CONCLUSION

It might be useful to devote this brief conclusion to the question, were the administrators of English landed estates businesslike? If we are to believe some observers they were utterly lacking in this quality. A recent opinion, for example, has made much of the strength of the political imperatives of the landed society. It has argued that the economic functions of landowners were severely subordinated to their political functions, that landowners exerted a kind of political tyranny over their dependants, that they were far more interested to know how their tenants voted than how they farmed.¹

If this were true, one would expect nineteenth-century land agents to have spent a great deal of time looking into the political opinions of those who applied for farms. But little if any evidence has turned up that they did so. Their chief concern was to find if tenants could farm well. Perhaps they rarely concerned themselves with the political opinions of tenants for the simple reason that they could count on tenants' showing a considerable malleability in their opinions. That English farmers did not display so intense an interest in politics as frequently to insist on having opinions of their own seemed natural enough even to an American observer.² In short, as Professor Gash has put it,

¹ O. R. McGregor in Ernle, English Farming, pp. cxxix–cxxxi.
² Colman, European Agriculture, I, 168.
in the country districts . . . the situation was semi-feudal, and the tenant followed the political tenets of his landlord as a kind of political service due to the owner of the land from the occupier. It would be a mistake to attribute this entirely or even mainly to coercion.³

The theory of a landowner's tyranny goes on to allege that landowners found the means of coercing their tenants by denying them leases and security of tenure. Tenants went without leases because in return they obtained lower rents; and landowners were content to accept lower rents and slovenly farming because they preferred to maintain their political power.

As the history of the game laws demonstrates only too brutally [this theory concludes] landlords never hesitated to coerce their tenantry to accept practices which increased the amenities of their estates; among these good farming did not figure importantly.⁴

This is melodrama. It is a ticklish matter to generalize about the prevalence and significance of the long lease. But it might be suggested that the long lease was far from unknown; that it was commoner on the great estates than elsewhere; that when it was criticized, as it was after 1815, the reasons were economic rather than political; that good farming was sometimes practiced without it; and that its prevalence did not necessarily put an end to political subordination, as the example of the Scottish farmers might indicate. The subject of leases clearly needs detailed study, but in an economic not a political context.⁵

It needs no further research, however, to be sceptical of the implied backwardness of English farming in the nineteenth century. No doubt landowners can be found who heeded nothing but their political functions. Yet it may be asked what

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⁵ See the useful review of Mr. McGregor's essay by G. Mingay in *The Agricultural History Review*, vol. X, 1962.
nation farmed better than the English? According to Sir John Clapham, "in no country at any time has the combination of arable farming and sheep farming been so successfully carried out as in nineteenth-century Britain."

In fact the mid-nineteenth century saw, as Caird once said, a vast improvement in farming methods; and of all the forces responsible for this transformation none was more important than that exerted by English landowners and their agents.

Another opinion—a nineteenth-century opinion—had it that English farming was backward and that English landowners were poor managers for social rather than political reasons. What was held to be at fault was the institution of strict family settlement. Admittedly landowners were passionately concerned to keep their estates in their families. No one has put this better than the Psalmist: "Their inward thought is, that their houses shall continue for ever, and their dwelling places to all generations; they call their lands after their own names." Admittedly a device that was useful to this end was frequently employed. To what degree, however, settlement affected agriculture is not certain.

It was argued that because landowners were limited in their powers of borrowing they failed to invest sufficiently in agricultural improvements. In the early years of the century there was truth in this. But even here a qualification needs making. Settlement in practice was probably never as restrictive of a landowner's powers as it has been made out. This is a subject that needs detailed investigation; but it can be said with some confidence that the inherent freedoms of the system—which have been noted in the previous chapter—inevitably tended to considerable flexibility in practice. It can also be said with confidence that as the nineteenth century progressed settlement came to be flexibly practiced with increasing frequency. The Duke of Bedford, for example, might have chosen to improve by borrowing, for he was not the prisoner of his family settlement. In any case, as we have seen, by the middle of the

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7 Caird, *The Landed Interest*, p. 29.
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century the state had set about removing the difficulties of the landowner whose settlement did interfere with the proper management of his estates. One must hesitate therefore to make a case for a shortage of landowner’s capital in English agriculture. In fact a scholar has recently gone on to make the opposite case, that English agriculture came to suffer from overcapitalization.8

It was also not uncommon in the nineteenth century to find in settlement—because it passed on estates from eldest son to eldest son—a source of administrative ineptitude on landed estates. It was argued that landowners, owing their position to biology rather than to innate capacity, and being assured of great wealth, were likely to be lacking in habits of business. Again there was some truth in this. Not all eldest sons proved adequate administrators. But a surprising number of them did, perhaps because it was hard to escape the contagion of business in the nineteenth century. Moreover, if they knew nothing about business, it was not difficult for them to find efficient agents. The result was that a landowner like the second Duke of Buckingham, who did only harm as the manager of his estates, was highly unusual.

All this should not surprise us. With a long history of political and economic success, English landowners were scarcely bereft of such humdrum qualities as practicality and prudence. Of all the qualities associated with aristocracy these are often the least recognized although they may be the most consistently displayed. Somehow they tend to be obscured, perhaps by the bourgeois censoriousness that lurks in most of us. The truth of the matter may be that English landowners differed little from industrialists, that they were reasonably businesslike in their procedures, that they rationally maximized their incomes.

Unfortunately this description does not fit a great landowner like the Duke of Bedford. As we have seen, he would probably have done better for himself if he had not invested so heavily in agriculture. Whether this level of investment was confined to the leviathans among landowners and whether it was typical

of them are matters that need looking into. How long they persisted in such investment also needs investigation. It is to be noted that the Duke of Bedford's successor reduced his investment on the Woburn estate sharply in 1869.9

It may be that this phenomenon of uneconomic investment among great landowners should be looked on as something of an aberration, the product of peculiar circumstances. It went hand in hand with method and system in the administration of great estates. Agents were likely to be imbued with the professional spirit, bringing informed and vigorous minds to bear on the problems of increased productivity. The best techniques plainly fascinated them. Indeed they may have been too enthusiastic, too ready to believe that universal remedies were at hand, and perhaps too ready to cling to them once they thought they had found them. In short, the blandishments of the new scientific agriculture probably help to explain the large expenditure.

By the 1850's, moreover, it was likely that the finances of a great landowner were prospering. In all probability there had been a period of retrenchment in which old forms of wasteful expenditure were eliminated or reduced. At the same time there may well have emerged new sources of income, like mines or urban ground rents, which came to account for an increasing proportion of gross income. These financial circumstances may have bred a tolerance of large expenditure on permanent agricultural improvements.

Finally there is the elusive matter of social leadership, the traditional role of the great landowner. It is not unknown, of course, for industrialists to be influenced by social considerations.10 But it may be that the great landowner was especially vulnerable in the nineteenth century. On the defensive generally, he may have found a peculiar relish and satisfaction in so vigorously taking the lead in agricultural affairs.

9 Duke of Bedford, A Great Estate, p. 223.