The English Landed Estate in the Nineteenth Century

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CHAPTER IV

THE LAND AGENT

The agglomeration of estates, the revolution in agriculture, the growth in mineral output—all contributed in some degree to the emergence during the eighteenth century of specialized activity in the management of land. Professor Hughes has noted that the word "agent" itself—used in connection with the management of landed estates—gained currency in the eighteenth century.¹ Possibly the substitution of "agent" for "steward" was a sign of the land agent's growing self-consciousness, of his attempt to make an occupation into a profession.² Some agents' handbooks plainly struck a note of professional self-consciousness at the end of the eighteenth century.³

Owing mainly to the accidents of research, this chapter will be concerned chiefly with land agents resident on large estates. Such agents specialized in the close, day-to-day supervision of a farming tenantry: receiving rents, selecting tenants, negotiating agreements and leases, maintaining and improving the

¹ Hughes, "The Eighteenth Century Estate Agent," in Essays in British and Irish History.
² Dr. Robson suggests that "linguistic affectations" may also have had their social significance in the rise of the attorney; see Robson, The Attorney, p. 152.
³ N. Kent, Hints to Gentlemen of Landed Property (London, 1799), p. 245.
permanent equipment of the estate, spurring tenants to greater enterprise, participating in local government, even invigilating parochial morality.

This chapter will say little about agents in general business—for example, such London firms as the Cluttons, employed by the Ecclesiastical Commissioners, or Pickering and Smith, similarly employed, or such provincial firms as that of Thomas Smith Woolley of Newark or William Sturge of Bristol. This neglect may have some warrant. Agents like the Cluttons often administered corporate estates—and this book is chiefly concerned with private estates. Although it would be useful for an exhaustive account of estate administration to know more about such agents in general business as were connected with small private estates, it may be doubted that they were very different in outlook from the resident agents on the great estates.

I

What was the social background and education of nineteenth-century land agents? Professor Hughes cites some examples of land agents in Hanoverian England who were cadets of landed families, or in some way related to such families, like Henry Ellison, nephew to Colonel George Liddell of Ravensworth, who became the Liddell agent in 1726. Even more impressive examples can be found a century or so later: Frederick Grey, son of Earl Grey of the Reform Bill, a naval Captain who managed the family estates in Northumberland from 1846 to 1852; Algernon Egerton, second son of the Earl of Ellesmere, second son of the Earl of Ellesmere,

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4 There is some mention of these agents in A. Clapham, *A Short History of the Surveyor's Profession* (London, 1949).

5 This was implied by the Estate Committee of the Ecclesiastical Commissioners in its report on land agents and estate administration in 1862; see B.P.P., *Report of the Select Committee on the Ecclesiastical Commission* (1862, VIII), pp. 423-24.

who served on the family estates after 1855; and Henry Noel, son of Lord Gainsborough, who was agent at Exton Park in 1851.

But these examples probably do not signify much. In 1816 Lord Dudley expressed a preference for agents of high social standing—such as were to be found in Ireland. But Dudley was an eccentric, and even he admitted that “this is an opinion that don’t seem to prevail among the great lords of the soil; and they are, for the most part, better pleased to go on in the old way with their indigenous stewards and attornies.”

It is not likely that Dudley’s opinion prevailed at any time in the nineteenth century: that aristocratic families ever became an important source for the recruitment of land agents, or that land agency ever became a vocation mainly of the upper middle classes.

If land agents were not Lord Dudley’s sort of gentleman, they were often—as Surtees once called them—“gentlemen of the second class”: that is, respectable men drawn largely from the provincial middle classes. Some with the highest reputation came from Scotland, part of that impressive migration of talent which marked Anglo-Scottish history. Francis Blaikie, agent to Coke of Norfolk, was a Scot; so were Andrew Thompson, agent to Ralph Sneyd, John Yule, agent to Sir James Graham, and John Matthew whom Caird recommended to Sir Robert Peel. Blaikie’s social origins are unknown. But

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8 Add. MSS, 36,472, folio 66, Sophia Hobhouse to Lord Broughton, 1851 (?). And there was Henry Petre who was agent to his brother, Lord Petre; see L. Petre, *The Life of the Hon. Henry W. Petre* (Privately printed, 1907).
11 R. S. Surtees, *Ask Mama*, chap. XI.
12 Add. MSS, 40,602, folios 269 ff., Caird to Sir R. Peel, Nov. 29, 1849.
13 At any rate there is no mention of them in A. M. W. Stirling, *Coke of Norfolk and His Friends* (London, 1908), 2 vols.; or in A. M. W.
in all probability they were the same as Thompson’s and Yule’s and Matthews’—a Scottish farming family.

The social origins of English land agents were probably much the same. They tended to be sons of tenant farmers and yeomen; of land agents, builders, and surveyors; and of mining engineers. In a word they were sons of practical men, often familiar from youth with the varied business of land management. Henry Morton, agent to the Earls of Durham, came from substantial farming stock in the Northumberland border country.14 Grey of Dilston, agent to the Greenwich Hospital estates in the North Country, came from a Northumbrian yeoman family.15 The Dixons were for four generations agents of the Charlton family at Hesleyside in Northumberland.16 For an even longer time the Wings were agents to the Dukes of Bedford on their Fen estate.17 Robert Evans, George Eliot’s father and agent to the Newdegate family in Warwickshire, was the son of a builder.18 Hugh Taylor, Commissioner to the Duke of Northumberland, was the son of the Duke’s mineral agent who was also a farmer.19 William Sturge, the Bristol land agent, was the son and grandson of land agents.20

In 1896 the Royal Commission on the Land of Wales and Monmouthshire set down what it took to be the proper training of a land agent.

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15 J. E. Butler, Memoir of John Grey of Dilston (Edinburgh, 1869), passim.


17 See article in D.N.B. on an earlier Tycho Wing (1696–1750) which refers to the later Tycho (1794–1851) and to John Wing (1752–1812), both agents to the Dukes of Bedford.


19 Welford, Men of Mark, III, 494–97.

We think that such an agent should be one who in addition to a sound preliminary, general, and scientific education has received a special theoretical training in agriculture and land surveying, and in the sciences (such as mathematics, chemistry etc.) upon which the practise of these arts depends, as well as practical experience in an estate office and on a farm. To put the matter in another way, we think a young man, intending to become a land agent should, in addition to acquiring the average degree of culture and knowledge of a university man, attend courses of study at an agricultural college or a college giving technical instruction in the practical arts, and then pass some time gaining practical and actual experience in an office or on a farm. In short, we would have him prepare himself professionally in a manner analogous to that in which the physician qualifies himself to practice the art of medicine, or a solicitor that of the law.21

Of the land agents who figure prominently in this chapter—men who usually had passed their prime by the 1870's—none underwent much of this training. What is known of their formal education suggests that it was relatively slight. Henry Morton went to the famous High School in Edinburgh, a fellow pupil of Brougham and Jeffrey, but failed to go on with them to the University.22 Grey of Dilston went to Dr. Tate's school in Yorkshire, and spent two further years being privately taught in the home of a Cumberland clergyman.23 In all probability this kind of schooling was typical; land agents were products not of Oxford or Cambridge nor for that matter of London colleges or Scottish universities.

As to a theoretical training in agriculture, it was simply not available anywhere in England; at any rate not until the founding of the Royal Agricultural College at Cirencester in 1845.

This school was originally intended as a school for the sons of farmers, and might well have provided from its beginning a professional training for land agents. But it seems that financial difficulties forced up fees to such an extent that farmers' sons found the College too expensive. It was thus largely used, as it was said in 1881, "for the sons of gentlemen." Although some of its graduates became land agents—like S. D. Dodgson, agent to the Earl of Lonsdale, and Nevile Day, agent to the Earl of Westmorland—these were probably not typical products of the Royal Agricultural College.

It would seem then that nineteenth-century land agents picked up their knowledge, both theoretical and practical, without the aid of much formal instruction. What theoretical knowledge they acquired—self-confessedly slight, since they took pride in their being practical men—came to them from books, journals, conversations, and from the meetings of local and national agricultural societies. Their practical knowledge was the product of a life bred to the soil—"from my cradle," as John Yule once observed to Sir James Graham. Some agents, like William Sturge, were articled to surveyors—Sturge himself entering his father's Bristol office at the age of sixteen. Some went as pupils to an established agent, like John Beasley, the Spencers' agent at Althorp, who trained young men as he trained his sons: probably in much the way Caleb Garth instructed his nephew, Fred Vincey. And some took to land agency as a side line to their own farming. This emphasis on the

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24 Mark Lane Express, July 3, 1843, for an account of the projected agricultural college.
26 C. Bathurst and E. Kinch, eds., Register of the Staff and Students of the Royal Agricultural College (Cirencester, 1897), passim.
27 Netherby MSS, Yule to Sir J. Graham, July 4, 1843.
29 Beasley was also agent to Lord Overstone. His farming was commended in Caird, English Agriculture, pp. 421–34. Landowners from all parts of England sought out their agents from among his pupils.
practical was probably not misplaced, given the nature of much of the agent’s work.\textsuperscript{30}

It would be misleading to suggest that all land agents were of the type here described. There was reason for the remark made by Miss Aldclyffe in Thomas Hardy’s \textit{Desperate Remedies}: “a steward’s is an indefinite, fast and loose profession, it seems to me.”\textsuperscript{31} Some men made their way into it, or offered to enter it, with little or no experience of farming and estate business, often for the very good reason of having nothing else to do. In the 1890’s the complaint was still heard that too many ex-soldiers and sailors took to land agency.\textsuperscript{32} Miss Mitford was quite sure that her father would make a reasonably good agent, although he had been trained as a doctor.\textsuperscript{33} Robert Oastler, agent to the Thornhills at Fixby in Yorkshire, was until the age of fifty-three a cloth merchant. His better-known son, Richard, the humanitarian reformer, who succeeded him at Fixby, first sought his livelihood as a commission agent in the cloth trade after having gained some experience of an architect’s office.\textsuperscript{34}

Still it is not likely that the great estates often employed such men—or even that such men frequently offered themselves for employment on the great estates. For what it is worth, there is the example of Cornwall Legh, owner of a moderately sized estate in Cheshire, who lost his agent in a fatal accident in 1859, with the result that a number of men made application to fill the vacancy. All but one of them had had some farming experience. Most of them had sought some sort of practical experience as agent: one had been a pupil under H. W. Keary, the Earl of Leicester’s agent on his Holkham estate in Norfolk;

\textsuperscript{30}Carr-Saunders and Wilson, \textit{The Professions}, pp. 376–79.
\textsuperscript{31}T. Hardy, \textit{Desperate Remedies}, chap. 7.
\textsuperscript{32}Smith, \textit{Principles of Estate Management}, p. 298.
\textsuperscript{33}A. G. L. Estrange, \textit{The Life of Mary Russell Mitford} (London, 1870), 3 vols., III, 163–64.
another had gone to the Royal Agricultural College, thence to the estate office of T. S. Wooley and to a farmer on the Lincolnshire wolds to see "the best agriculture in England." 35

Qualified men managed to obtain the positions even under landowners so little acquainted with farming and estate business as Ralph Sneyd. In 1848 he was known to be looking for an agent, and Sir Francis Lawley mentioned this fact to his friend, Charles Arbuthnot, the Tory politician and intimate of the Duke of Wellington. Arbuthnot happened to own a small estate at Woodford in Northamptonshire, small enough to require no more than the services of a farm bailiff. For fifteen to twenty years he had employed as bailiff two brothers, Scots named Thompson, first one and then the other. The first eventually left to become agent to the Duke of Beaufort. The second, Andrew, was Arbuthnot's choice as agent to Ralph Sneyd. Andrew had recently married, and his brother-in-law objected to his remaining a bailiff. Arbuthnot also thought that Andrew was "more fit to be agent to some one of great landed property than to remain with me." 36 Fortunately there was a third Thompson brother ready to take Andrew's place at Woodford—which he did, rendering the same satisfaction as his brothers had before him.37

Andrew Thompson proved a happy find for Sneyd. He was but twenty-six years of age and had already come to the notice of Josiah Parkes, the drainage engineer, and by him had been recommended as an Assistant Commissioner under the Public Money Drainage Act.38 The Duke of Northumberland had also heard of Andrew Thompson's abilities, in particular of his system of accounting, and had requested an example of it. Arbuthnot found him "one of the most intelligent men, in respect to all agricultural concerns, that I ever knew." No one,

35 Cornwall Legh MSS, T. S. Wooley to Countess Macclesfield, Dec. 29, 1859.
36 Sneyd MSS, C. Arbuthnot to R. Sneyd, June 23, 1848.
38 There is an account of this Act in the next chapter.
he concluded, "would be so likely to introduce a good system into a badly farmed district." 39

II

Of all his functions that of introducing a good system of farming was what the land agent took as chief. And to do so, as most agents were aware, needed certain qualities of mind and spirit.

According to Beasley, an efficient agent needed to be "an active man." 40 Few things are more conspicuous than the incessant industry of the leading land agents in the nineteenth century—of which Grey of Dilton's labors provide an example. The Greenwich Hospital estates to which he came in the 1830's were widely scattered, so that he had to travel almost to Carlisle in the west, to Berwick-on-Tweed in the north, and to Newcastle in the east. "When I went there," he said in his old age,

I was almost killed in the first year and a half; for I rode over every farm and every field, and I made a report every night when I came home of its value and its capabilities, whether you could employ water power instead of horse power, and so on. This was a thing that every one could not have done, but I had been brought up in the country, and seven or eight hours in the saddle was no great matter to me.41

Agents like Grey of Dilton seemed to go on endlessly, with little rest from their labors. John Beasley himself died in his seventy-third year, but not until the age of sixty did he miss the holding of a rental audit on the Spencer estates.42 Three

39 Sneyd MSS, C. Arbuthnot to R. Sneyd, June 23, 1848.
41 B.P.P., Report of the Commissioners appointed to inquire into Greenwich Hospital (1860, XXX), p. 120.
42 Althorp MSS, L. Beasley to Earl Spencer, Jan. 14, 1861.
years later he reported to the Earl that a hard summer's work left him "disposed to run away, if only for a few days, but something always springs up to make it inconvenient." A son, who followed the family profession as his father's assistant, complained of a want of work, to which the father replied, "I cannot help this, that is, I must do all that I can, so long as I am able to do it." At the very end, on his death bed, he was uneasy lest his son forget the date of the Brinton Rent Days.

Versatility, no less than activity, was held a desirable quality in an agent. The good agent, Beasley declared, should "be enough of a builder to know how a building can be well and economically done"; "enough of an engineer to design and direct ordinary engineering works; he should understand draining works and be something of a chemist and a geologist." This sort of versatility was not uncommon among the leading land agents. Grey of Dilston, for example, came to an estate on which lead, iron ore, and coal were mined, and although unfamiliar with mining business he set out to learn it, himself valuing the whole estate "instead of having it done for him, that he might be independent of everyone." Henry Morton took over responsibility for the management of the Lambton collieries in 1827, having up to that time apparently been in charge of the Lambtons' agricultural concerns. George Eliot remarked that her father, Robert Evans, had without special training acquired a "large knowledge of building, of mines, of plantations, of various branches of valuation and measurement,—of all that is essential to the management of large estates." Plainly in these matters professionalism was not yet the enemy of versatility.

However varied and numerous an agent's skills, fundamental to them all was his skill in farming, and what hung on that, his

43 Ibid., Beasley to Earl Spencer, Oct. 6, 1864.
44 Ibid., Beasley to Earl Spencer, March 6, 1865.
45 Ibid., Joseph Beasley (the son) to Earl Spencer, Jan. 19, 1874.
46 Beasley, Duties and Privileges.
skill in the management of his tenantry. As Beasley put it, “farming is the grammar of an agent’s education.” The land agent of the nineteenth century—at any rate of the era of high farming—paid more attention to his tenants’ farming than his predecessors had, being less content (as Surtees, the novelist, observed of agents in county Durham) with “receiving what they could, and drinking the landlord’s health twice a year,” and more inclined to “urge their tenants to activity.” F. F. Fox, the agent on the Melbourne estate, reported to his employer in 1850, “a constant effort requires to be made to induce the farmers to keep up and improve their cultivation.”

If we are to believe Caleb Garth, the effort brought its own reward. As he put it, “it’s a fine thing to come to a man when he’s seen into the nature of business: to have a chance of getting a bit of the country into good fettle, as they say, and putting men in the right way with their farming, and getting a bit of good contriving and solid building done.”

To improve was also a duty, as was noted in the previous chapter. Sometime in the eighteenth century, perhaps earlier, land agent’s manuals began to view agricultural improvements as an obligation of both tenants and landowners. Writing at the end of the century William Marshall declared: “A tenanted estate differs widely from other species of property. . . . It has a dignity, and a set of duties, attached to it, which are peculiar to itself.” A recent work on the sociology of the professions has suggested that in the process by which an occupation becomes a profession those engaged in that occupation “claim a mandate to define what is proper conduct of others toward the matters concerned with their work.”

49 Beasley, Duties and Privileges.
51 Panshanger MSS, Fox to Lord Melbourne, Sept. 4, 1850.
52 Eliot, Middlemarch, chap. 40.
54 E. C. Hughes, Men and their Work (Glencoe, Illinois, 1958), p. 78.
Something like this may very well have happened among land agents by the end of the eighteenth century, as the mood of professionalism began to overtake their occupation. By the 1860's Beasley might even state with a flourish: "That man who owns or occupies an acre of land, and does not make it produce all it is capable of producing is an enemy to his country."  

More soberly put, this was the message of high farming—of which James Caird was a noted popularizer. Its object was to increase productivity in order (it was hoped) to withstand a fall in agricultural prices. It emphasized several things. There was a general emphasis on effecting capital improvements, the most important of which were draining and new farm buildings, and on employing scientific discoveries such as artificial fertilizers, new feeding stuffs, and improved implements. There was a particular emphasis on the integration and intensification of mixed farming, that is, of the system which makes complementary use of crops and livestock. Drained fields and liberal application of manure and artificial fertilizer led to increased crops, some part of which (along with new feeding stuffs) was fed to fatten livestock. Better housing for livestock and more efficient means of preserving manure led to greater fertility in the field, and thus the circle of mixed farming was expanded. This stepping-up of productivity inevitably involved land agents in a closer supervision of their farming tenantry.

It began with the selection of tenants before they came onto the estate, and persisted throughout the occupation of their farms. The problems of selection confronting agents of the great estates in the nineteenth century were not unlike those described by a historian of eighteenth-century farming. Landowners and agents in the nineteenth century as in the eighteenth preferred large to small farms, since the large units made for savings in buildings and management. Large farms meant large tenants: that is, men of large capital, of skill and

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55 Beasley, *Duties and Privileges.*
industry and good character. But such farmers were never plentiful, and it was important that their credentials be carefully scrutinized. Not unnaturally agents preferred to find them through personal knowledge. One of Grey of Dilston's first innovations on the Greenwich Hospital estate was to abolish the system of tender previously employed in the letting of estate farms. John Yule avoided advertising his vacant farms if he could help it; he preferred local men whom he knew—and who in turn knew the farming of the locality.

On one occasion Yule was left with no choice. This happened in 1842, at a time when many farms, including the largest ones on the Netherby estate, were up for re-letting. For almost two decades Yule had followed a policy of extensive improvements, a policy which had involved Sir James Graham in large expenditure. Yule hoped in 1842 to gain some interest on that expenditure in the shape of increased rents. The largest farmers on the estate, however, balked at his proposal; they were frightened, he thought, by the drift of Sir Robert Peel's legislation. Yule was nettled and found the fact hard to conceal. "From the first," he wrote to Sir James, "I foresaw great difficulty in managing a few of your first class Farmers, but I little expected the arrogance and vexation I have experienced." But accustomed to having his way with the farmers under him, he proceeded to take steps against them.

In March he recommended that the "four best farms" on the estate be advertised in such local newspapers as the Carlisle Patriot and the Dumfries Northern Advertiser. Sir James, however, advised that they postpone advertisement until later in the year, possibly in the hope that his old tenants would yield. Accordingly Yule waited until the beginning of July when he

57 B.P.P., Rep. into Greenwich Hospital, p. 118.
58 Netherby MSS, Yule to Sir J. Graham, April 29, 1842. Neither on the Duke of Bedford's estates nor on the several estates managed by John Beasley were farms advertised or let by tender; see Caird, English Agriculture, pp. 432, 435.
60 Netherby MSS, Yule to Sir J. Graham, March 29, 1842.
reported to Sir James, "I believe by this evening our four best farms are advertised over all Scotland and the north of England." 61 For all his perseverance, one suspects that Yule's heart was not in it. A fortnight later he made the doleful announcement that a Lincolnshire farmer had shown some interest in Netherby—but "I fear his ideas are quite incompatible with matters here." 62 It may be—although there is no sure evidence on the matter—that Yule was bluffing his tenants, that he thought he might intimidate them by advertising their farms. And in fact he may have done just that. In August the tenants relented and Yule sighed with relief.63

Side by side with the problems of finding and keeping the right tenant, there was the problem of getting rid of the wrong one. This may have presented less difficulty by the mid-nineteenth century than earlier. If Surtees was correct in his observation that "the old-fashioned agents" would "always rather excite their principals to compassion than urge the tenants to activity," 64 there would seem to be less compassion in the hearts of a later generation of agents. Henry Morton, for example, spoke harshly of farmers in county Durham: "a very stupid set . . . and excessively timid", 65 he was quite prepared to believe that incendiarism in the North was the work of farmers trying to defraud the insurance company. 66 There was, of course, less reason for compassion after the lifting of the agricultural depression of the 1830's and the invention of draining techniques and appliances which rendered the condition of even the most unfortunate farmers—the small ones on the cold clays—capable of amelioration.

In 1836 Morton resolved that "three or four Tenants must be removed from time to time" 67—a policy that proved overly ambitious during a period of agricultural depression. Later, in

61 Ibid., Yule to Sir J. Graham, July 1, 1842.
62 Ibid., Yule to Sir J. Graham, July 7, 1842.
63 Ibid., Yule to Sir J. Graham, Aug. 22, 1842.
64 Surtees and Cuming, Robert Smith Surtees, p. 158.
65 Lambton MSS, Morton to Lord Durham, Dec. 9, 1830.
66 Ibid., Morton to Lord Durham, Feb. 28, 1834.
67 Ibid., Morton to Lord Durham, May 22, 1836.
a more prosperous time when "Farms can readily be let," Morton informed the Earl of Durham that "I intend to weed the farmers every year." In 1857 he removed six of them from the estate. There is no way of knowing the precise effects throughout English rural society of this policy which many land agents probably adopted. But Sir Charles Wood's prediction—that "small unskillful farmers will share the fate of the handloom weavers"—may well have had some truth in it.

The policy of weeding the tenantry ran headlong into a principle which agents had in varying degree respected—that of continuity, "the system of succession from father to son," as one of them put it. William Marshall had likened the tenantry to plants, rooted in the soil. Agents of a later generation, anxious under the spur of Corn-Law repeal to find "the kind of men best adapted to meet any changes," were apt to be sceptical of the beneficial results of the principle of continuity. F. F. Fox was "convinced that nothing has injured both landlords and tenants more than a confidence on the part of the latter that be their character and conduct or that of their children what it may, or whatever may be the circumstances in which they are left, they will still be continued in the tenancy." Henry Morton confessed that to violate the principle of continuity was "unpopular and unpleasant"; but not to do so when circumstances warranted it ended only "in greater disappointment and evil . . . [tenants'] moral feelings [becoming] blunted as to render a change of conduct impossible almost."

68 Ibid., Morton to Lord Durham, Nov. 8, 1854.
70 Ibid.
71 Add. MSS, 40,602, folio 13, Sir C. Wood to Sir R. Peel, July, 1849.
72 Panshanger MSS, Fox to Lord Melbourne, Dec. 1847.
74 Panshanger MSS, Fox to Lord Melbourne, Dec. 1847.
75 Ibid., Fox to Lord Melbourne, Dec. 3, 1852. David Low, professor of agriculture in the University of Edinburgh, was less critical of continuity; see his On Landed Property and the Economy of Estates (London, 1856), p. 19.
76 Lambton MSS, Morton to Lord Durham, Jan. 14, 1856.
There were, however, emollients which agents applied when tenant families of long standing were removed. In the previous chapter, note was taken of the pensions granted to aged tenants on the Duke of Bedford's estates. Pensions and gifts were also given there to sons and daughters whom the agents judged unfit to succeed to a farm, as in the case of the Chettles on the Fen estate, where a shiftless son was given a gift of £100, and an infirm daughter a pension. When Fox insisted on keeping a farm from falling into the hands of a drunken nephew, the heir of his aged uncle, the old man was given a house on the estate rent free and a pension. In 1839 Yule served notice to quit on Robert Ferguson, the tenant of Bush on Lyne, one of the larger farms on the Netherby estate, but gave him the opportunity of taking a smaller farm; since, as Yule put it, "your forefathers and yourself having for many years been farmers under the Netherby family."

Once an agent had his tenants sorted out, the inefficient removed and the promising installed, he could then proceed to impose on them a set of rules, or farming covenants. If Cadle's prize essay for the Royal Agricultural Society provides a representative account of covenants on great estates, their chief object in the 1860's was—as it had been in the eighteenth century—to keep the tenant from violating the minimum decencies of good farming: he must keep up repairs; he must not plant two crops of wheat or more than two white straw crops in succession; he must keep down weeds in the hedges, ditches, and waste lands; and in general, he must "cultivate and manage the said farm and lands in a good and husbandlike manner."

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77 Bedford MSS, Annual Reports, 1861.
78 Panshanger MSS, Fox to Lord Melbourne, Nov. 27, 1852.
79 Netherby MSS, Yule to R. Ferguson, July 9, 1839.
Covenants were probably found on all great estates, although one is less certain how firmly they were enforced, especially in the bad years between 1815 and 1840. Certainly Yule brought his tenants quickly to heel, serving notices to quit if necessary. On the Duke of Bedford's estate, however, during the 1830's, there was some laxity. Bennett, the Woburn agent, found that one of his tenants who was required to leave 45 acres of fallow for turnips sowed 15 with peas. Being an injurious crop in that period of rotation, Bennett insisted that the tenant plough it up. The tenant was reluctant at first, but was finally persuaded. Haedy applauded Bennett's firmness: "The feeling that the Duke of Bedford must not do what other landlords were fairly entitled to do had almost become a morbid feeling of which much advantage has heretofore been unfairly taken." It is probable that such laxity was less common after 1840 than before.

It may be, however, that land agents, especially in the 1860's, held to their covenants, and particularly their cropping covenants, too rigidly. As Caird predicted, livestock prices rose while grain prices remained stationary. It therefore became increasingly advisable for tenants to lean more heavily on the livestock side of mixed farming. This involved adjustments in their covenants. It is not clear to what extent the needed flexibility was introduced. Farmers may well have encountered stubborn resistance on the part of some land agents who clung tenaciously to orthodoxy in farming techniques at the expense of economic efficiency.82

A secondary object of covenants—to which Cadle also bears witness—was to encourage virtue rather than prohibit vice. This was seen in the covenants that provided compensation for unexhausted improvements, for what was known as tenant right: as when a tenant had drained his farm or part of it in a permanent and satisfactory manner; or had used artificial ma-

82 See W. Ashworth, *An Economic History of England: 1870–1939* (London, 1960), p. 48, where it is suggested that some tenants may also have been conservative.
nure on his land. Two decades earlier Lord Yarborough's agent had pointed out in the *Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society* that tenant right on Lord Yarborough's Lincolnshire estate relied not on written agreements but on the custom of the country. In 1851 F. F. Fox advised Lord Melbourne to draw up specific requirements with his tenants concerning unexhausted improvements because "the custom of the country [was] gradually, perhaps I ought to say rapidly altering everywhere in favor of the improving tenant farmer." It may be that by Cadle's time many landowners had accepted this advice, and introduced a modest form of tenant right.

Some agents preferred to make their tenants secure by means of the long lease. This was James Caird's preference, and Caird often spoke for the agents on the great estates. He complained of tenant right on several grounds: that it might lead to fraud, even to poor farming. North Country agents like Yule and Grey of Dilston were all for leases: how else to attract tenants of capital? Yule was thunderstruck when he learned that there were no leases on Sir Robert Peel's estate: "a Tenancy from year to year is a complete ban to all improvement." But Beasley, it should be noted, did without leases too—and as Caird himself reported, without diminishing his tenants' enterprise.

High farming demanded not only a close supervision of the tenantry but also an extensive program of permanent improve-

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84 Panshanger MSS, Fox to Lord Melbourne, Nov. 25, 1851. It is to be noted that the Select Committee on Agricultural Customs, of which Philip Pusey was chairman, had recommended tenant right on a voluntary basis; see B.P.P., *Report from the Select Committee on Agricultural Customs* (1847–8, VII).


87 Netherby MSS, Yule to Sir J. Graham, March 17, 1841.

ments such as we have seen undertaken on the Duke of Bedford's estate. After 1840 one heard less of the sort of advice offered the Duke of Northumberland by his agents in 1836: "the new occupants require so much to be done, in Buildings, Draining and Fences, when they enter, that it is better to yield a small diminution of Rent, and keep an old Tenant on the premises." 89 Instead the talk was all for improvements and putting the tenant, as Fox said in 1847, "on a good footing to meet the times." 90

Of all farming improvements, "draining is the first or foundation," as Andrew Thompson once put it; the necessary preparation "for other improvements which ought to be made by the landlord or his occupier in the shape of improved cultivation and manures, of improved Buildings, and frequently a fresh arrangement of the fields." 91 Few if any agents disagreed with him. The subject of draining was considered important enough, especially in the 1840's and '50's, for some of them to draw up a brief lecture on its fundamentals for the benefit of their employers. Hugh Taylor, the fourth Duke of Northumberland's Commissioner, composed a succinct memorandum for the Duke in the estate's Business Minutes, explaining the action of subsoil moisture—"this inferior moisture which may be regarded as a reservoir coextensive with the Country." As he went on to explain, it furnished moisture to the upper soil by evaporation and capillary action: "A great degree of cold is thus produced, and as it is during the spring months that the subsoil is wettest, the growth of the plant is injured by this transmission of damp and cold just at the time when it requires most nursing." 92

Land agents may well have allowed themselves to be carried

89 Alnwick Castle MSS, D. W. Smith to 3rd Duke of Northumberland, July 30, 1836.
90 Panshanger MSS, Fox to Lord Melbourne, Dec., 1847.
91 Sneyd MSS, A. Thompson's reports to the Inclosure Commissioners, vol. 5, March 15, 1865. Surtees, in a mocking mood, had Jorrocks say something of the same kind in Hillingdon Hall, chap. XIII.
92 Alnwick Castle MSS, Business Minutes, Feb. 29, 1848.
away by their enthusiasm for new techniques and appliances, and particularly by their enthusiasm for the ideas of Josiah Parkes, high priest of deep draining. Beginning in 1848, Hugh Taylor employed Parkes to supervise the draining of 7,300 acres of the wettest land on the Percy estates. Some agents like F. F. Fox, although aware that they might be acting hastily, concluded that “we should lose more by waiting to learn what is the very best system that can be adopted (the land and the tenants suffering greatly all the while) than we should gain by adopting the system several years hence.” As it turned out, landowners and agents paid a price for their haste. The Earl of Leicester’s agent reported to the Select Committee on the Improvement of Land in 1873 that some drainage systems were being dug up because of the inefficiency of Parkes’s one-inch pipes; and other witnesses testified to the speculative element in draining. But Fox was still right; the gains probably outweighed the losses, as large areas of farmland produced earlier and cheaper crops.

Agents often had to arouse the enthusiasm of tenants, who were at first sceptical of innovation and reluctant to shoulder the burden of additional rent. What was more, agents had to persuade tenants that the work would best be done—not by themselves, for they were apt to do it poorly—but by a draining agent especially employed for the purpose. On Lord Melbourne’s estate Fox at first found it hard to persuade the tenants to drain 1,000 acres of land most in need of it. Once

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93 Ibid., Business Minutes, Nov. 26, 1855.
94 Panshanger MSS, Fox to Lord Melbourne, Nov. 25, 1850.
96 Ibid., p. iv. See H. N. Nicholson, The Principles of Field Drainage (Cambridge, 1942) for a modern study on the subject. Nicholson points out (p. 65) that tile drainage is commonly regarded as a permanent improvement, but “there is room for doubt as to whether permanent improvement . . . can be effected” in really heavy land and the major clay areas.
97 As a Drainage Commissioner Andrew Thompson often had cause to report on the poor draining set out by the tenants; see Sneyd MSS, Thompson’s reports to the Inclosure Commissioners, vol. 8, July 27, 1868.
he brought them round, he hired a draining engineer who set out the drains and was paid five per cent on the outlay.98

Writing to Sir Robert Peel in 1850, James Caird observed, “It will be vain to drain the land and fit it for the culture of green crops, if no suitable housing is provided for economically converting these into a marketable form, and for preserving and accumulating manure.” 99 This was a commonplace among agents. Along with it went an awareness of a revolution under way in farm architecture: in the size, design, and structural material of farm buildings.100 As Fox put it, “the whole system of building Farm premises is undergoing a change.” 101 It followed that an enterprising tenantry must be provided with more efficient buildings than their ancestors had made do with. Hence Fox’s lament to Lord Melbourne, that he found a “great deficiency of cattle accommodation . . . In many cases the main buildings are bad and inconveniently situated and must at a future time be removed.”102

In 1843 Grey of Dilston, writing in the Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society, proclaimed this deficiency in farm buildings a national phenomenon.

No one can have travelled much in the rural districts of England, even in those which are comparatively well cultivated, without being struck, if he have any sense of neatness and order, with the ill-arranged and patch-work appearance of many of the farm buildings, which are often placed, in relation to their different parts, in utter defiance of the economy of labour in the case of cattle; and what is still worse, with little regard to the production and preservation of the manure, the dry parts of

98 Panshanger MSS, Fox to Lord Melbourne, Nov. 5, 19, 1850. As an informed witness before the Select Committee on Agricultural Customs put it: “The landlords are now becoming wiser than they were; they keep some person they can depend upon to put in the tiles under their own superintendence.” (B.P.P., Rep. of S.C. on Agricultural Customs, p. 30.)
99 Add. MSS, 40,603, folio 134. Caird to Sir R. Peel, March 20, 1850.
101 Panshanger MSS, Fox to Lord Melbourne, Nov. 13, 1851.
102 Ibid.
which may be seen exposed to the winds, and the liquid part
carried off without being applied to any beneficial purpose.\textsuperscript{103}

Besides providing tenants with permanent improvements, the
more enthusiastic among agents took the further step of in-
structing them in the most recent developments in the agricul-
tural world. Some introduced their tenants to the subsoil plough,
or to oilcake for cattle. Lord Chichester's agent sent a tenant,
chosen by his fellows at the estate audit dinner, to the annual
meeting of the Royal Agricultural Society; on his return he
reported on his experiences at the "Royal" to the next audit
dinner.\textsuperscript{104} Grey of Dilston set on foot a farmers' club for the
purpose of discussing agricultural affairs, and put at its dis-
posal a library on agricultural subjects; he also established farm-
ers' societies on the Greenwich Hospital estates in which
farmers competed for prizes.\textsuperscript{105}

The farmers' society was employed to nurture enterprise
through competition and emulation. Yule's society at Netherby
offered a long list of prizes: for "the best managed, manured
and cultivated" turnip crop; for the best potato crop; for the
best cow of Galloway breed; for the best brood cart mare of
the pure Scotch breed; etc. The farms on the estate were class-
ified according to size, and a prize was awarded to the best
managed farm of each class.\textsuperscript{106} Fox was delighted with the
results of his own society: as he wrote to Lord Melbourne,
"prizes for the best crops of Swedish turnips etc. were for the
first time given, and one was won by a tenant on land at Selston
which I could scarcely let at 10 s. per acre two or three years
since." \textsuperscript{107}

\textsuperscript{103} J. Grey of Dilston, "On Farm Buildings," \textit{The Journal of the Royal
Agricultural Society}, 1843.
\textsuperscript{104} Bedford MSS, 7th Duke to Haedey, Aug. 20, 1844.
\textsuperscript{106} Netherby MSS, announcement of premiums offered by the Netherby
Farmers' Society, 1837.
\textsuperscript{107} Panshanger MSS, Fox to Lord Melbourne, Oct. 30, 1852.
III

John Yule once remarked to Sir James Graham, “I have since early youth had the management of numerous sets of Tenantry—some of them ill enough to guide, but as yet I have never failed by just, determined and firm conduct to carry my point.”¹⁰⁸ There is a note of paternalism here, suggestive of the attitude which agents like Yule took to the tenants and agricultural laborers on their estates. John Beasley spoke of the “agricultural family,” comprising landowner, agent, tenant, and laborer.¹⁰⁹ Being a family, its head, the landowner or his agent, provided a sort of leadership which went beyond purely economic relations into all corners of rural life.

Accordingly the agent took his place in the several spheres of local government. Sometimes he even reached the Commission of the Peace. It was the custom in Derbyshire for the agents of the Dukes of Devonshire and Rutland—the great landowners in that part of the world—to sit on the Derbyshire Bench. In 1853 the Lord Chancellor challenged this practice; eventually he acquiesced in it on the ground of their being few resident landowners in north Derbyshire. He had notified the Duke of Devonshire that the practice was “not quite without precedent, yet very unusual.”¹¹⁰ In fact Grey of Dilston was justice of the peace for two counties; Henry Morton for county Durham—as was James Buddle, the noted colliery engineer who was agent to the Marquis of Londonderry.

It was much more usual, however, for the land agent to take his place on the lower levels of local government, such as the parish vestry and the poor-law union. An agent like F. F. Fox clearly appreciated what a paternal policy might effect there. As he explained to Lord Melbourne, the agent

¹⁰⁸ Netherby MSS, Yule to Sir J. Graham, April 27, 1838.
¹⁰⁹ Beasley, Duties and Privileges.
¹¹⁰ Chatsworth MSS, Lord Chancellor to 6th Duke of Devonshire, April 5, 1853.
ought to see that all Parish affairs are properly conducted, and also the different charities, so as to ensure their being fairly and judiciously applied—above all he ought to see that proper means of education are provided for all, and that efforts are made to induce the poorer families more particularly to take advantage of them—The want of proper training and education in early life has (taking the lowest and most practical point of view) a very powerful and certain tendency to increase the amount of parochial burdens.111

Agents like Fox saw themselves as guardians of parochial morality, and they held it their duty to look into the private lives of their tenants and laborers.112 When the leading tenants on the Netherby estate proposed to form a coursing club, Yule forbade it on the ground that it led to "gambling and idleness."113 John Beasley kept a close eye on the moral condition of the laborers, periodically looking into the bastardy rate in the Spencer cottages. "Your Lordship has only 26 cottages,” he reported in October, 1860, “and in these I found an addition of three illegitimate children since I was over them in June”; 114 he recommended that the local schools be more closely supervised. The Duke of Newcastle’s agent at Clumber was somewhat less enthusiastic about his role as guardian of the local morality. He was prepared to remove the most offensive delinquents on the estate—but warned that depopulation might be the result “if all the immoral characters are to be discharged.” 115

In the nonagricultural affairs of the landed estate, the agent’s rule might be of a far sterner sort. Much depended, it would seem, on the degree of social inertia of the laboring population. If the laborers became restive, the agent might show a forbidding harshness. So at least did Henry Morton when the miners of county Durham took to striking. Few land agents were so placed as Morton was: in charge of large mineral

111 Panshanger MSS, Fox to Lord Melbourne, Sept. 4, 1850.
112 Ibid.
113 Netherby MSS, Yule to Sir J. Graham, Feb. 25, 1836.
114 Althorp MSS, Beasley to Earl Spencer, Oct. 23, 1860.
concerns, he was the manager of something like 1,200 pitmen and colliery workers. His dealings with them in 1830-31 are revealing, and might profitably be considered at some length.\(^\text{116}\)

The winter months of 1830-31 found Morton advising the Earl on how best to keep order in the colliery districts where a strike threatened. His recommendations were few and simple: first, that the great families take the lead, else the gentry would capitulate; second, that the Earl organize a troop of yeomanry among his tenants and dependants to be stationed in the colliery premises; and third, that when force was used chief reliance be put on the regular troops. “When a mob is quelled,” he wrote, “by the regulars and even lives lost—tho’ the animosity may be as great towards them for the time being—the troops are soon removed to a distance, and those feelings die away—but from the yeomanry being stationary it is long before these feelings are allayed.”\(^\text{117}\)

When the pitmen went out on strike, Morton promptly made a show of force, and refused to bargain with the men. He requested the Durham justices to post the troops at Sunderland among the colliery villages. Then he proposed to set such men to work as wished to work; to turn out “some of the worst disposed Pitmen” from their houses;\(^\text{118}\) and if the strikers took the law into their own hands, to have them arrested. He himself would “go the first day and station myself with 20 or 25 men in the Engine house”;\(^\text{119}\) he had taken the precaution of buying some old muskets. On April 26, having received word that the troops had been sent, he was confident that “this plan will bring the matter to a crisis . . . the Union must fall to pieces.” “If they do attack me,” Morton assured the Earl, “several must be killed which will more rapidly put an end to the matter.”\(^\text{120}\)

Within little more than a fortnight, Morton’s plan succeeded


\(^{117}\)Lambton MSS, Morton to Lord Durham, Dec. 6, 1830.

\(^{118}\)Ibid., Morton to Lord Durham, April 17, 1831.

\(^{119}\)Ibid., Morton to Lord Durham, April 18, 1831.

\(^{120}\)Ibid., Morton to Lord Durham, April 26, 1831.
at Lumley pit. On April 28, he had reported “near 50 Men and Boys in the Pit today.” 121 A party of miners had marched on Lumley, but surprised to find troops there, they had dispersed; Morton regretted “that we did not come to blows . . . being so admirably prepared to meet them.” 122 With something like pride he announced to the Earl that the men disliked him enough to have dug a grave for him. By May 9 he had noted signs of disunion among the strikers; and ten days later he triumphantly reported that the Lumley pitmen had accepted his terms, yielding when they saw their comrades being paid. Morton observed with some bitterness that he would get no thanks from the other coal owners for setting this example at Lumley.123

A week earlier he had been pleased to find the coal owners on Tyneside following his example to the extent of “getting military stationed at the Pits and letting as many men as possible to work with protection.” 124 But as it turned out the coal owners lacked Morton’s resolution. On the Wear, so he reported, Lord Londonderry and his wife had shamefully pleaded with their men to return to work.125 Then, in the last week of May, the news arrived that the coal owners had capitulated. At the time Morton was busy at Newbottle pit turning out pitmen and their families from their homes: first, six families, and “if that does not produce the desired effect I shall proceed with 20 or 30 more immediately; there is nothing but decided and determined conduct that will bring these Brutes to reason.” 126 The owners’ capitulation compelled Morton to follow their example and concede the demands of the Newbottle men. In themselves these were not serious, but “the principle is horrible.” 127 On one point, however, Morton refused to yield,
whatever the cost. He would not rehire the pitmen's leaders: "the matter at issue is this, whether they or I shall have the control over the workmen of the colliery." 128

IV

In addition to an aggressive labor force, of which the agricultural world had comparatively little experience in the years of high farming, the world of nonagricultural affairs confronted the land agent with other problems of its own. These problems varied much in their complexity.

Since the Earls of Durham mined their coal, Morton's problems were special and formidable. The chief one was to maintain the competitive strength of the Earl's collieries. As long as the unique position of the Northern coal field endured—that is, until the coming of the railways and the accelerated development of the inland coal fields—he sought to preserve a monopoly of the mining and sale of coal among a few large producers, like the Lambton and Vane-Tempest families, who made regular agreements about output in order to regulate the price of coal. This was the so-called "regulation of the vend." It was Morton's constant business to cope with any threat to this monopoly. 129

Such a threat became formidable in the mid-1830's when the Durham Colliery Company proposed to enter the Northern coal field in strength by purchasing a large operating colliery, the North Hetton. Morton advised that Lord Durham together with Lord Londonderry and others themselves purchase the colliery—which was done. Generally he advised the Lambtons to purchase or lease dormant collieries and unworked mineral land to achieve the same object of keeping the business of mining coal in their own hands as much as possible.

128 Ibid., Morton to Lord Durham, June 6, 1831.
Projects for new railways were likely to conjure up the same threat for Morton. For example, when a railway from Durham to South Shields was proposed in 1830, Morton conceded that it might be beneficial to the public interest, but so far as the Earl of Durham's private interest was concerned, the line would open a great field of coal to the west of Durham "where it lays at no great depth—and wrought at little expense, and every person possessing one hundred acres of coal might easily make a winning, having the facility of a public railway to carry away the coals—the trade would by this means get into too numerous a body that would render it impossible to carry on a regulation." 130

So long as he could, Morton supported the regulation of the coal trade by the great coal owners of the Tyne and the Wear. When it came to an end during the 1840's, largely by reason of Lord Londonderry's actions, 131 and when the Lambton collieries became subject not only to the full competition of their neighbors but also to that of the inland coal fields, Morton proved his resourcefulness in facing up to the new competitive conditions. The depression in the coal trade during the 'forties did not dismay him as much as it did the Lambtons' auditor, Henry Stephenson. Morton strove to cut costs wherever he could: most spectacularly, by the introduction of screw-propelled iron vessels into the carrying trade from Sunderland to London. His object was to reduce the cost of transport by two shillings per ton. Early in 1853 he was able to report a successful trial of the first vessel, the Lady Alice Durham. "We shall," he wrote, "drive the Yorkshire coals out of the London market"—or, less exuberantly, "at least check their increase." 132

Since the Duke of Northumberland did not mine his coal, his agent, Hugh Taylor, was spared much of Morton's busi-

130 Lambton MSS, Morton to Lord Durham, July 15, 1830.
132 Lambton MSS, Morton to Lord Durham, April 8, 1853.
ness. Nevertheless Taylor had certain problems connected with mining, in particular that of wayleaves. The Duke owned the manor of Tynemouth which lying along the north bank of the river Tyne controlled the access to that river of many of the Tyne collieries. The operators of these collieries therefore paid the Duke a wayleave, that is an annual rent for the right to move their coal across his land. By 1851 ten collieries paid such rent, the total sum having reached the not inconsiderable amount of £8,560, about ten per cent of the Duke's gross income.\(^{133}\) It was Hugh Taylor's object to maintain the wayleave income—which by 1850 had become somewhat precarious.

The lessees had become restive, complaining that wayleave rents were such as to put them at a disadvantage when competing with coal carried by public railway lines on which no wayleave charges were laid; they threatened to support the building of such lines and to support projects for docks at ports like Blyth. Taylor was active in meeting these complaints. When the Bedlington colliery lessees approached the Duke for wayleave to the Tyne in 1849, Taylor declared that "this first step towards bringing the produce of the Coal field North of the Blyth across Your Grace's Property, ought evidently to be met with encouragement." He proposed that the usual rent of ten shillings, six pence per ten\(^{134}\) be reduced to seven shillings on the ground that Bedlington colliery was among the most distant from the Tyne: "the thing to do is to persuade collieries to use the superior facilities afforded by the Tyne . . . [and] to discourage the getting up of Parliamentary Lines."\(^{135}\)

Hence Taylor's advocacy of the Hayhole Dock which the Tyne Improvement Commissioners were projecting in 1851. This dock was to be built on the Duke's property. As Taylor

\(^{133}\) Alnwick Castle MSS, Business Minutes, Sept. 20, 1852.

\(^{134}\) According to the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* a ten is a measure of coal, locally varying from 48 to 50 tons, and is the unit of calculation on which the lessor's rent or royalty is based. That royalty is known as the *tentale* rent.

\(^{135}\) Alnwick Castle MSS, Business Minutes, Aug. 27, 1849.
observed, it would “act as a check upon the construction of similar works elsewhere, and upon the improvement of little ports like Blyth, in the district, the effect of which would be to abstract a portion of Wayleave Revenue.”\textsuperscript{136} The Commissioners, however, would not build the dock unless there was a guarantee of the colliery vessels’ using it for a reasonably long time. Taylor therefore urged that an agreement be made with the lessees to reduce the wayleave rent for all lessees to six shillings, the agreement to last for forty years, the term which the Commissioners had suggested.\textsuperscript{137} On some such footing the dock was built, and the Duke’s “wayleave interest” was kept intact.

Where the agent had mining tenants to deal with he would probably find that his relations with them were simpler than those with his farming tenants. Admittedly similarities existed. Agents were anxious to lease their mines to tenants of capital, to “men of business.” F. F. Fox was critical of Barber and Walker, the colliery lessees of Lord Melbourne’s mines in Nottinghamshire, on the ground that they were lacking in “large capital and are not men of business”: “They are entirely in the hands of their Agent Mr. Harrison who has always conducted their concerns on the old fashioned principle of small sales and high prices—The consequence has been that your Lordship’s Collieries have not probably yielded half the income that might have been expected from their great extent.”\textsuperscript{138} Fox therefore advised that if Barber and Walker’s lease was renewed, the renewal should depend on their being associated with more enterprising men.

There was also in these relations some suggestion of a partnership. In one form or other the mineral owner may have embarked some of his own capital in the mining enterprise. Sometimes a part of the working stock belonged to him. Some-

\textsuperscript{136} Ibid., Nov. 3, 1851. 
\textsuperscript{137} Ibid., Dec. 29, 1851. 
\textsuperscript{138} Panshanger MSS, Fox to Lord Melbourne, Jan. 22, 1848.
times he came to the tenant's financial aid. In the years 1838–43 when the lessees of the Percy Main Colliery were faced by a heavy flooding of the mine, the Duke of Northumberland first agreed to reduce his royalty, and later contributed £5,000 to the cost of resisting the flood water. In 1833 the Duke and his agent had set on foot a sliding scale of colliery rents by which such rents were adjusted to the market price of coal.

If there was a kind of partnership here, it was one in which the mineral owner and his agent were junior, if not sleeping, partners. Relations between agent and mining tenants thus had less in them of the tutelary and the paternal than the relations between agent and farming tenants. Once the mines were leased to the proper person, as Fox explained to Lord Melbourne, there was not enough to do to require the employment of a full-time mineral agent. So long as one hired "an intelligent, resident collier," someone to keep a knowing eye on the lessees, they could be left "to make the best of [the mines] and to sell as much as they can." This would do, of course, only on estates where colliery concerns were on a smaller scale than those of the Duke of Northumberland.

V

Not a few agents identified themselves closely with the cherished objects of their employers—with family continuity, family honor, and family influence. Examples of this disposition are not hard to come by. Yule, for example, displayed it on several notable occasions. In the 1820's, when Sir James Graham despaired of bringing Netherby round and was apparently on the verge of selling a large part of it, Yule felt compelled to protest:

129 Alnwick Castle MSS, Business Minutes, July 24, 1848.
130 Ibid., Nov. 5, 1849.
131 Panshanger MSS, Fox to Lord Melbourne, March 4, 1850.
132 Ibid., Sept. 19, 1850.
plebeian though I am, I cannot bear to see it [Netherby] go out of the possession of an Honourable old family, who have always been beloved by their retainers, into the hands of a Hard hearted grinding speculator without lifting up my humble voice against such a measure, which if I know anything at all of Human Nature I think fraught with great mischief in the first place to a devoted race of men born and bred on the soil, but with endless regret to their natural Lord, a regret which no power that the most ample future can give will ever repay.\textsuperscript{143}

Twenty years later there was a less dramatic occasion when Yule had to decide about the wisdom of further borrowing for the purpose of draining, which would have added significantly to an already large debt on the estate. He had no doubt that draining was a useful improvement, but he feared the possible consequences for the next generation, and he had trouble therefore in deciding on the best course to follow.

My long silence in this important matter of draining is caused by a knowledge of your late Family settlements, and a great dread of overburthening your successor beyond what he is able to bear—with his habits, not calculated for a struggle, which you, when a young man, would easily have encountered and overcome.\textsuperscript{144}

It was not uncommon for agents like Yule—as it was not uncommon for landowners like Sir James Graham—to endeavor to leave an estate in a better financial condition than they had found it, “in that condition [according to John Beasley] which I think every old Family property ought to be in.”\textsuperscript{145} Hence their concern with indebtedness and their evident desire to reduce it whenever possible. On the Sneyd estate once colliery income improved in the ’fifties and opportunities to sell land for building purposes grew more plentiful, Andrew Thompson announced, “I am now looking forward with great

\textsuperscript{143} Netherby MSS, Yule to Sir J. Graham, Nov. 12, 1826, quoted in Spring, “A Great Agricultural Estate . . . ,” Agric. Hist., April, 1955.
\textsuperscript{144} Ibid., Yule to Sir J. Graham, March 13, 1847.
\textsuperscript{145} Althorp MSS, Beasley to Earl Spencer, April 5, 1852.
confidence to the time when we shall be able to wipe off some of the debt." 146 Henry Morton echoed this when the Lambton collieries flourished in the mid-'fifties. And Francis Blaikie in 1828 despaired of achieving that "desirable object"—"the paying off of encumbrances in Mr. Coke's estate"—147 when loss of a sizable income from the Dungeness lighthouse threatened.

Since nonagricultural resources were more likely to provide a surplus that could be applied to debt reduction, they proved especially attractive to agents. John Lawrence's handbook, *The Modern Land Steward*, published in 1801, had advised agents not to overlook such possibilities as the finding of mines or the letting of land for building, the latter being "one of the surest methods of raising a great estate." 148 With the coming of the railways, which powerfully stimulated the non-agricultural side of estate business, agents scarcely needed such advice. Sometimes they looked for nonagricultural resources in what seems highly unlikely places—as when John Beasley searched for coal on the small Spencer estate in Norfolk.

The attractions of nonagricultural resources were enhanced by the growing awareness that agricultural profits were not fat. Early in the century many agents were disposed to make a case for the profitability of landowner's improvements in agriculture.149 But as the years of high farming went by, agents grew less enthusiastic. The Duke of Bedford's West Country agent in the 1860's summed up the matter with a pessimism that may have been heard elsewhere on the great estates:

If we were solely to be regulated by purely commercial rules, that is, only expending money when it will make a profitable

146 Sneyd MSS, Thompson to R. Sneyd, May 19, 1857.
147 Holkham MSS, Blaikie to anonymous recipient, June 26, 1828. Coke of Norfolk owned and operated the Dungeness lighthouse, collecting a toll from passing ships.
149 See Kent, *Hints to Gentlemen of Landed Property*, p. 8; Marshall, *On Landed Property*, p. 304. Marshall, it must be admitted, could be disconcertingly obscure on this point.
return, I believe very little would be done—for I do not believe that if the cost of buildings and making the fences were calculated and interest charged on the outlay that there is any rent for any Farm on the west side of the parish of Tavistock. . . . I have always looked at what the requirements of each farm were, not looking to cost or value first. . . . I have done all I could to provide tenants with the means of doing their work at the least cost—of gradually improving their system of husbandry, and the details of their agricultural operations by teaching them what is being done elsewhere.150

Indeed, an agent like Yule, who had begun his improvements so unusually early as the 1820's151 felt compelled in the 1840's—as a previous quotation has shown—to go cautiously.152 For there was a large debt on the estate, and there were no non-agricultural resources to speak of; he had drilled for coal but in vain. Thus the burden of ensuring continuity weighed heavily on him.

Where there was a concern for continuity, there was also a concern for the honor and influence of a landed family. Thus Henry Morton took it upon himself to admonish the young Earl of Durham on the duties pertaining to his station in life when that young man showed little inclination to follow in the footsteps of his illustrious father. Or there was the amusing episode in the Coke family when a daughter of the house was about to marry John Spencer Stanhope, scion of the Yorkshire Stanhopes. Francis Blaikie, the Cokes' agent, took a personal interest in the marital negotiations. He was delighted that

150 Bedford MSS, Annual Reports, 1864.
151 R. W. Sturgess in his “A Study of Agricultural Change in the Staffordshire Moorlands 1780-1850,” North Staffordshire Journal of Field Studies, vol. 1, 1961, has written: “Nineteenth century agricultural economic history has been written in terms of arable farming and in particular of eastern England arable farming; it has neglected the western and northern livestock industry and the prosperity of agriculture has been seen in the graph of wheat prices.” The example of Netherby points to this neglect. Yule was improving at Netherby when other parts of rural England were depressed.
Miss Coke was to marry a Stanhope, his previous employer having been Lord Chesterfield. Nonetheless, he was taking no risks about the soundness of the prospective son-in-law of the house; and he undertook extensive inquiries among his agent acquaintance in Yorkshire to find if Stanhope "had ever borrowed any money on annuities, whether he was extravagant, in short whether in every possible particular he was a fit person to be entrusted with the happiness of his beloved Miss Coke." He solemnly turned over to her the results of his inquiries, apparently having found them satisfactory.  

Not surprisingly, when it was a matter of deploying a family's influence—as happened most obviously in a parliamentary election—the resident land agent was likely to turn electoral agent. Among other things he canvassed the tenants, mustered them at the polls, kept an eye on the local press, and generally acquired much miscellaneous information relevant to electoral strategy and tactics. He might complain about such duties, as Henry Morton did in 1852, finding them "a sad obstacle to business." Nonetheless, even Morton took them most seriously. On his death it was said that "in all the contested elections for the Northern Division [of Durham], and for the town of Sunderland, since he filled the managing place at Lambton, he was actively concerned on behalf of the Whig candidates."

His letters bear this out. In 1836, for example, he reported to the Earl of Durham that "in the northern division of [the county] there are a very large number of 40 s. Freeholders who are ready to sell themselves in the event of an election, chiefly Pitmen and labourers," and he inquired whether he should enlist such voters; he was already very busy with the Registration, indeed he and other agents of Lord Durham were the only persons troubling themselves about it.

154 Lambton MSS, Morton to Lord Durham, March 14, 1852.  
155 T. Fordyce, Local Records or Historical Register of Remarkable Events (Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 1867), 2 vols., II, 84.  
156 Lambton MSS, Morton to Lord Durham, Oct. 30, 1836.
on the Whig side in the county. The next year he informed the Earl of the difficulty in finding a suitable candidate for the county, and added that he had been in touch with Mr. Stanley of the Treasury to find him such a candidate. On various other occasions, it appears, he wrote the leading articles in the *Durham Chronicle* on political and other subjects. These are but a few examples of Morton's activity as guardian of the Lambtons' family influence.

What was the origin of the land agent's concern with family influence and family continuity? For the most part perhaps it issued from that social conservatism noted in the previous chapter as marking the early history of a profession. This conservatism may have been more marked among land agents, especially among the resident agents, than elsewhere in the new professions. The land agent was comparatively slow in the nineteenth century to establish an independent professional organization, and he long kept a reputation easily recognized in E. M. Forster's Mr. Wilbraham. This Edwardian character was a land agent, who "knew his place and kept others to theirs: all society seemed spread before him like a map. . . . Everything with him was graduated." An agent like Henry Morton usually knew his place. Occasionally he stepped out of it, as he did in the crisis of 1830–31, when he sternly advised Lord Durham and his fellow landowners on their duty to identify themselves with "the respectable middle class of society"—adding, almost threateningly, "perhaps the most influential class of society." But this was a momentary lapse, quickly covered over, and Morton resumed his role of family servant, devoted to the enhancement of the Lambton family fortunes.

What was the remuneration of agents? According to a committee of the Church Commissioners in 1862, if they were paid in the form of a commission, they received from

157 Ibid., Morton to Lord Durham, July 5, 1837.
158 The Land Agents' Society was established in 1902.
159 E. M. Forster, *The Longest Journey*, chap. XI.
160 Lambton MSS, Morton to Lord Durham, Dec. 8, 9, 1830.
three to five per cent of the gross rental; and if they were paid in the form of a fixed salary, "it is accompanied with various allowances for house rent, horses etc. so as to be somewhat above the lower of these limits." Most if not all agents on large English estates were paid in the form of a fixed salary with various allowances (usually a house). Where salaries can be matched with gross incomes, they are found to be something like the percentage adduced by the Church Commissioners. The Duke of Bedford paid his Woburn agent, Thomas Bennett, £760 a year with a house. At the height of their careers, Blaikie received £650 and John Yule £500. Beasley received £1,000 as a total salary from the several large landowners whom he served.

Such remuneration easily made possible the sort of success in life that land agents usually sought. Their social ambitions were not exorbitant, usually being satisfied by placing their sons somewhere in the world of business. John Beasley was probably unusual in seeking a living in the Church of England for one of his four sons—and obtaining it with the help of Earl Spencer; but two of them followed in their father's footsteps.

When Henry Morton's son chose to go up to Oxford to stand for a scholarship, the father's reaction was probably typical: "It would have been very much more satisfactory to me, and infinitely more beneficial to himself had he followed the profession of Mr. Buddle." In spite of Oxford, he managed to succeed his father as an agent of the Lambton family.

It was a rare agent who achieved something of social distinction, who rose out of the steward's room, so to speak. One such man was Thomas Sopwith, chief agent to the Beaumont family, owners of the great lead mines in Northumberland and Durham. A friend of Buddle and Robert Stephenson, Sopwith began his career articled to a surveyor, and as a young man he plunged into the new and vastly exciting world of

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162 Althorp MSS, *passim*.
163 Lambton MSS, Morton to Lord Durham, Nov. 16, 1837.
railways and mines in the North Country. Even as a young man he had shown a mind possessed of many interests: natural science, music, architecture. In 1845 he took up the Beaumont agency, "undoubtedly [he said] the first position open to a professional man." 164 By the end of the following decade he had become a Fellow of the Royal Society, a member of the Athenaeum Club, and a Fellow of the Geological Society. In his diary for August 21, 1859, there was this entry: "In the evening I dined with Mr and Lady Margaret Beaumont, the Duc de Richelieu, the Countess of Cork and Sir John Shelley." 165

To most estate agents such honors and privileges were unknown. Their rewards were in a worldly view of a lesser sort: knowledge of work well done, a position of some authority and comfort, a relationship of trust and confidence with their employers. These were not unmerited. It is true that one hears of dishonest agents: Lord Shaftesbury's Mr. Waters caused a noisy scandal; 166 and the highly reputable Tycho Wing left his affairs in disorder.167 But by and large the greedy and fraudulent agents of many nineteenth-century novels are misleading. Here George Eliot is probably closer to the truth when she portrays Caleb Garth than is Surtees when he declares: "that whatever becomes of the owner of an estate, the steward invariably thrives." 168

165 Ibid., p. 265.
166 *The Times*, Aug. 15, 1865, leading article.
167 Bedford MSS, Annual Reports, 1852.
168 R. S. Surtees, *Hillingdon Hall*, chap. XIV.