

ART. XVII – *The strange decline of the Lakeland yeoman: some thoughts on sources, methods, and definitions.*

By JOHN K. WALTON

ONE of the distinctive features of the social history of modern Cumbria has been the tenacious survival of the small landowner farming his own estate. People of this sort remained numerous and economically important well into the nineteenth century in Furness and the Lake Counties, in sharp contrast with most of the rest of England, where they were already in retreat by the mid-eighteenth century, and in many cases much earlier.<sup>1</sup> In the Cumbrian setting however, the nature, timing and causes of the eventual decline of the “yeomanry” have themselves become matters for debate, and these are the issues that I propose to discuss in this paper. The reasons for, and significance of, the survival in strength of this important social grouping for so long, would themselves merit further discussion, as it is here that Cumbria’s social distinctiveness resides; but the historiography of decline raises issues of historical method which demand attention, as well as being interesting in its own right.

The problem of decline has been approached from several different standpoints by recent historians. Usually, it has been discussed in terms of the decline of something called the “yeomanry”; and this is how it was perceived by contemporaries, who conducted a running discussion about it from the late eighteenth century onwards. Sometimes, indeed, they used the word “statesmen” instead; but John Marshall has convincingly shown that this expression did not gain wide currency until the early nineteenth century, when it acquired a romantic aura of rustic simplicity, frugality, independence and virtue which made it attractive to tourists, outsiders conscious of their Lakeland origins, guide-book writers and nostalgic historians without lending it validity as an effective tool for social analysis. Most importantly, it was seldom used by the locals themselves: it was an external, even an alien construction.<sup>2</sup> The locals saw themselves as yeomen or farmers; and this lends an air of (possibly misleading) authenticity to the use of this vocabulary for historical discussion.

Among the more recent contributors to the debate, Jones talks most straightforwardly about the decline of the yeomanry as a distinct social entity, although he rightly recognizes that there are problems of definition, and especially that there was “no utterly rigid boundary between the classes of yeomen and gentry.”<sup>3</sup> Beckett, in his Ph.D. thesis, similarly discusses the yeomanry as a group, though in this case they are in some sense a residual category, “a collective term for all those landowners excluded from the previous two” chapters, which dealt with the peerage and the gentry; and in a recent article on the decline of the small landowner with special reference to Cumbria, he again uses the yeomanry as his frame of reference.<sup>4</sup> He rejects alternative modes of description, such as “freeholder” as used by Gregory King, or “owner-occupier” and “small landowner” as used by commentators on the national scene such as Mingay and F. M. L. Thompson, “for reasons of technical correctness: many yeomen were not freeholders, or were in some sense not the outright owners of the land they farmed,” subject as they often were to customary rents and manorial dues.<sup>5</sup> Marshall also prefers to discuss the

fortunes of the "yeomanry", although in a recent article he also analyses probate inventories in terms of a tripartite division between "upper", "middle" and "lower peasantry".<sup>6</sup>

The concept of a "peasantry" is not the same as that of a "yeomanry". At a common-sense level, a "peasantry" may be held to include lesser landowning groups, husbandmen and cottagers, who would fall outside most definitions of "yeomanry". This poses no real problems in Marshall's article, where the vocabulary of "peasantries" is largely a convenience to show "changing relationships of richer or poorer in larger groups over long periods";<sup>7</sup> but in a wider historical context the use of the term to describe the middling and lower levels of agrarian society in early modern England has itself become controversial. Macfarlane, arguing from a definition of a peasantry which has its roots in eastern Europe, insists that the word is not applicable to English circumstances. To be true peasants, families must hold their land in common and in perpetuity, and be unable to sell or bequeath it as individuals or to individuals. Peasant farming must necessarily be a collective enterprise. But, as far back as the thirteenth century, and probably earlier, land in England has been the property of individuals rather than families, and a market in land has existed at all levels of landowning society. Therefore, competitive individualism has been the dominant characteristic of English rural life since the beginning of usable written records; the transition from feudalism to capitalism or from traditional society to modern market society never occurred; and the words "peasant" and "peasantry" should be excised from the vocabulary of English social history.<sup>8</sup>

These arguments have encountered severe and justified criticism; but they need to be considered when we discuss the social structure of rural Cumbria, partly because much of Macfarlane's empirical evidence comes from the Kirkby Lonsdale area, but especially in the light of Searle's recent contribution to the yeomanry debate.<sup>9</sup> Searle insists that eighteenth-century Cumbria was essentially a peasant society, "functioning within a feudal mode of production" in which landlords extracted surplus value from near-subsistence customary tenants through rents levied in kind and in labour as well as in money, and in which the dominant concern of the peasants was with the use-values rather than the exchange-values of commodities. This was, in other words, a near-subsistence economy with very limited penetration by market forces; and it was sustained by a great deal of mutual assistance and collective regulation of assets held in common, such as common grazing, turbary and woodland rights. This traditional economy was coming under increasing pressure in the eighteenth century, which was a period of belated transition in this respect; but the change to a predominant market economy and the decline of peasant culture was slow and piecemeal.

Searle's rejection of Macfarlane's analysis echoes criticisms made elsewhere, especially by Marshall in a review article in *Northern History*.<sup>10</sup> Macfarlane's conception of a peasantry is unduly narrow, and specific to a distant and distinctive culture; and his ideas about rural individualism are based on a limited range of legal documents, taking no account of the necessarily collective or collaborative ways in which people organized their daily lives. But Searle goes further than this, because, as will be apparent from his terminology, he is operating within a Marxist frame of reference, and the direction and nature of his arguments are affected by his interest in controversies within Marxism.

This enables him to provide a new, and in many respects controversial, approach to the decline of what others call the yeomanry, but which he prefers to describe as a peasantry.

I shall return to the content of Searle's argument later. Before examining the debates between Jones, Marshall and (most explicitly) Beckett and Searle, and asking what conclusions we can come to about the decline of the yeomanry, I want to explore the twin problems of description and definition a little further. Our understanding of what happens is affected, and sometimes even determined, by the labels we give to the phenomena we are describing; and if we try to chart the decline of a social grouping, our conclusions may be affected by whether we call its members yeomen, peasants or small owner-occupier farmers.

We have seen that use of the word "peasant" poses problems, in that historians disagree about what it ought to mean. But if we use it outside a specific theoretical context, its dictionary meaning is so fuzzy as to endow it with very limited analytical power. "One who lives in the country and works on the land; a countryman; a rustic", for example, tells us very little:<sup>11</sup> in principle, it includes everything from a wage-labourer to a substantial farmer or even landowner, while perhaps omitting the superior ranks of the yeomanry, who might be leisured, have tenant farmers of their own and seek acceptance into the gentry. The diarist William Fleming of Pennington in Furness, for example, with his classical education, his books and piano and his penchant for Augustan versifying, would have reacted very angrily to being described as a "peasant";<sup>12</sup> and the word carries connotations of backward rusticity which can lead the unwary into question-begging assumptions. Besides, it was not used by the people to whom it is being applied; and while this is far from being an insuperable objection – Marshall is willing, and rightly, to refer to "middle peasants" while acknowledging that "no Lakeland yeoman saw himself as such"<sup>13</sup> – it does pose additional, and perhaps unnecessary, problems of source interpretation and definition. Searle's insistence on the word "peasantry" is much more defensible than Macfarlane's dismissal of it; but outside Searle's own specific theoretical frame of reference, the term as applied to pre-industrial Cumbria may obscure or distort as much as it reveals.

It is tempting, indeed, to set aside Beckett's scruples and describe the social grouping at issue as "owner-occupier farmers". If we stay with this definition, perhaps extending it slightly to cover customary tenants who were, in Jones's words, "in some sense (the) proprietor"<sup>14</sup> of their land, with security of tenure and the power to sell or bequeath subject to the continuing payment of customary rents and dues, we follow the experiences of a well-defined social and economic collectivity which can, in theory, be differentiated quite clearly from other groupings. Work on the land market, and on the social structure of landownership and farming, should eventually enable clear conclusions to be reached in this area, although the sources do not always make the identification of "owner-occupier farmers" a straightforward matter. This research is largely a thing of the future, however; and in any case, to chart the fortunes of the owner-occupier farmer is not the same as to analyse the decline of the yeomanry. This issue raises subtly different questions, involving value-judgements about the status, lifestyles and self-perception of people in the past, as well as analysis of their economic functions and activities. That is why Jones and Beckett can claim some justification for tackling the problem in this way; and much of Searle's discussion is also highly relevant to the questions of whether, when, how and why the yeomanry declined.<sup>15</sup>

Before we can continue, however, we are immediately faced with the central question: what is, or was, a yeoman? Unfortunately, different historians have different definitions, and this renders comparisons over time and between interpretations difficult, especially as explanations for decline will vary in emphasis according to each historian's perception of the nature of the yeomanry. As we saw, Beckett in his thesis defined the yeomanry as containing all landowners below the ranks of the gentry, pointing out that the inferior status label of "husbandman", between the yeomanry and the cottagers, was seldom used in Cumbria; and he also extended this residual definition to cover those customary tenants, farmers holding on leases, and holders of land on a mixture of tenures who were accorded the description "yeoman" by contemporaries.<sup>16</sup> Jones's definition is less generous: "an occupier of land who was also in some sense a proprietor, not a lessee or farmer in the strict sense";<sup>17</sup> and when Beckett himself narrows the focus of his argument, he becomes more demanding in his definitions, but also less consistent. In his thesis, he suggests that "a maximum figure of one hundred acres is probably not substantially incorrect" for yeoman estates in the first half of the eighteenth century, although this ceiling lifted after 1750 to some extent.<sup>18</sup> In his more recent article, however, he lays particular stress on the decline of yeomen with holdings of between 15 and 40 acres, and endorses an identification of the mid-nineteenth century yeoman with an estate of between 40 and 100 acres.<sup>19</sup> So the extent of a yeoman's holding, and therefore in one sense the definition of a yeoman, seems to have changed over time: a problem to which we shall return. Marshall, writing about the early 1870s, sees most "yeomen" as owning between 50 and 150 acres; and this is supported by a small sample of twenty-five Furness yeomen from the 1851 census, in which the median acreage was 58 and the range was between 14 and 140 acres, with as many as six of the sample holding 40 acres or fewer.<sup>20</sup> But how do we reconcile these perceptions with Bateman's national landownership survey of 1873, for which he defined owners of fewer than 100 acres as "small proprietors", owners of 100-300 acres as "lesser yeomen", and owners of 300-1000 acres as "greater yeomen" after which he reached the ranks of the gentry? Estates of between 100 and 1000 acres occupied 38 per cent of Cumberland's cultivated area, and 34 per cent of that of Westmorland.<sup>21</sup> How should we label their owners?

Bateman's requirements for admission to the gentry were unduly high in the Cumbrian context. Marshall cites several examples of socially acceptable gentry with estates of considerably less than 1000 acres, although by the 1870s their path to acceptability had long been eased by non-landed sources of wealth.<sup>22</sup> But the same author's study of Troutbeck finds that its leading yeoman family, the Brownes, owned 735 acres in 1846, when four further substantial yeomen each owned between 100 and 400 acres.<sup>23</sup> Clearly, there was extensive overlap in landownership and wealth between the upper yeomanry and the lesser gentry. This is neither novel nor surprising; but it is also clear that to set an upper ceiling of 100 or even 150 acres on the estates of the yeomanry leaves the owners of a large proportion of Cumbria's cultivated area hovering in a social no man's land. Yeoman estates of above this size were important and probably quite numerous, and they should not be excluded from an assessment of the fortunes of the yeomanry as a whole.<sup>24</sup>

In a sense, of course, attempts to define the size-range of yeoman estates are bound to be of limited value, because the label "yeoman" said as much about an individual's social standing as perceived by himself and by his neighbours, as it said about his

economic circumstances. Above all, the yeomanry were a status group, membership of which was defined by the product of a range of subjective assessments of worth as well as by the occupancy of a certain estate or the command of certain economic resources. This means that precise definitions are impossible to achieve; or rather, that the sources impose their own definitions upon the historian, who has to try to work with the labels which were affixed to individuals by contemporaries. In practice, this means in turn that historians' attempts to establish the proper size of a yeoman landholding prove to be irrelevant to the actual process of charting the yeomanry's decline. This has been pursued by the comparison of lists of "yeomen" drawn from contemporary sources at different times. Numbers have been counted and compared, and series of totals have been generated, with a greater or lesser degree of scepticism, which purport to measure the yeomanry's decline, while paying no explicit attention in this part of the argument to size of holding or to any other measure of economic power or wealth.<sup>25</sup>

This approach appears to provide a statistical basis for chronology of decline, for which appropriate explanations can then be sought. But it contains dangerous pitfalls. Above all, it rests on the assumption that the all-important consensus perceptions of what made a yeoman remained constant over time and were reflected to the same extent in different sources, and that a decline in the use of the word is in itself a demonstration of the decline of the social grouping which it describes. But what if the use of the word declines, while the social grouping persists, hiding behind new or otherwise alternative labels? I suspect that in important senses this was the case, and that we are really dealing with the changing use of a word rather than the actual decline of a social grouping.<sup>26</sup>

The term "yeoman" gained currency in a hierarchical society, in which it filled the difficult niche between the gentry, who were particularly thin on the ground in Cumbria, and the petty landowners, often known as husbandmen, and cottagers who formed the lowest and most insecure echelons of the propertied.<sup>27</sup> It marked out a stratum of quite substantial non-gentry landowners, and came to carry specific archaic and value-laden connotations of worth and standing, solid dependable virtues and rooted attachment to the soil of a particular place. It was associated with expectations of a permanent and unchanging social order. It was in practice rare for yeoman families to occupy the same holding for more than two generations, but this did not prevent the idea of the yeomanry from becoming identified with stability, permanence and reassuring continuity.<sup>28</sup> Such attributes could be attractive, of course. Marshall even argues that in the early nineteenth century the title "yeoman" became sought after by "comparative newcomers to freehold farms and estates", who "would adopt the proud title *yeoman* as though they represented families of antiquity".<sup>29</sup> This may well be so; but the label fitted uneasily into an increasingly competitive, market-orientated society in which status was becoming acquired rather than ascribed, and associated more explicitly with income, lifestyle and relationship to the means of production than with inheritance or continuity of occupation. As Cumbria experienced a belated agricultural revolution during the first half of the nineteenth century,<sup>30</sup> it is easy to imagine a new generation of cultivators retreating from the archaic, arcadian, rustic overtones of the label "yeoman". Where they could not aspire convincingly to gentility, they may well have preferred to identify themselves as farmers, a term which carried no similar connotations of respectable but increasingly moth-eaten, semi-feudal backwardness. We shall see that the most obvious and well-thumbed sources for attempts to count yeomen at mid-century, the local directories and

the census enumerator's books, were themselves shifting away from the use of the older terminology; and in the case of the directories, this must have reflected a strong element of personal choice on the part of those listed. There is, for whatever overriding reasons, a clear decline in the use of the label "yeoman" during the first half of the nineteenth century; but this may well tell us more about changing values and attitudes than about actual changes in the rural social structure of Cumbria.<sup>31</sup> Before taking this argument further, we need to look more closely at existing analyses of the decline of the "yeomanry" and the possible reasons for such a decline.

All of the recent commentators agree that the decline of the yeomanry (or in Searle's case, the peasant proprietors) was a long-term process which was retarded or temporarily reversed during the favourable economic conditions of the Napoleonic Wars – Marshall describes Napoleon as "the patron saint of farmers and some yeomen"<sup>32</sup> – but accelerated sharply in their aftermath and continued to gather momentum during the second quarter of the nineteenth century. This chronology is accepted, in broad outline, by Beckett, Jones and Searle, although they disagree in emphasis about the underlying causes.

Beckett sees many of the yeomanry as positively doing well over most of the period 1660-1780, as grain prices fell, to the benefit of a rural economy which specialized increasingly in rearing and wintering cattle; and he points to evidence of rising levels of wealth and standards of consumption, as demonstrated by the value and content of probate inventories and the rebuilding of farmhouses substantially in stone. He also points out that the burden of taxation was relatively light in this remote and under-assessed area, and that customary tenants were able to band together to defend themselves effectively against their landlords' attempts to break the stranglehold of custom on manorial rents and dues. The development of subsidiary occupations in mining, quarrying, carting and textiles, and in the processing of wood and leather, also gave a boost to many household economies.<sup>33</sup> Jones is less enthusiastic, pointing out that although "customary rents in general were (probably) not high in proportion to the extent and value of yeomen's estates . . . the pressure of fines on the death of the lord or tenant might be great"; but his analysis, too, is compatible with a very limited decline in the importance of the yeomanry as a group during the eighteenth century, coupled with an improvement in the living standards of many of its members.<sup>34</sup>

Searle provides a different perspective on these years. He sees the eighteenth century as a period of sustained conflict between landlords and customary tenants, as the former systematically sought to increase their exploitation of the latter through feudal rents and dues; but he accepts that the tenants were able to collaborate remarkably effectively in defence of their customs and living standards, although he points out that entry fines and other irregular payments increased at a rate which almost certainly outpaced the growth in yeoman incomes, although it is not clear how important these payments were as a proportion of total outgoings. He is sceptical about the real extent and significance of the rise in disposable wealth, and he argues that the rise of the cattle trade in this period led to the chronic overstocking of the commons which were so important to the region's economy, to the enrichment of a few substantial and successful yeomen – he refers to them as "kulaks" – at the expense of their neighbours, and to a consequent undermining of the rural solidarities which had protected tenants against their landlords. Searle, then, is less sanguine about the evidence for improvement than Beckett or Jones: he prefers to endorse the famous *Gentleman's Magazine* description of 1766, which spoke

of Cumberland's 10,000 "petty landowners" who "work like slaves; they cannot afford to keep a man servant, but husband, wife, sons and daughters all turn out to work in the fields . . . they very seldom taste meat or wheat bread . . . notwithstanding this miserable way of life, they save nothing . . . they cannot either feed or dress meaner."<sup>35</sup> What Searle provides is an endorsement of Beckett's picture of the strong persistence of the Cumbrian yeomanry in the eighteenth century, but with a gloomier perception of their material conditions and a characteristic emphasis on sustained and endemic class conflict between landlord and tenant.<sup>36</sup>

Searle and Beckett, especially, agree that the decline of the yeomanry began in earnest after 1815. Beckett provides a multiplicity of causes, some of which endorse and amplify earlier suggestions by Jones. The temporary prosperity of the French Wars encouraged yeomen to borrow to expand and improve their holdings, and to buy their enfranchisement from customary rents and manorial dues; but the post-war collapse in agricultural commodity prices turned their debts into crippling burdens, and where they were not forced to sell up through insolvency, they were tempted to dispose of their estates, which were now freehold and therefore more attractive, at enhanced prices, and go into retirement or seek a less gruelling and abstemious way of life elsewhere. He suggests that some family economies may have become over-stretched by succumbing to a temptation to competitive consumption beyond their means, or by the estate being burdened by the provision of extravagant endowments and marriage-portions for too many children. He also draws attention to a decline in supportive by-occupations, especially in textiles, with closer integration into a national economy which was increasingly characterized by regional specialization and the division of labour. On the other hand, he rejects the notion that the extensive Cumbrian enclosures of upland commons and waste were causally connected with the decline of the yeomanry, pointing out that there is no evidence that this distinctive kind of enclosure brought depopulation or changes in the rural social structure in its wake.<sup>37</sup>

Searle presents a similar cocktail of causes, but blends and shakes them differently. He argues that the landowners encouraged enfranchisement and pursued enclosure as alternative ways of maximizing their incomes and exploiting their tenantry, after the failure of their attempts to break the customary restraints on feudal rents and dues. Enclosure brought part of the commons into the hands of the lord of the manor, and enfranchisement made tenants' land more attractive to purchase, while the high costs involved often led them into debt and made them more likely to sell. So these were twin processes which together broke custom, undermined the collectivist spirit which came from communal management of the commons, gave landlords full control over more of the means of production, encouraged competitive individualism and ushered in a new era of capitalist agricultural improvement. This carries conviction, although Searle is unable to show that enclosure or enfranchisement, in themselves, initiated or accelerated a decline in the numbers of the yeomanry in particular places. Much more important, he thinks, was the destabilizing impact of the growing influence of the market economy, in which small proprietors were insufficiently flexible to hold out for the best prices and depended dangerously on borrowing to make the most of favourable periods; and especially significant, of course, was the collapse in grain, butter and wool prices after 1815, with sustained low returns persisting through the 1830s and 1840s. Alongside these economic trends, Searle lays particular stress on the debilitating effects of marriage

portions and endowments on the yeoman economy, as the attempt to enable all of the children to retain the status to which they were born placed crippling burdens on family finances, especially as the sum allocated to each child seems to have increased more than fourfold between the early 1750s and the late 1820s. The coincidence of worsening economic pressures after 1815, and a persisting rise in the level of provision for children, in a context of declining rural industries, provides a telling explanation for decline in the yeomanry; and when land prices began to rise sharply in the middle decades of the nineteenth century, the temptations to give up and sell up became more seductive still.<sup>38</sup>

These seem quite compelling arguments, with impressive and appropriate supporting evidence. There is much common ground between Beckett, Searle and Jones, and much of what they say carries conviction, up to a point. The key difference between them, perhaps, lies in the question: what are they trying to explain? Beckett and Jones are accounting for the numerical decline of an established social grouping, the yeomanry; and significantly perhaps, they tell us nothing specific about what might have taken its place. Searle, on the other hand, is analyzing a transition from feudal, peasant agriculture to individualist, commodity-orientated, capitalist agriculture; and he sees the decline of the yeomanry as part of a wider transition in values and social behaviour as well as in social structure more narrowly defined. We need to consider which of these approaches asks more useful and satisfying questions about the changes in agrarian society in nineteenth-century Cumbria; and in order to do this we need to get behind the explanations, and take another look at the evidence. What is the nature of the phenomenon which these arguments are supposed to explain? And how convincing is the evidence of its existence?

I shall begin by testing the evidence used by Beckett and Jones to demonstrate the decline of the yeomanry as a social grouping after the Napoleonic Wars. It is of two basic kinds: comments by contemporary observers, and the comparison of lists of yeomen and farmers in trade directories for 1829 and the late 1840s. Some of the contemporary commentators carry weight: William Blamire the tithe expert, for instance, giving evidence in 1833 on the incidence of, and reasons for, the decline of the yeomanry in Cumberland, had an extensive knowledge of agriculture in general and north-west Cumberland in particular;<sup>39</sup> but by that time even his outlook was likely to be coloured by contemporary romantic literary perceptions and expectations of the sad demize of the virtuous "statesmen" of the dales, as propogated by the Wordsworths and a host of imitators. These are essentially impressionistic sources, and historians are tempted to endorse and deploy those which support their predilections, and to discard those which present inconvenient points of view. Thus Searle considers the article in the *Gentleman's Magazine* for 1766 to provide a convincing depiction of the poverty of rural Cumberland, while Jones treats it with reserve and Macfarlane rejects it.<sup>40</sup>

Are the directories more convincing? They have been used for many years to chart the decline in yeoman numbers: F. W. Garnett in 1912 compared three directories to show that the number of "statesmen" in Westmorland fell from 899 in 1829, to 549 in 1849 and 439 in 1885.<sup>41</sup> Jones picked up the first two of these directories, Parson and White's for 1829 and Mannex for 1849, and performed calculations which suggested that during the twenty years in question the yeomanry in Westmorland declined from 35·4 per cent of the total number of farmers to 24 per cent and in Lancashire north of the sands from 35·4 per cent to 19·8 per cent. In absolute numbers there was a fall of 38·5

per cent in Westmorland, from 916 to 563, and 36.3 per cent in Lancashire north of the sands.<sup>42</sup> Subsequently Beckett has used the directory evidence in this way without question; Searle has used the directories to provide a “shorthand, if not so accurate” measure; and Marshall has used them altogether more cautiously, pointing out that “the apparent steady disappearance of persons styling themselves yeomen . . . in directory entries . . . does not necessarily indicate a decimation of owner-occupiers, but may also suggest a change of emphasis in the use of a title.”<sup>43</sup>

This qualification is important; and its relevance is enhanced when we look at the characteristics of the directories themselves. If they are to provide a satisfactory index of decline, they need to have a very considerable continuity of depth and coverage of the relevant social groupings, and they need to share common assumptions about how people’s occupations and status levels ought to be classified and presented. It is now a commonplace among social historians that directories in the first half of the nineteenth century were often idiosyncratic productions, and that their quality and methods varied widely. In comparing occupational listings in directories, we run the risk that we may really be comparing the quality of the directories themselves, rather than the actual incidence of the phenomenon that they purport to describe.<sup>44</sup>

Does this problem apply to the lists of farmers and “yeomen” in the Parson and White and Mannex directories? Both compilers make earnest promises of thoroughness and reliability. Parson and White, from their office in Leeds, stated that “The information has been in every case either collected or verified upon the spot, by personal application in both counties, at the houses of all the principal inhabitants . . .”<sup>45</sup> Mannex, who used a printer in Beverley, assured his readers that “all possible care has been taken to avoid errors, and the most unremitting endeavours have been used to secure fidelity of representation, every Parish and Township having been visited, and the information either collected or verified on the spot.”<sup>46</sup>

These are, of course, conventional pieties. The obvious way to test them is by comparing a directory with another source with similar claims to representativeness; and in the context of the decline of the yeomanry, the best course is to compare Mannex’s 1849 directory with the enumerators’ books for the 1851 census.

The following table shows the results of this enterprise, and brings out the limited actual coverage of the directory.<sup>47</sup>

In these Furness townships the census finds over 30 per cent more farmers and yeomen than the directory; and it also classifies them differently, suggesting a revealing lack of consensus about what a yeoman actually was. Just over half of those listed in one or other of the sources, can be found in both under the same heading. Only a small amount of this variation can be explained in terms of deaths and removals during the two years or less between the compilation of the directory and the taking of the census. Clearly, the directory omits a significant number of farmers, especially small ones (the median acreage of farms included in Mannex was 70, compared with 20 for the excluded ones). It is also more likely to label its farmers as yeomen or owner-occupiers; and it classifies rural society on a different principle from the census, making it look different in the eyes of the researcher. Moreover, the additional evidence from the census undermines Jones’ assertion that the availability of supplementary occupations were declining. Even though the census was not interested in second occupations, being unable to include them in the printed tables, the enumerators’ books for the survey area reveal 23 farmers

TABLE I. – *Farmers and yeomen in selected Furness townships, 1849-51.*

Number of entries in:	Mannex	Census
Farmers	169	255
Yeomen	39	6
Others	0	11 (8 husbandmen, 3 hinds)
	208	272
Number of farmers:		
(a) In Mannex but not in Census:		25
(b) In Census but not in Mannex:		65
(c) In Mannex as yeoman but Census as farmer:		28
(d) In Census as yeoman but Mannex as farmer:		0
(e) In Mannex as yeoman but not in Census:		7
(f) In Mannex under other heading but Census as farmer:		16
(g) In both Mannex and Census as farmer:		145
(h) In both Mannex and Census as yeoman:		3
(i) In Census as yeoman but not in Mannex:		2
(j) In Mannex as gentleman but Census as yeoman:		1
(k) In Mannex as gentleman but Census as farmer:		1
Total, yeomen and farmers in both sources		293

Enumerators' books and directory entries compared for: Egton with Newland, Mansriggs, Osmotherly, Ulverston, Above Town (Dalton), Low and Middle Quarters (Kirkby Ireleth), Woodland, Broughton West.

and yeomen with additional occupations which would not have been suspected from the directory. These included victuallers, basket makers, millers, a blacksmith, a builder, a surgeon, a carrier, a quarry labourer and three other labourers. This part of Furness did have an unusually diverse and healthy rural economy, admittedly, and the decline in domestic textiles over much of Cumbria was real enough; but this evidence still gives further emphasis to the dangers of using the directory in isolation.<sup>48</sup> We do not know how incomplete the Parson and White directory was, or how its compilers differentiated between yeomen and farmers; but it does appear that an uncritical comparison of the two directories is likely to give a misleading impression of the extent and nature of changes in rural social structure.

The Census, of course, poses problems of its own. Its enumerators were discouraged from entering individuals as "yeomen" or "husbandmen", which were not accepted occupational categories for the printed tables of either the 1841 or 1851 census. So listings under these headings in the enumerators' books occur as a result of the random caprices of individual enumerators; and they occur much more often, though patchily, in 1841 than in 1851. At Woodland, for example, the 1841 enumerator listed husbandmen (one of whom had 115 acres in 1851) and yeomen as well as farmers; but in nearby Middle Quarter a different enumerator returned a uniform list of "farmers". "Yeoman" and "husbandman" were status categories of pre-industrial origin: they were difficult to slot into the census-takers' expectations of an agricultural system based on landlords, tenant farmers and labourers, and they were therefore disguised under an occupational label which made them indistinguishable from ordinary tenant farmers. In devising their standard occupational classification, the census takers obscured the complex reality of a

transitional Cumbrian social system behind the occupational categories of commercial, capitalist farming.<sup>49</sup>

How far, then, was the decline of the yeomanry merely an optical illusion, a change in the conventional meaning and use of a word? The comparison between Mannex and the Census supports the contention that the decline was much more a linguistic than a social phenomenon. Perhaps significantly, the average "yeoman" in my sample of the 1841 census was five years older than the average "farmer"; and it seems likely that by Victorian times, at least, the term "yeoman" was gradually passing out of use as its connotations became archaic and embarrassing instead of status-enhancing and reassuring, although it must be admitted that some families seem to have clung to the label with pride. Whatever the reasons for the change in nomenclature, the decline in the use of the word tells us nothing, in itself, about the fortunes of the owner-occupier farmer, although it suggests important things about the passing of a set of social attitudes at a time of rapid agricultural transformation. In this more specialized sense, the decline of the yeomanry fits in well with Searle's thesis about the gradual and belated decline of the Cumbrian peasantry and the concomitant commercialization of relationships and values.<sup>50</sup> But there is much evidence to suggest that actual social structure of rural Cumbria changed remarkably little. There may have been fewer owner-occupier farmers — though this needs further research — but the number of farms were actually increasing in the 1850s, and for the rest of the nineteenth century the decline was minimal. Moreover, the demand for small farms remained buoyant, even in the depressed years of the 1880s.<sup>51</sup> Searle, in an appendix to his thesis, provides remarkable evidence of the resilience of the small family-based farming unit even in the early twentieth century. In different areas of Cumbria the percentage of land held in units of less than 200 acres fell only marginally between the 1838-43 tithe surveys and the great land return organized for Lloyd George's 1910 budget. Falls were of the order of 56 per cent to 49 per cent, 79 per cent to 69 per cent, 46 per cent to 37 per cent and 83 per cent to 73 per cent, in groups of selected parishes.<sup>52</sup>

If we remember that there was never any necessity for "yeomen" to be owner occupiers, and that the category could include farmers of anything from ten or so acres to several hundred, it becomes clear that the decline of the yeomanry as a social formation is indeed, for practical purposes, an illusion. The explanations for decline are predicated on the assumption that it actually occurred: in themselves, they show the economic and social pressures that were being exerted on the small owner-occupier farmer, but they are not evidence for an actual decline of the yeomanry. Cumbria's system of small family farms persisted, and continued to include a significant number of owner-occupiers. Their crops and farming systems changed during the nineteenth century; they became more market-orientated, while the subsistence element in their domestic economies declined; and they became even more dependent on family labour. But in many respects, as Searle acknowledges, their way of life changed remarkably little.<sup>53</sup> For practical purposes, what had been called the yeomanry was as important in the Cumbria of 1900 as in 1800 or 1700. The only major change was that most of these people were no longer known as yeomen. This change of nomenclature is itself significant, but it was not accompanied by major changes in the social structure of rural Cumbria. If we accept this analysis, we are left with the disturbing suspicion that much ink has been spilt, by Jones and Beckett in particular, in providing elaborate economic explanations for what is really a non-

problem. The use of the word “yeoman” certainly declined in nineteenth-century Cumbria, but the social grouping it described remained resilient and important, even though its members were now hidden, and in many cases chose to hide, behind the new classificatory vocabulary of commercial capitalist farming.

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### Notes and References

- <sup>1</sup> J. V. Beckett, ‘The pattern of landownership in England and Wales, 1660-1880’, *Economic History Review* 37 (1984), 15-21.
- <sup>2</sup> J. D. Marshall, ‘“Statesmen” in Cumbria: the vicissitudes of an expression’, CW2 lxxii, 248-73.
- <sup>3</sup> G. P. Jones, ‘The decline of the yeomanry in the Lake Counties’, CW2 lxii, 207-8 and *passim*.
- <sup>4</sup> J. V. Beckett, ‘Landownership in Cumbria c. 1680-1750’, Ph. D. thesis, University of Lancaster, 1975, Chapter 5; ‘The decline of the small landowner in eighteenth and nineteenth century England: some regional considerations’, *Agricultural History Review* 30 (1982), 97-111.
- <sup>5</sup> Beckett, thesis, 139, *op. cit.*
- <sup>6</sup> J. D. Marshall, ‘Agrarian wealth and social structure in pre-industrial Cumbria’, *Economic History Review* 33 (1980), 517-19 and *passim*.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 518.
- <sup>8</sup> A. Macfarlane, *The origins of English individualism* (Oxford, 1978). For a different and more convincing argument against the use of “peasant” in the English setting, which also points out that “yeomen” are not conceptually the same as “peasants”, see J. V. Beckett, ‘The peasant in England: a case of terminological confusion’, *Agricultural History Review* 32 (1984), 113-23.
- <sup>9</sup> C. E. Searle, ‘“The odd corner of England”’: a study of a rural social formation in transition: Cumbria c. 1700-c. 1914’, Ph.D. thesis, University of Essex, 1983.
- <sup>10</sup> J. D. Marshall, ‘The study of local and regional “communities”’: some problems and possibilities’, *Northern History* 17 (1981), 203-30.
- <sup>11</sup> This definition comes from the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary.
- <sup>12</sup> J. D. Marshall, *Old Lakeland* (Newton Abbot, 1971), 128-36. See also Beckett (1984), 116, for the more generally pejorative connotations of “peasant”.
- <sup>13</sup> Marshall (1980), 518, *op. cit.*
- <sup>14</sup> Jones (1962), 198, *op. cit.*
- <sup>15</sup> Searle also makes clear at one point that he is discussing “the demise of an independent landowning peasantry, the yeomanry or ‘statesmen’ of contemporary description”: Searle, thesis, 335, *op. cit.*
- <sup>16</sup> Beckett, thesis, 139-41; and see also Beckett (1982), 100, *op. cit.*
- <sup>17</sup> Jones (1962), 198, *op. cit.*
- <sup>18</sup> Beckett, thesis, 142, *op. cit.*
- <sup>19</sup> Beckett (1982), 102. But see also Beckett (1984), 123, where yeomen are said to have been “close to being a gentleman” in the eyes of contemporaries.
- <sup>20</sup> J. D. Marshall and J. K. Walton, *The Lake Counties from 1830 to the mid-twentieth century* (Manchester, 1981), 112; and see below, note 47.
- <sup>21</sup> F. M. L. Thompson, *English landed society in the nineteenth century* (London, 1963), 116-17.
- <sup>22</sup> Marshall and Walton (1981), 114, *op. cit.*
- <sup>23</sup> Marshall, *Old Lakeland*, 112, *op. cit.*

- <sup>24</sup> Cf. M. Campbell, *The English Yeoman* (1967 edn.), 99 ff.
- <sup>25</sup> Jones (1962), 211-13, 217-19; Beckett (1982), 102; Searle, thesis, 312, 330, *op. cit.*
- <sup>26</sup> Marshall and Walton (1981), 112, *op. cit.*
- <sup>27</sup> Campbell, *English Yeoman*, Chapter 2, *op. cit.*
- <sup>28</sup> Jones (1962), 209-10, *op. cit.*
- <sup>29</sup> Marshall (1972), 270, *op. cit.*
- <sup>30</sup> Searle, thesis, 279 ff., *op. cit.*
- <sup>31</sup> Cf. Marshall and Walton (1981), 112, *op. cit.*
- <sup>32</sup> Marshall, *Old Lakeland*, 136, *op. cit.*
- <sup>33</sup> Beckett (1982), 102-5; J. D. Marshall, 'The domestic economy of the Lakeland yeoman, 1660-1749', CW2, lxxiii, 190-219; Marshall (1980), *op. cit.*
- <sup>34</sup> Jones (1962), 205 and *passim*, *op. cit.*
- <sup>35</sup> Quoted by Jones (1962), 207, *op. cit.*
- <sup>36</sup> Searle, thesis, 48, 55, 63, 69 ff., 98-103, 145-69, 227-31, *op. cit.*
- <sup>37</sup> Beckett (1982), 107-9; Jones (1962), 215, 220, *op. cit.*
- <sup>38</sup> Searle, thesis, 231-62, 329, *op. cit.*
- <sup>39</sup> H. Lonsdale, *The worthies of Cumberland: John Christian Curwen and William Blamire* (London, 1867), 207-315.
- <sup>40</sup> Searle, thesis, 55; Jones (1962), 207-8, *op. cit.*
- <sup>41</sup> F. W. Garnett, *Westmorland agriculture 1800-1900* (1912), 15.
- <sup>42</sup> Jones (1962), 218; see also Marshall and Walton (1981), 113. Note the discrepancy between the figures cited by Garnett and Jones.
- <sup>43</sup> Beckett (1982), 102: "The number of Westmorland yeomen fell dramatically in the two decades between the compilation of Parson and White's directory (1829) and that of Mannex (1849)." Also Searle, thesis, 330; Marshall and Walton (1981), 112-13, *op. cit.*
- <sup>44</sup> M. J. Winstanley, *The shopkeeper's world, 1830-1914* (Manchester, 1983), 12-14; J. K. Walton and P. R. McGloin, 'The tourist trade in Victorian Lakeland', *Northern History* 17 (1981), 168-9; G. Timmins, 'Measuring industrial growth from trade directories', *Local Historian* 13 (1979), 349-52.
- <sup>45</sup> W. Parson and W. White, *History, directory and gazetteer of Cumberland and Westmorland, with Furness and Cartmel* (Leeds, 1829; reprinted Beckermeth, 1976), 4.
- <sup>46</sup> P. J. Mannex, *History, topography and directory of Westmorland; and Lonsdale north of the sands, in Lancashire* (London, 1849), v.
- <sup>47</sup> This table compares the entries in Mannex (1849) with the census enumerators' books for 1851, which are available on microfilm in Lancaster University Library. It is worth noting that the lists in Mannex refer sometimes to "yeomen" and sometimes to "owner-occupiers", and the terms are apparently used interchangeably.
- <sup>48</sup> Jones (1962), 215-16. For the Furness economy see especially J. D. Marshall, *Furness and the Industrial Revolution* (Barrow, 1958; reprinted Beckermeth, 1981).
- <sup>49</sup> See B. Hindess, *The use of official statistics in sociology* (London, 1973), Chapters 2-3. I owe this reference to John Easton.
- <sup>50</sup> Searle, thesis, 355 and *passim*.
- <sup>51</sup> Marshall and Walton (1981), 249, Appendix 4; Garnett, *Westmorland agriculture 1800-1900*, *op. cit.*
- <sup>52</sup> Searle, thesis, Appendix C, 396 ff., *op. cit.*
- <sup>53</sup> Searle, thesis, especially 351-2.

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