the Monthly Assessment during the Interregnum and the same was true of aids.²³ Tax payers on oath would mislead assessors²⁴ and commissioners for subsidies and poll taxes, it was said,²⁵ would "rather procure the ease of themselves and their many friends than the advance of the King's service and the public benefit". These defects were by no means limited to one part of the country and it is possible that to some extent the relative lightness of taxation in the north was the consequence of under-assessment. Davenant had no doubt on the matter:—

" . . . the favour which the north and west have met with . . . may be attributed to that care which the great number of members they send up have always had of their concerns in parliament . . . When the (civil) war was over, there was real reason to ease the north and west, and accordingly the parliament . . . spared such places as had been most harassed . . . But still

²² According to Sir F. Eden in the late 18th century they were not: "in the North besides the pure limpid stream, the general drink of the labouring classes is either whey or milk, or rather milk and water, or, at best, very meagre small beer" (*State of the Poor*, I. 542.). Sir Daniel Fleming in 1671 held that the inhabitants of Kendal were "generally addicted to sobriety and temperance" (*Description of the County of Westmorland*, 8.).

²³ W. Kennedy, *English Taxation, 1640-1799*, 42, 45.

²⁴ Oliver Heywood's *Autobiography* (II, 268) cites a case in 1681: "William Jackman in Halifax . . . When the pole-money came to be gathered and persons must give in their stocks upon oath, he swore that he was worth no more than 100 li and now upon his death his inventory is found to be 1300 li of Debtles goods."

²⁵ In 1666, *Cobbett's Parliamentary History*, IV, 354-5. Cf. "A proposal for an Equal Land Tax," 1691 (*Harl. Misc. II. 507*): ". . . experience hath taught us they men will strangely swear and forswear, to save themselves and their neighbours from being screwed up." Cf. also *The Diary of Dudley Ryder, 1715-1716* (Edited, W. Mathews, 1939) 347 for a London opinion that "the authority of a considerable man shall be sufficient to fix or alter any assessment or lower his taxes and raise those of other people."

perhaps it had not fared so well with the north and west, notwithstanding their sufferings, if their cause had not been maintained in the house of commons by a sufficient number of friends and advocates . . . Since the last war with France, laud has been taxed in different manners, by an assessment and by a pound rate; but both ways it will perhaps appear that the north and west have not born (*sic*) their due share of the common burthen".²⁶

It is clear, too; that he was not alone in this opinion, for William Fleming, in January 1697, informed his father:—

The Capitation Bill is passed . . . with power to the King to name commissioners which I fear will be ill for the north . . . I fear posterity will have no reason to thank the promoters of this Bill, the middle of England men being all for having the rates of the north raised.²⁷

That the suspicions of the Midlanders were by no means baseless is evident from the lobbying activity of William Fleming himself. In February 1697, for instance, he was organizing opposition to proposals in Parliament that the commissioners for a tax then being debated should either be excise men or strangers to the localities where they were to act or local people paid for their services. His view was evidently that the commissioners should be unpaid local gentry. He was equally firm, in his conviction in March 1698. "Cumberland", he wrote,

"Will fare easily about the Tax in consequence of the prudent act of the commissioners in the first 4s. aid. I have already a list of Commissioners which includes my own relations."²⁸

Commissioners of that kind, one imagines, might easily believe that their estates and expenditures could be over-assessed. Sir William Lowther, in that same month, thought his part of the country over-rated.²⁹ The spirit in which they were likely to act was shown at a meeting in February 1697 when, as Richard Braithwaite wrote to Sir Daniel Fleming:—

²⁶ *Op. cit.*, I, 33, 34, 38.

²⁷ *Historical MSS Commission Report: Le Fleming MSS.* 347.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 350.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 351.

They decided to abate a quarter of what they paid last year for land, thinking it not proper to go too high in that tax lest it should be used as evidence against them in the future.³⁰

Local patriotism, which was strong in the 17th century, no doubt strengthened what, from one point of view, was a vested interest. An example occurred in 1698 when a bill to prohibit the export of wool to Holland reached the report stage. The effect of such a bill might well be, by preventing a diminution in the amount of wool available at home, to harm the grower by preventing a rise in its price. William Fleming, writing to his father on May 28th, declared:—

This will bring trouble upon Cumberland within fifteen miles of Scotland. The Committee would need insert Westmorland and all Cumberland, but I got the first without much ado excused, and cousin John Lowther the rest of Cumberland, but we could not excuse the rest nor Sir Christopher Musgrave to-day though he pressed it very much.³¹

It is not, of course, to be concluded that William Fleming and others in the north were unique in such endeavours and certainly not that they regarded their efforts as morally or politically culpable. As representatives of Cumberland and Westmorland they felt bound to do their best for their constituents, knowing no doubt, that members from other parts of the country would act in the same way for theirs. What distinguished the northern members was not that they lobbied and organised but, perhaps, that they were more effective or more fortunate. Davenant, we may take it, was right in believing that the tax assessments of these two counties were lighter than they might have been. Whether they were lighter than they ought to have been, in view of all the circumstances, is a separate question on which, despite his assertion, it is not possible to be sure.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 350.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 351.