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England's agrarian history outside the Agrarian History of England and Wales. Introduction

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The papers brought together in this volume go back to a combined meeting of the Vereniging voor Landbouwgeschiedenis and the international research group CORN (Comparative Rural History of the North Sea Area), a Flemish project financed by the Foundation for Scientific Research Flanders, and based at the University of Ghent. The meeting took place in Wageningen on 6 June 1997. Its aim was to inform those familiar with the agrarian history of The Netherlands and Belgium on 'some main theme's and results of the recent study of the agrarian history of England.' To this goal the board of the Vereniging had invited two well-known agrarian historians from Great-Britain – I have to choose the geographical terms carefully – to shed their light on the meeting's subject: Bruce Campbell, Professor of Economic and Social History at Queen's University in Belfast for the Late Middle Ages, his colleague Mark Overton of the University of Exeter for the Early Modern Age. Both lectures were followed by a critical reflection of a referee, who had been explicitly asked to compare the English situation with that in the Low Countries during the same historical periods. Professor Erik Thoen of the University of Ghent and professor Jan Luiten van Zanden of the University of Utrecht did perform this duty with confidence and ingenuity. The meeting was topped-off by the inevitable but lively general discussion. Published in this volume are the lectures by Campbell and Overton, the reports by Thoen and Van Zanden, and my own introductory remarks, made as the meeting's chairman. It goes without saying that all texts have to a larger or smaller extent been reworked, supplemented, annotated, etcetera, in order to be presented as full-fledged articles.

Neither of the two distinguished British agrarian historians who feature in this volume has contributed to the prestigious multi-volume *Agrarian History of England and Wales* which is nearing its completion. The reason for this may, very simply, be that both are of a younger generation, or started their careers as his-

torical geographers. But since the A.H.E.W. is generally accepted as a landmark in historiography, covering more than 2,000 years of history in, until this moment, over 7,000 pages – one or two volumes on the second half of the 19th century are still missing – it will be interesting to know what Bruce Campbell and Mark Overton have to say about it.

To give part of the answer myself, Campbell ended a review article of the last volume that appeared with the remark that it ‘represents a beginning and not an end.’¹ Overton in his latest book, after a critical note that I shall quote below, and besides a reserved assessment of Joan Thirsk’s use of the concepts of *pays* and farming regions, did hardly pay any *particular* attention to the volumes of A.H.E.W. on the early modern period. It will be clear from this that neither sees A.H.E.W. as a resting-place where agrarian historians can recover their breath. Still, after having read quite a few of both Campbell’s and Overton’s writings, I would not say that their interests and ways of approaching agrarian history are far out of step with what has been done in A.H.E.W. They share with it a broad view, which not only encompasses what is called in English ‘cows-and-ploughs agriculture’, but also the main institutional and social structural arrangements surrounding it, in all their regional diversity and their long-term changes over time. Clearly however, Campbell and Overton are dissatisfied about the scattering of the over-all picture to which a multi-decennial mega-project such as the A.H.E.W. inevitably leads. On at least one central point, that is to say the volume and composition of England’s agrarian production and the ways it was disposed of from the Middle Ages until into the 19th century, they have been hard trying, often in joint publications, to piece things back together. In doing this, Campbell and Overton do not shrink from daring quantification based on sophisticated techniques of estimation, from catching in figures output, productivity and marketing, and the changes these underwent in the very long term. Wisely, these figures are not so much used as hard evidence, but rather as a basis for debate, to give an idea, any idea, of the order of magnitude we are talking about. A stunning example of such a reconstruction offers the article they published two years ago in the French review *Histoire et Mesure*.² In it, they reconstructed over-all English land productivity in terms of crop yields and livestock production against the background of shifting demand for nine sample years between 1086 and 1871, a time span of eight centuries.

The same clear-cut approach is in the heart of Overton’s latest book, *Agricultural Revolution in England*, which appeared in 1996 and which is mandatory reading for anyone who wants to get involved in the field of agrarian history

1. Bruce MS Campbell, ‘A fair field once full of folk: agrarian change in an era of population decline, 1348-1500’, *Agricultural History Review* 41 (1993) 60-70; ic 70.

2. Mark Overton, Bruce M.S. Campbell, ‘Production et productivité dans l’agriculture anglaise, 1086-1871’, *Histoire et Mesure* 11 (1996) 255-297.

because of its succinct and transparent introductions to many basic ideas and concepts.³ Besides, it tackles all the important issues that have been raised time and again about the transformation of England's agrarian economy somewhere between the 16th and 19th century.

In face of their year-long cooperation and of their agreement on how to approach agrarian history, Campbell's and Overton's views on their own specialist periods – the later medieval and the early modern respectively – are, as I hope to make clear, not easy to reconcile. Campbell shares Overton's interest in the relationship between agrarian-economic and institutional changes, but being a mediaevalist, he has to study them in quite a different historical and heuristic context. Although English mediaevalists are blessed with an abundance and a wealth of primary sources their continental colleagues can only dream of, even the rich English sources pose serious problems to more general interpretations, because they leave about the entire peasant sector in agrarian production out of direct sight (see below).

Campbell's work initially concentrated on land productivity in later medieval Norfolk. He convincingly disclosed the mediaeval roots of some of the progressive and innovative traits of Norfolk agriculture, such as the introduction of crop rotations with reduced fallowing and the (relatively) extensive growing of vetches as a fodder crop (with its additional advantage of nitrogen fixation), for which Norfolk agriculture would gain renown in the early-modern period.⁴ It led him to think that at the end of the long-term medieval expansion period (ca. 1000-ca. 1300) agriculture more in general, but especially in progressive regions such as Norfolk and the Low Countries, has been 'more dynamic than it has hitherto been given credit' or did at least have a 'potential for technological progress'.⁵ Besides the two novelties just mentioned, Campbell has marked out as typically medieval innovations the introduction of windmills (in England ca. 1180); the (very gradual) substitution of horses for oxen, first for hauling, later and geographically more unevenly, for ploughing as well; the gradual widening of the range of crops; and the diffusion of convertible husbandry (the alternating use of land as arable and grass) after ca. 1300). In this way, Campbell has resolutely dismissed the gloomy view that neomalthusians and neomarxists alike picture of

3. To quote a praise, sung in a review by Joan Thirsk: 'it [Overton's book] carries the most innocent of city dwellers through the logic of farming procedures', *The Economic History Review* 50 (1997), 378-379.

4. B.M.S. Campbell, 'Arable productivity in medieval England: some evidence from Norfolk', *Journal of Economic History* 43 (1983), 379-404; idem, 'The diffusion of vetches in medieval England', *Economic History Review* 2nd Series 41 (1988), 193-208.

5. B.M.S. Campbell, 'Progressiveness and backwardness in thirteenth- and early fourteenth-century English agriculture: the verdict of recent research', in: *Peasants & townsmen in medieval Europe. Studia in honorem Adriaan Verhulst*. Jean-Marie Duvosquel, Erik Thoen [eds.] (Gent 1995), 541-559; i.c. 544-545.

the inherent tendency to declining productivity in agriculture towards the end of the demographic and economic expansion phase – without succeeding (or wanting), as we shall see, to let it evaporate into thin air completely.

But before proceeding to the proviso's, let us first establish, however, that Campbell has buttressed his rosy view along a second line of arguing, centred on commercialisation. This theme got Campbell's growing attention after he had become the co-director of the first of the two so-called *Feeding the City*-projects. The first one, initiated in 1988, was aimed at measuring the impact of the presence of a very large urban market by the standards of the later medieval period – London – on the agrarian economy of South-East England on two points in time, one around 1300, the other around 1400.⁶ Although Campbell's definition of commercialisation – 'the propensity with which agricultural goods were produced for sale' – seems a bit offhand (it should at least be supplemented with Richard Britnell's observation that commercialisation as a process in (medieval) history implies 'not simply that trade grew but that it grew faster than population'⁷), his claims as to its character and its consequences are exciting. Campbell outright suggests that the seigneurial sector alone – that is to say that part of the agrarian production of which the lay and ecclesiastical lords of manors could dispose, estimated at about one-third of total production⁸ – cannot possibly have fed the 60,000 to 80,000 or so inhabitants of London at the beginning of the 14th century. So it was in the peasant sector – the two thirds of the agrarian economy that we know virtually nothing about – that commercialisation by implication must have made its greatest progress during the preceding centuries. In a recent joint paper Campbell and Overton have even further widened this claim: only if the peasant sector around 1300 were, thanks to market demand-induced specialisation and intensification, more productive than the seigneurial sector, could the estimated total population of England of about 6 million people have ever been fed. Whoever should want to disclaim the productivity argument, will have to accept the consequence and lower the population estimate substantially – till about 4 to 4.5 million people.⁹

6. cf *A medieval capital and its grain supply: agrarian production in the London region c. 1300*. B.M.S. Campbell, J.A. Galloway, D. Keene, M. Murphy [eds]. Londen, 1993 (Historical Geography Research Series; 30).

7. Bruce M.S. Campbell, 'Measuring the commercialisation of seigneurial agriculture, c. 1300', in: *A commercialising economy. England 1086 to c. 1300*. Richard H. Britnell, Bruce M.S. Campbell [eds.] (Manchester/New York 1995), 132-193; i.c. 185. Richard H. Britnell, 'Commercialisation and economic development in England, 1000-1300', *ibidem* 7-26; i.c. 7.

8. To be sure, all such estimates are only based on arable output.

9. Mark Overton, Bruce M.S. Campbell, 'Statistics of production and productivity in English agriculture 1086-1871'. Paper presented at the CORN-conference on land productivity, Exeter, May 1997.

From all this it follows that, contrary to what has often been presumed, substantial commercialisation took place within the context of a feudal type of exploitation, while at the same time helping to undermine it. For, and now I quote Campbell, 'commercialisation implies a great deal more than production for sale, for the very presence of markets influences prevailing levels of economic rent and thereby affects what is produced and how it is produced'.¹⁰ It leads us to another concept of classical economics: economic rent, that, because of its suitability for linking questions of output and productivity to questions of commercialisation, regularly turns up in Campbell's work. Economic rent could be defined as the return due for the use of land above sheer production costs and before remuneration of other factors of production (labour, capital, and enterprise). It is made up of both Ricardian and von Thünen elements, which in more simple terms means that land quality and demand for land as well as distance to market together determine the height of economic rent.¹¹ The problem is that it is often difficult to hold these elements apart; especially when there is a strong demand for land in regions with a favourable distance to markets, because high economic rents will then reflect *both* Ricardian *and* von Thünen elements at the same time.

Campbell has tried to bring more clarity into this very complex matter by linking economic rent to a concept taken-up from 19th century agronomical geography: 'farming systems', primarily aimed at mapping regional diversity in agriculture on the basis of key characteristics of farming procedures. To this end Campbell has developed, together with John Power and Ken Bartley a typology which distinguishes 8 main types for the later medieval period.¹² According to Campbell it confirms that already by 1300 South-East English agriculture was highly commercialised and that around the city of London, but only there, a von Thünen field of forces was indeed at work. For the remainder of the country, however, despite the presence of many smaller towns and hundreds of village- and small town markets low to moderate economic rents and, by consequence, relatively extensive farming systems still predominated. This tendency was reinforced during the plague-ridden period 1350-1500, when the land/labour ratio was reversed. It forced the lords/large landowners who did not outright lease their demesnes either to more

10. Campbell, 'Measuring', o.c., 191.

11. E.g. Bruce M.S. Campbell, 'Economic rent and the intensification of English agriculture, 1086-1350', in: *Medieval farming and technology. The impact of agricultural change in Northwest Europe*. Grenville Astill, John Langdon [eds.] (Leiden, etc. 1997), 225-249; i.c. 235-238.

12. That is to say, seven for the period before the Black Death, and six for the century thereafter. A survey of the types in Bruce M.S. Campbell, Ken Bartley, John P. Power, 'The demesne farming systems of post Black Death England: a classification', *Agricultural History Review* 44 (1996), 131-179; for a shortened description see Campbell, 'Progressiveness',

extensive, labour-saving forms of land-use or to try other cost-effective forms of production (e.g. extensive sheep farming).

But even in regions where the large London market did not cast a spell on the agrarian economy, in Campbell's view agriculture was never as backward as has often been thought. Although he is constantly cautious – 'the argument should not be pushed too far'¹³ – Campbell still makes the argument that, at least in Norfolk, 'the market was structuring agricultural production from at least the thirteenth century.'¹⁴

However, Campbell would not go so far as to label changes in late-medieval agriculture under the growing influence of markets an Agricultural Revolution. There is only one Agricultural Revolution, and that is the one highlighted in Overton's book. But it is on this point that Campbell's and Overton's views, despite their close cooperation in unveiling long-term development of Norfolk agriculture, do end up in being strained between them. For whereas Campbell tries to make most of market-orientation in late-medieval agriculture, Overton, picking up agrarian history in the sixteenth century, effectively plays down the level of commercialisation at that time: 'In the sixteenth century, the majority of farmers were producing at subsistence levels; although they might have been engaging with the market, for the majority (..) the market was not the major determinant of production.'¹⁵ In fact, much of Overton's fine book is aimed at sapping the recent tendency to push the Agricultural Revolution back in time. It makes Overton to a self-chosen anti-revisionist, who with conviction returns to the view, best represented by J.D. Chambers and G.E. Mingay's *The agricultural revolution 1750-1880* of 1966, which firmly located the transformation of agriculture between the middle of the 18th and the middle of the 19th century. This view had been attacked since by E. Kerridge, E.L. Jones, and A.H. John, and, more recently, by R.C. Allen and G. Clark, who all had pointed to what they saw as revolutionary changes before 1750.¹⁶ Overton's judgment on the contribution to

o.c.; for a far more sophisticated analysis of the relationship between farming systems and degree of commercialisation: Bruce M.S. Campbell, 'Matching supply to demand: crop production and disposal by English demesnes in the century of the Black Death', *The Journal of Economic History* 57 (1997), 827-858. In this article the term 'farming system' has been replaced by 'cropping type'.

13. Campbell, 'Matching', o.c., 829.

14. B.M.S. Campbell, M. Overton, 'A new perspective on medieval and early modern agriculture: six centuries of Norfolk farming, c.1250-c.1850', *Past and Present* 141 (1993), 38-105; i.c.102.

15. Mark Overton, *Agricultural Revolution in England. The transformation of the agrarian economy 1500-1850* (Cambridge 1996), 195.

16. Campbell, Overton, 'Six centuries', o.c., 42-49; Overton, *Agricultural Revolution*, o.c., 3-7.

this whole issue in the A.H.E.W. is short and slashing: ‘The (...) *Agrarian History of England and Wales* has done nothing to clarify matters.’¹⁷

Overton’s Agricultural Revolution is a twofold transformation: one in output and productivity, the other in ‘the institutional framework of farming’ – meaning ‘the progress of agrarian capitalism’. These two spheres also cover much of Campbell’s agenda, as appears most clearly in their joint publications, such as the magnificent article in *Past and Present* of 1993. In it, one can taste both authors’ dislike of the use of rigorous theoretical schemes – a dislike they compensate by being very rigorous on the point of methodology. In addition, in almost every of their books and articles, they seem to take a pleasure in leaving empty-handed all those who think differently, by succinct outbursts against, you name it: pessimist (neo)malthusians, ‘Whiggish’ neo-liberals, all kinds of marxists, of course, and every behaviourist approach.

At the same time, neither Campbell nor Overton does anywhere speak his mind about his own theoretical position. Still, no closer scrutiny is needed to perceive that their views are tinged with definite theoretical assumptions as well. On a recent conference, for instance, the neo-marxist historian Robert Brenner accused Campbell quite bluntly of being a Smithian. In more subtle terms, one could say that Campbell and Overton, in their approach of long-term agrarian-historical development in the pre-industrial era opt for an idiosyncratic mix of Smithian, Malthusian, Boserupian, and von Thünen ingredients. Both evidently see a demographic system at work which is kept in place by the classical Malthusian checks and balances. On the other hand, they shrink back from explaining the turning-points in long-term expansion phases by the easy Ricardian explanation in terms of diminishing returns exclusively as a consequence of declining land productivity. Campbell and Overton have rightly pointed out that the Malthusian trap was a more deceitful contrivance. During phases of rising population pressure land productivity rose (according to Campbell Norfolk grain yields of around 1300 have been unsurpassed before the first half of 18th century¹⁸), but rising land productivity was more than offset by declining labour productivity (as well as falling returns to capital, one could add, but this is a factor that, for historians of the pre-industrial era, is even more difficult to get hold of than labour productivity already is). This would imply that in times of population pressure, total factor productivity must indeed have been fallen on balance, and eventually tinged Campbell’s rosy peasant world with darker overtones. Vice versa, periods of population relaxation led to a rise of total factor productivity, because ‘labour and capital were deployed with greater efficiency’.¹⁹ Only from the end of the 18th century onwards both land and labour productivity rose to-

17. Overton, *Agricultural Revolution*, o.c., 6.

18. E.g. Campbell, ‘Progressiveness’, o.c., 556.

19. Campbell, Overton, ‘Six centuries’, o.c., 98.

gether, and sustainedly. Finally, agriculture was capable of responding ‘to rising demand by raising the productivity of land without sacrificing productivity of labour.’²⁰

‘Institutions and markets’ wrought this miracle. As to the first of these driving forces, five are mentioned in the *Past and Present* article: 1) the substitution of wage for servile labour; 2) the break-up and leasing-out of demesnes; 3) the engrossment of holdings; 4) the establishment of more competitive terms of tenure; and 5) the transformation of property rights. Not surprisingly, these ‘institutional changes were in turn linked to changing market opportunities.’²¹ By and large, this explanatory scheme is covered by the chapter on institutional change in Overton’s book. It clearly places Campbell and Overton somewhere in the middle ground between neo-marxists such as Brenner, and institutionalists, such as Douglas North. Still, in the end their explanations of what happened – or of what failed to happen – in the long-term, remain somewhat shadowy. When it comes to the point, the answer that Campbell gives to the question why no Agricultural Revolution took place in Norfolk around 1300 despite the high levels of land productivity and commercialisation, amounts to underdeveloped demand outside the peasant sector, not to any inherent conservatism or aversion to innovation within it.²² In fact, Overton did find his answer to the question why the one and only Agricultural Revolution only took place after 1750 in the same interaction between market stimulus and entrepreneurial willingness to respond. For him, the explanatory chain ends with the attitude of peasants and farmers, who, seemingly suddenly became more receptive to (dramatically increasing) market incentives and market integration. It finally turned ‘husbandmen’ into farmer-entrepreneurs, their farms into ‘money-making enterprises’ as we know them today.²³ It makes Overton a believer in the mysterious potency of the fourth of the classical factors of production: enterprise, and, therefore, in a way, an adept of von Thünen and even Schumpeter.

I am convinced that Campbell’s and Overton’s rethinking of the phenomenon of agrarian revolutions within the English context can have a refreshing influence on the rethinking of the dynamics of agricultural change elsewhere in North-Western Europe. From that, comparative, perspective their work deserves to be more widely read and used as a model than it already does. And so far as it does not, at least part of the blame has to be put on Bruce Campbell and Mark Overton themselves. For whatever merits their work has – and I hope that from this volume will appear that there are many – a weak spot is their seeming unwilling-

20. *Ibidem*, 100.

21. *Ibidem*, 100-101.

22. See esp. Campbell, ‘Economic rent’, o.c., 235.

23. See esp. Overton, *Agricultural Revolution*, o.c., 205-207.

ness to indulge in serious international comparison, and to have a try at solving one of the major riddles of European agrarian history: did *the* Agricultural Revolution only take place in England, and, if so, why? One of the aims of this volume, and of the Wageningen conference that stood at the basis of it, was to challenge them to engage in international comparison. If it has not yet succeeded in achieving this, I hope it will switch some buttons in the right direction.