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Before the Black Death

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I

THE simultaneous publication of two fresh assessments of the early fourteenth-century economy marks a significant departure from recent discussions of the problems raised by conditions in the countryside before the Black Death.¹ Everyone has his own ideas as to what happened to the economy after the Black Death. But any attempt to account for what happened then by attributing it to simple causes is bound to be suspect. Consequently, historians have looked for predisposing factors to which they can assign some share of responsibility for the momentous subversion of the accepted order of things that took place once the Black Death had run its course, and have perceived symptoms of excessive strain or debility in the changes they find on the land or in farming policy during the half-century or so before its coming.

Prof. Postan has always contended that the economy was failing well before the days of the Black Death; and his views have always commanded widespread support.² Dr Baker has concluded, for example, from his examination of the *Nonarum Inquisitiones* that "the high tide of medieval land colonisation . . . [was] . . . on the turn" in the early decades of the fourteenth century;³ and Dr Kershaw, who has contributed a pastoral crisis in this period to the saga of crop failures with which H. S. Lucas has made us all so familiar, firmly corroborates his findings.⁴ Widespread support, however, is not unanimity. There are dissentients. Miss Harvey, using very similar records to those cited by Prof. Postan and by those who share his views, comes to very different conclusions;⁵ and Dr Watts has added his proffer to the range of her arguments and examples.⁶

¹ E. Miller, 'War, Taxation and the English Economy in the Late Thirteenth and Early Fourteenth Centuries', in J. M. Winter, ed. *War and Economic Development* (Cambridge, 1975); J. R. Maddicott, 'The English Peasantry and the Demands of the Crown, 1294-1341', *Past and Present*, supp. 1 (1975).

² M. M. Postan, *Essays on Medieval Agriculture and General Problems of the Medieval Economy* (Cambridge, 1973), pp. 14, 201 ff.

³ A. R. H. Baker, 'Evidence in the *Nonarum Inquisitiones* of Contracting Arable Lands', *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser. xix (1966), 518.

⁴ I. Kershaw, 'The Great Famine and Agrarian Crisis in England, 1315-22', *Past and Present*, LIX (1973).

⁵ B. Harvey, 'The Population Trend in England between 1300 and 1348', *Transactions Royal Historical Society*, 5th ser. xvi (1966).

⁶ D. G. Watts, 'A Model for the Early Fourteenth Century', *Econ. Hist. Rev.* 2nd ser. xx (1967).

To a controversy conducted in these terms there can be no foreseeable end. Given the haphazard inheritance of records upon which historical inquiry depends, a plausible case can always be made out to support the contention that colonization went on in the early fourteenth century, and to strengthen the claim that land went out of cultivation because no tenant could be found to take it up.¹ The latest attempts to deal with the problem of the early fourteenth century, therefore, have very sensibly shifted the angle of attack upon it. Prof. Miller's article lightly sketches the outlines of an argument which Dr Maddicott investigates in much greater depth. Indeed, Dr Maddicott has added immeasurably to our understanding by taking us into the countryside, with the aid of the kind of records that Prof. Fryde once recommended for this purpose,² and showing us what the grand designs of great kings meant to the peasants whose goods were taxed, purveyed, and fraudulently converted, and to those who managed to turn other men's troubles to their own advantage.

Though they differ substantially in approach from other writers on the subject, they differ very little from one another. Using roughly the same range of records, they arrive at very similar conclusions. They take the view that the quarrel between England and France imposed so great a strain upon the economy, at a period which was in any case one of exceptional stress for the mass of the population, that it could not have failed to cause irreparable damage to the fabric of society. "If the population was checked during this period," says Dr Maddicott, "and if the area under cultivation shrank, it was not solely because a countryside full of land-starved smallholders had become especially vulnerable to the impact of poor harvests and grain shortages, but rather because dearth, seigneurial exploitation and the King's taxes all worked together to place the peasant's resources in a new and more precarious position." "Turning points and watersheds are part of the historian's stock-in-trade," he adds, "but it may be that in the history of rural England such terms are used less justly of the famine of 1315-17 than of the wars with France and Scotland which had begun twenty years before."³ Prof. Miller echoes Dr Maddicott's words. "The precise part played by government financial measures in generating economic change," he comments, "cannot be accurately measured; but it may well be that those measures were as significant in the economic field as they were in instigating those constitutional developments which made the reigns of the first three Edwards a watershed in English history."⁴

Does this mean that we have now got, particularly as a result of Dr Maddicott's very learned work, an interpretation of early fourteenth-century economic movements which is not only plausible and coherent but also one which is unlikely to be compromised by the disclosures that will follow the next set of estate records or Exchequer returns to be examined? Did government policy, acting upon population pressure, drive the early fourteenth-century peasant to the brink of catastrophe, as it was once contended that the terms of emancipation coupled with the orthodox financial policy of the Russian government drove the

¹ Kershaw, loc. cit. 43-4.

² E. B. Fryde, 'Parliament and the French War, 1336-40', in E. B. Fryde and E. Miller, eds. *Historical Studies of the English Parliament* (Cambridge, 1970), p. 250, n. 44.

³ Maddicott, loc. cit. 75. ⁴ Miller, loc. cit. p. 27.

masses of the Russian peasantry to the brink of catastrophe before the terrible famine of 1891-2?¹

Whether it did so or not this interpretation of the course of events lays claim to our serious attention for two reasons. It links the political ambitions that provoked successive financial and constitutional crises in this period and culminated in resounding victories on the field of battle, with the more obscure movements of the economic system that so frequently ignored the reigns of kings and the machinations of politicians. And it has the signal merit of forcing us to think seriously about the repercussions of war, particularly its repercussions upon those who bore its burdens at home in England. Hitherto these repercussions have been given as little serious attention by historians of social and economic affairs as the cognate problem of what the church actually meant to the ordinary medieval villager has been given by historians of ecclesiastical institutions. Dr Hewitt's pioneering study of the impact of the early decades of the Hundred Years War upon those who actually fought in the war or endured its consequences makes him the Coulton of war studies in this sense.² Dr Maddicott and Prof. Miller are to be congratulated upon following where he led.

Anyone who tells us, however, that the poor and the politically weak suffered more than those who were neither poor nor weak, when kings decided to settle their differences by war, can hardly expect to arouse a storm of controversy by doing so. What he can tell us about the tribulations of the vulnerable classes is bound, therefore, to add more to our knowledge than to our understanding. But Prof. Miller and Dr Maddicott handle their twin themes with sufficient skill to make them inseparable. The period of conflict and manoeuvre that began in 1294 with the formal confiscation of Gascony by Philip the Fair, and ended in 1360 with the signing of the preliminaries of peace at Brétigny, has for many years claimed a share of the attention of historians which is disproportionate to its length but not to its importance in constitutional, military, and financial history. Are we now justified in seeing it as no less important in its consequences for the economy?

Unfortunately, a multitude of difficulties stands in the way of our doing so. Perhaps the most intractable of these is posed by the problem of determining the cost of waging the wars of the later Middle Ages. When historians speak of the costs of medieval war they generally have monetary costs in mind. These costs were unquestionably much heavier in the later Middle Ages than they had been in earlier times. One important reason for this was the greater power of certain weapons. The mounted knight, who was little more than a light cavalryman at the time of the Conquest, had been transformed into the medieval equivalent of a tank by the beginning of the Hundred Years War. And the castle which had so often been no more than a stockaded and perhaps moated pile of earth in the eleventh century had become, by then, a thing of intricate and massive strength.

But costs had risen not solely because warfare had become more sophisticated. They had risen also because the price level had risen, apparently, with devastat-

¹ Apparently, as with its medieval parallel, there is more than one view of this famine. — R. G. Robbins *Famine in Russia, 1891-2* (New York, 1975).

² H. J. Hewitt, *The Organisation of War under Edward III* (Manchester, 1966).

ing rapidity between the late twelfth and mid-thirteenth centuries.¹ This period of price history is still so obscure that it is difficult to assign an exact meaning to what is said about it. But if prices had indeed risen as they are said to have done, then any comparison of military cost incurred early and late in the thirteenth century must make large allowances for monetary changes, before we can be sure that more was bought by Edward I with the money he spent than Henry II or even John could have obtained by spending less. When everything costs more than it did we have to do some complicated sums before we can be quite sure that war has become more expensive than it was.

The problem of value for money raises the allied question of paid and unpaid service. Norman feudalism has always had the reputation of having provided the king with an army which served in order to discharge obligations for land rather than because it was paid to do so. In fact, one of the lessons of Norman feudalism is that services, once territorialized, were very soon diminished, if not lost. This meant that the king was presently obliged, perhaps even eager, to pay for military services instead of taking what he was offered, or standing on his rights. Consequently the "whole history of the development of Anglo-Norman administration," in the words of one of its most acute students, "is intelligible only in terms of the scale and the pressing needs of war finance: the expenditure on the wages of troops, the construction and repair of castles, the pensions to allies, the bribes which eased the course of campaigns and diplomacy, and the upkeep of the bureaucracy itself."² Paid service, however, did not altogether supersede unpaid until Edward III's time. Powicke's impression was that "in broad terms Henry III's armies until 1257 were based upon the feudal levy."³ And even when the infantry was mainly a paid force, as it was later, under Edward I, the most recent opinion is that the cavalry on all the major campaigns was provided mainly by "magnates who refused to accept pay for themselves or their men".⁴

This substitution of paid for unpaid services has had the unfortunate incidental result of fortifying the belief that war was becoming more expensive in the later Middle Ages. The belief may well be justified. But the monetization of military services that occurred when the king bought the services he required, instead of depending upon his tenants to fulfil their military obligations whenever he reasonably required them to do so, does not itself prove that war was becoming more expensive to wage. The financial evidence of taxes paid and money spent cannot be handled safely, therefore, without making reservations about its use which may be fatal to its value.

There is no denying, however, that very much more was spent on war after 1294 than for many years past. Wars are not evenly distributed throughout the centuries. They come in clusters. The series that began in 1294 brought to an end one of the most protracted periods of military inaction yet known in English history. It was by no means an unbroken period of peace. But it was in such striking contrast with what followed that we are liable to forget that it was also

¹ P. D. A. Harvey, 'The English Inflation of 1180-1220', *Past and Present*, LXI (1973).

² J. O. Prestwich, 'War and Finance in the Anglo-Norman State', *Trans. R. Hist. Soc.* 5th ser. iv (1954), 36.

³ F. M. Powicke, *The Thirteenth Century* (Oxford, 1953), p. 554.

⁴ M. Prestwich, *War, Politics and Finance under Edward I* (1972), p. 91.

very different from what went before. This does not mean that when Edward I gratified his more mettlesome aristocratic subjects by restoring the profession of arms to its glamorous role in society, he henceforth devoted to unproductive uses resources which had been better employed hitherto. It is difficult to give our phrases a meaning which would convey anything to the men of the Middle Ages, or to say which of other possible uses of resources they might have preferred. But money which was not spent on waging war never found what we should call a more productive outlet in times of peace. All the evidence we possess goes to show that the landed classes invariably squandered every penny of income they received, and as much more as they could persuade or cajole others to lend them. Frugality and solvency, care for the land and thought for the morrow were no more characteristic of ecclesiastical landowners than of lay ones. Everywhere we look we find the fruits of the earth being consumed by swelling staffs of retainers and servants, by lawyers and builders, and by all who were lucky enough to be permitted to eat, drink, and amuse themselves at the expense of the landowners and their creditors.

War did not change all that. Indeed in the households of the military classes it would be surprising to find that war did much more than quicken the pace of life during periods of active campaigning. Even when war did change routines of life and patterns of expenditure it made much less of an impact upon the economy than it appears to have made upon historians. That was so not simply because monetary costs had risen without necessarily reflecting increased real costs. It was so mainly because the economy itself had got so much bigger since war was last a principal preoccupation of foreign affairs. Accordingly, we cannot hope to make sense of the costs of waging war in the reigns of Edward I and Edward III without first taking the precaution of setting those costs against the vastly increased capacity of the economy to sustain them.

II

The size of the fourteenth-century economy is not something that we can easily visualize. When McFarlane tells us that "armies of more than 10,000 were very rarely put into the field";¹ when we learn that battles were occasionally fought in which over twice that number of men took part;² what are we to make of such numbers? An army of 10,000 men had more grown and active men in it than there were males of all ages in some of the very biggest English provincial towns at the time. Behind the soldiers stood those who organized and supplied them. After the campaigns were over there was garrison duty to be done. What sort of burden did all this impose? A few statistics may put the problem in perspective. By the end of the thirteenth century the economy supported a population of over 17,000 men and women living under rule in religious houses, and possibly twice that number of ordained priests in the parishes.³ Very few of these priests, whether regular or secular, were not socially superior to the average infantryman. Fewer still were too poor to employ servants. Some employed many. And these servants

¹ K. B. McFarlane, 'War, the Economy and Social Change', *Past and Present*, xxii (1962), 4.

² Prestwich, *War, Politics and Finance*, ch. iv, *passim*.

³ D. Knowles and R. N. Hadcock, *Medieval Religious Houses* (2nd edn, 1971), p. 494; J. R. H. Moorman, *Church Life in England in the Thirteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1945), pp. 52-3.

no more formed a uniformly depressed class than ordinary infantrymen did. They numbered many thousands. So did those who administered the assessment and collection of taxes on movables in Edward I's reign. It has been calculated that in Lincolnshire alone nearly 4,000 men were required to assist the chief commissioners when Parliament authorized a levy.¹ Taxation was a notoriously sensitive and laborious preoccupation of local government. But how many men were called upon in the country as a whole for these and other less demanding administrative duties, when so many were required in a single county to cope with one Parliamentary levy?

These are impressive numbers. They seem to tell of a countryside crowded with farms. And that is, in fact, what the statistics of wool exports also suggest. In this period between 30,000 and 40,000 sacks of wool were exported in an average year. Each sack contained 364 lb. of wool. The average fleece yielded between 1 lb. and 1½ lb. of wool. Consequently, every sack contained the wool of some 260 sheep.² It may be, as Eileen Power remarked, that when thinking about wool production "it is the large landowners who particularly attract one's attention."³ But at such low rates of productivity what sort of contribution to the export trade could such producers have made? The Priory of St Swithun's, Winchester, kept 20,000 sheep in its early fourteenth-century flocks.⁴ We know of no estates with more sheep at that period. Even under Henry of Eastry's management Canterbury Cathedral Priory kept fewer than 14,000.⁵ With such numbers, however, these immensely wealthy institutions could have contributed no more than 77 and 54 sacks respectively to the total exported.

Even if we allow for the firmly held belief, common amongst historians, that the big farmers were more productive than the small, these figures nevertheless show that it would have taken the entire clip of roughly 400 estates the size of St Swithun's, or perhaps 550 the size of Canterbury Cathedral Priory, to supply the demands of the export trade. In fact very few estates were anything like as big as that. We must conclude, therefore, that when Eileen Power said she had "a suspicion that even in the heyday of demesne farming peasant sheep flocks exceeded those of demesne," she expressed herself with altogether excessive caution.⁶ If we assume, for example, that the average sheep-farmer kept a flock of 260 sheep, at a period when, according to Prof. Postan's investigation of village livestock in a sheep-farming region, a man was wealthy who had half that number,⁷ and that the big landowners supplied one-third of the volume of wool exported, which is unlikely even on the most favourable view of their productivity, then we are at once in a world in which no less than 20,000 very substantial and affluent sheep-farmers, each with his 260 sheep, devoted themselves exclusively to the export market.

How many farmers actually looked to the export market for wool sales we shall never know. Nor shall we ever know how many supplied the home market. But

¹ W. S. Thomson, ed. *A Lincolnshire Assize Roll for 1298*, Lincolnshire Record Society, xxxvi (1944), xlv. Some were poor men, or at any rate procured exemption as if they were.—xlv.

² E. M. Carus-Wilson and O. Coleman, *England's Export Trade, 1275-1547* (Oxford, 1963), p. 13 and tables. See also S. F. Hockey, *Quarr Abbey* (Leicester, 1970), p. 57.

³ E. Power, *The Wool Trade* (Oxford, 1941), p. 24. ⁴ *Ibid.* p. 34.

⁵ R. A. L. Smith, *Canterbury Cathedral Priory* (Cambridge, 1943), p. 153.

⁶ Power, *op. cit.* p. 29.

⁷ Postan, *op. cit.* p. 243.

if it is no less fanciful to postulate an economy in which 20,000 sheep-farmers each had 260 sheep, than it is to envisage one in which there were over 500 estates of the size of Canterbury Cathedral Priory, does this not point to the likelihood that the number of those who kept sheep to supply the export market alone could easily have run into hundreds of thousands?

A further indication of the size of the early fourteenth-century economy, and of its aggregate wealth, is perhaps furnished by the evidence of the resources devoted to the building and rebuilding of the national stock of towns, cathedrals, parish churches, fortifications, religious houses, and private homes of all types. As the economy grew so did its stock of buildings; and as the stock increased, the volume, though not necessarily the proportion, of resources devoted to its renovation and renewal had to be increased also. At some period an inheritance of mainly wooden structures was turned into a bequest whose larger buildings were chiefly made of stone. This was a colossal and unparalleled achievement. It was plainly not the work of any one period, however defined, even though we cannot look back with the aid of surviving evidence and watch the architectural landscape slowly transforming over the centuries. Would it be carrying speculation beyond the bounds of credibility to suggest, however, that this tremendous revolution was carried farther forward during the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, when the aggregate economic strength of the country was at its medieval peak, than it had been perhaps in all the previous centuries put together?

III

It was upon an economy as various and opulent as this that the martial Edwards imposed the burden of their wars. What sort of wars were they that their burden could have weighed as heavily in real terms, as we are asked to believe they did, upon an economy so massively expanded?

We can tell more or less how much money was spent on war because so much of the financial history of the period has been thoroughly investigated. And we can be all too easily tempted to believe that war costs rose more rapidly than the resources of the economy could possibly have increased, simply because we can calculate the costs but, in the absence of anything remotely comparable with modern facilities for the estimation of gross national product, not the rate of expansion of the economy. Ignorance on this score might have tempted us to exaggerate that rate of expansion but for the storms of outraged propriety that lashed any medieval king whose spending on war exceeded what the political classes were willing to tolerate. These storms are exceedingly well documented. They are profoundly impressive. But do they really mean that royal spending on war sometimes exceeded the capacity of the economy to sustain it? With this question in mind we cannot turn to the financial historians for help because, with eyes only for deficits and surpluses, they see nothing but grave financial problems and the expedients whereby successive kings endeavoured to mitigate their consequences. And yet it would be utterly wrong to take the view that the economy was embarrassed financially simply because the king was, or to assume, without much better corroborative evidence than that of the passionate outbursts of the Commons, that the economy was necessarily stretched to the limit because those

who were asked to sanction the king's policies by paying his bills made so much fuss about doing so, particularly when they took exception to what he was doing or how he was doing it. The king was not organized financially for waging war. He had means enough for an extravagant life-style. But even a small war was more than he could manage without getting himself into financial trouble. Consequently the crisis of finance and politics that ensued when the king ran out of money and credit was not necessarily a crisis for anyone else but the king.

Naturally the bigger the king's debts the graver, on the whole, the subsequent crisis. And some of the debts look formidable enough. Yet it is difficult to believe that they were as disastrous for the country as they were so loudly proclaimed to be, if only because the wars that caused them were not the devastating experiences, at least for the English, that they were sometimes made out to be. They were got up to be portentously splendid melodramas, impeccably stylized and masterfully stage-managed. But they were, in fact, little better than caricature: petty gang-warfare flamboyantly decked out and caparisoned, but for the most part, mere swagger and bluster, clamour and rodomontade. Campaigns were few and brief. Armies were small, so small indeed that the biggest of them, such as those investigated recently by Dr Prestwich, did little more than provide an outing for the unemployed.¹ Weapons were simple, so simple that the damage they were able to do so was strictly confined to the neighbourhood in which they did it. In a world in which most people depended for absolute necessities upon what they and their neighbours could produce, this meant that it was exceedingly difficult to inflict losses which had really serious repercussions beyond the district within which they occurred.

Strategy and tactics were rudimentary. Professional knowledge and discipline, in such matters, were erratic. To the knightly classes war offered scope not so much for the exercise of leadership skills as for characteristic displays of military prowess in the shape of bouts of single combat rendered infinitely more exhilarating in wartime by the prospect of ransom. Consequently, a resolute crowd of virtually untrained peasants or townsmen could, at times, defeat formidable armies, not only when it caught one at a disadvantage but also when it had to deal with one in the pride of its power. A wealthy and highly organized kingdom like England was, at times, quite incapable of coping with its small and threadbare neighbours. Time and again the Welsh and the Scots matched the forces and surpassed the military thinking of the English. The English king often enough spent to the limit to contain or avenge attacks from Wales or Scotland. But he could rarely sustain his riposte because he never had the means at his disposal with which to do so, even when he was not diverted from his purpose by other enemies or other problems.

Does this not suggest, despite appearances, that the military efforts made by the English were never, or at any rate not often, very great? Does it not suggest, in fact, that war had a very different significance for medieval English society from the one that we are tempted to attribute to it? Does it not look as if the political community of the realm, which furnished the means and was never averse to sharing the thrills or the spoils of war, took a favourable view of war, not only because it enjoyed war but also because it never allowed war, for any length of time, to cost more than it could easily afford, or to absorb energies which it pre-

¹ Prestwich, *War, Politics and Finance*, pp. 94-5.

ferred to devote to other interests? And do we, perhaps, invest the martial efforts of those who took part in war with greater economic significance than they deserve, because we fail to grasp the fact that the fuss made when things went wrong was utterly disproportionate to the damage done or the costs incurred?

IV

This was undoubtedly a period of unprecedented strain for the mass of the peasantry. The expansion of the economy, to which so much historical evidence testifies, had been accompanied by the progressive impoverishment of increasing numbers of ordinary people. Did their impoverishment render the community less capable than before, despite its expansion, of providing for armies which were in some respects better equipped, and for campaigns which were sometimes more arduous than they had been? Was the community incapable, despite its expansion, of providing for the material requirements of medieval warfare without calling upon its poorer members to make a proportionate contribution to the costs of war, or even perhaps a contribution which was more burdensome in proportion to their means than it may have been in earlier times?

Every effort was certainly made to impose upon them as many of the burdens as could be effectually transferred. The great value of Dr Maddicott's work is to show in detail how that was done. And the effect upon individual families, even perhaps upon whole villages, was often disastrous. But when war consists of intermittent raids, armies are small and weapons simple, can this really mean, in the context of early fourteenth-century England, the transfer of burdens which, whatever they might do to the individual, could overtax the aggregate resources of the economy and subvert its structure? It is the gravamen of the case made out by Prof. Miller and Dr Maddicott that it can, because the peasantry was at, or even beyond, the limits of endurance before the demands of war imposed their additional strains.

Indeed when Prof. Miller writes of "a retreat of demesne" which "was not balanced by a comparable advance of peasant economic activity",¹ he exactly expresses the views of very many historians who see the decades before the Black Death as a period when the countryside began to wear a derelict air because population loss had taken the vitality out of rents, and there were beginning to be more farms to let than farmers to occupy them. Everything apparently conspires to confirm their views—the sensational famines that carried off, no doubt, many thousands of the poorest in the land; the epidemic diseases that decimated flocks and herds; and the signs that Prof. Postan and others have interpreted to mean that nature was at last exacting retribution for the improvident exploitation of the soil by medieval man.

But the statistical evidence, such as it is, does not offer the least support for the belief, more often implicit in the arguments of those who take this somewhat cheerless view of the early fourteenth-century prospects for demesne farming than expressed in their writings, that rents were lower at that time than they had been formerly, and that cereal prices were less satisfactory than those that farmers had grown accustomed to expect.²

¹ Miller, loc. cit. p. 25.

² For references see A. R. Bridbury, 'The Black Death', *Econ. Hist. Rev.* 2nd ser. xxvi (1973), *passim*.

The fourteenth century, until it was three-quarters over, was not, so far as those who have worked with the evidence can tell, a century of low rents and unsatisfactory prices for the principal grains. On the contrary, until the 1370's, the fourteenth century was remarkable for the persistence of what were, by thirteenth-century standards, unusually high cereal prices. The price level, which had been buoyant enough until 1309, rose decisively thereafter and remained high until 1333. Then it dropped, and stayed low until 1351. But that fall was not prophetic of things to come. A depressed market for cereals was certainly one of the characteristic features of the later Middle Ages. But this was not when the market started to be depressed. By 1351 cereal prices had recovered, and for twenty years or more the evidence shows that they ruled at a level which was higher than ever before. In a longer perspective this means that the boom in cereal prices that began sometime in the late twelfth century lasted, despite fluctuations and interruptions, until the late fourteenth century. More than a century was to pass before farmers were to see its like again.

There is nothing incompatible, in the evidence of prices, with the contention that land was actually going out of cultivation, in the early fourteenth century, because it had been so grievously misused. The effect of soil exhaustion upon land prices, in the absence of countervailing factors, is not to depress but to raise them. Withdrawing land from cultivation, or getting less from the land as fertility diminishes, makes what is left more valuable, not less so. It is, so to speak, a negative assart. It may be a symptom of bad farming, and its economic consequences may be bad for everyone who is obliged subsequently to pay rents which reflect the rising value of the land he farms. But it is not bad for those who receive such rents and, if Prof. Postan is right about soil exhaustion, helps perhaps to account for some of those excellent results that so many large estates returned during the three decades of high prices with which the fourteenth century began.

Rent, however, was not the only substantial charge that ordinary farmers were obliged to set against gross receipts. There were many others. Of these labour was often one. In the later Middle Ages it was to be the decisive one. Did rising labour costs make farming risky even when prices were as high as they were in the early fourteenth century? According to Prof. Miller and Dr Maddicott labour bore the brunt of the consequences of famine and war. Were these consequences reflected in wage rates which rose more quickly than prices, and thus made it impossible for farmers to pay their wage bills as easily as they had done hitherto?

V

Much work still needs to be done before we can be satisfied that the wage-rate material now being used by historians gives an altogether reliable indication of the movements that actually took place. But, so far as we can tell, wage rates merely conformed to movements of prices during the first three decades of the century, as they did later, immediately after the Black Death. What can this mean if not that the early fourteenth-century population surplus was big enough to enable landlords to dispose of all the vacancies that occurred, and to do so without having to offer anyone an exceptional inducement to take them up? Whatever war and famine may have done, if we may credit what the statistics of wages and

prices suggest, they did not make life difficult for landlords. If one or two estates foundered, if a farm here or a village there was reputedly distressed or abandoned, we cannot invest such phenomena with the significance of a portent without having first disposed of the statistical evidence altogether.

Then in 1333 prices fell. Are we to assume that demographic forces had begun to exert their influence at last? If so, then wage rates should have continued to rise, as they did in the 1370's. But they did not. This had nothing to do with the war. Edward III's war and the preparations for it had not started when prices fell in 1333. And when the war did start it utterly failed to raise either prices or wages, though if Edward's war is to rank as the formative influence upon the economy that Prof. Miller and Dr Maddicott want it to be, then we are surely entitled to expect it to have made for shortages.

If the population had been depleted as a result of the succession of adversities to which it was exposed in these decades, then wage rates should have risen as prices fell, as they did later, so as to reflect the relative scarcity of labour. Those who received higher rates than before for the work they did might not have been allowed to keep the money and perquisites they earned. If Edward III's wars had told upon the economy as we are asked to believe they did, then taxation of one sort or another might very well have left the peasantry as destitute as it had been when its remuneration was smaller. But taxation, whatever form it took, could not have prevented a relative scarcity of labour from being reflected in its price.

Before the phase of low prices ended the Black Death arrived. Did the Black Death ravage a depleted population? If it did, then how are we to explain the readiness with which vacancies were, nevertheless, filled as soon as they had been created by the dying, not simply for a year or so after 1348, but in many places, for more than a generation after that? Did it ravage a population which had recovered from its supposed losses despite the fact that the wars from which it is said to have suffered in every sense had been at their most demanding only a few years before the Black Death paid its first visit? If we assume that the population had recovered by then, we can explain more reasonably than it would otherwise be possible to do why the Black Death took so long to work its way through the surplus population to the core. But if we make so damaging an assumption where are we to look for the losses that recovery has so miraculously made good? Have we not been pursuing a chimera which should be dismissed from our minds henceforth?

If we must replenish the countryside of fourteenth-century England in the decades before the Black Death because any attempt to deplete it seriously runs into difficulties to which it is not easy to find an answer, then we are at once back in a world, familiar enough in the thirteenth century, in which nothing but misfortune or wanton and invincible mismanagement could stand between the bigger landowners and a prosperity which was uninterrupted for five decades of the century out of the first seven.¹

¹ Dr Kershaw's murrain losses were presumably soon made good. Dr Farmer's livestock prices continue until 1325 and do not seem to reflect any exceptional shortages by then.—D. L. Farmer, 'Some Livestock Price Movements in Thirteenth-Century England', *Econ. Hist. Rev.* 2nd ser. xxxii (1969). And Dr Kershaw has himself noted that the tripling of Bolton Priory's sheep flock in the fourteen years be-

In these fortunate decades, the bigger landowners found that prices were high enough to offset any possible encroachment by rising wages upon profits. If they faltered then, they had only themselves to blame.¹ If they leased out their land they were not surrendering in the face of impossible market conditions: they were merely pursuing some purpose of their own that we have not managed to penetrate. Prof. Miller and Dr Maddicott have both argued that landowners had an incentive to lease their land before 1334 which was not simply a private one, because they avoided liability to movables taxes by having no movable farm property to tax.² But leasing out did not exempt landowners from paying movables taxes. We know they paid on the rents they received in kind because particular attention was paid to the possibility of double-counting in 1307, when it was stated that villeins were not to be charged on such goods since they formed part of the property for which their lords were liable. And we know they paid on treasure, which presumably meant money hoards, since treasure, unlike jewels and vessels of gold, silver, and brass, was never explicitly exempted from taxation, as they were, except in 1294 and 1295.³

Nor was there any reason why landlords, in the early fourteenth century, should have been obliged to incur the trouble and expense of finding tenants for their estates and of foregoing whatever benefits they thought that managing their estates for themselves might otherwise have brought them, simply in order to avoid a tax to which their own representatives in Parliament had given their consent. At that period landlords were very substantially insulated from the real burden of parliamentary taxation by their immense economic power. Prof.

tween 1296/7 and 1310/11 was "mainly brought about by reproduction within the flock".—*Bolton Priory, 1286-1325* (Oxford, 1973), pp. 80-1. Once the infection had gone, many wasted flocks and herds were, no doubt, replaced in the same way later.

¹ Dr Mavis Mate has recently contended that early fourteenth-century estate-owners did much less well than we might think they did when prices were high because they lost when they bought farm produce what they gained when they sold farm produce. She cites Canterbury Cathedral Priory as an example of costs rising with prices.—M. Mate, 'High Prices in Early Fourteenth-Century England', *Econ. Hist. Rev.* 2nd ser. xxviii (1975), 15-16. But did estate-owners spend on farm produce anything like as much as they earned by selling farm produce? If they did then they must always have been hard-pressed: for the argument is equally cogent at all price levels. Obviously they did not. Moreover Dr Mate's example of Canterbury Cathedral Priory's costs rising does not help her argument because Canterbury's monastic population more than doubled between the beginning and the end of the period of which she writes.—Smith, *op. cit.* p. 3.

² Miller, *loc. cit.* pp. 15-16; Maddicott, *loc. cit.* 7.

³ J. F. Willard, *Parliamentary Taxes on Personal Property* (Cambridge, Mass. 1934), pp. 77-8. Prof. Miller (*ut supra*) has done some interesting work to show that one or two extremely influential landlords, who paid little enough in any case, nevertheless managed to pay less on manors which yielded rent rather than produce, than they paid on manors which yielded produce rather than rent. Even if these cases are not merely anomalous, and on this score Prof. Miller appears to have some misgivings, it is difficult to see how less-exalted landlords could have been confident of avoiding tax by leasing out their demesnes when the law was perfectly clear as to their liability. Recent work on this problem shows that we cannot hope to solve it by appealing to the records. Only a tiny fraction of the local rolls, containing detailed inventories upon which the assessments were made, has survived. The rural rolls frequently make no reference to money. But they sometimes do; and sometimes they conceal what we should like to know in phrases such as "*in omnibus*" or "*aliis bonis*". Urban rolls are also rare. They show that citizens were assessed on money as well as goods. If this meagre evidence shows anything, does it not show that landlords took a greater risk and presumably put themselves to greater trouble by leasing in order to avoid tax than they incurred by bribing in order to evade tax? On all this see the admirable survey by J. F. Hadwin, 'Evidence on the Possession of "Treasure" from the Lay Subsidy Rolls', in N. J. Mayhew, ed. *Edwardian Monetary Affairs, 1279-1344*, British Archaeological Reports, no. 36 (1977).

Miller and Dr Maddicott both testify to the reality of that power. They contend that the poor invariably paid more than they should have done because the rich bought and bullied their way out of making an appropriate contribution to the king's demands. They claim that goods and money taken in the king's name never reached the king. And they take very seriously contemporary allegations that whole sections of the population were stripped of their means of livelihood by ruthless assessors and collectors.¹

In arguing this aspect of their case Prof. Miller and Dr Maddicott are surely justified in coming to some very depressing conclusions as to the vulnerability of ordinary villagers, at a period when population pressure was intense, and landlords were as prosperous as they appear to have been in the early decades of the fourteenth century. The ordinary villager did not have to be liable for payment of taxes before he felt their weight. He knew very well that rents and taxes were linked. Prof. Hilton has recently drawn our attention to a complaint made in 1437 by tenants of the earl of Warwick who declared that they could not pay their rents because the king's subsidies were levied on them so often.² Such were the exigencies of estate management in 1437 that the earl's steward was presumably forced to bestow the most sympathetic attention upon such representations by the tenantry. But in the early fourteenth century any deputation of tenants which pleaded the importunities of the royal tax-commissioners as an excuse for its failure to pay rent would have got short shrift indeed. And any landlord of that period who felt that his own liability to taxation had been harshly assessed could then, if ever, have had rents raised or tallages imposed with impunity so as to compensate himself for the mischance that brought a stubborn or unappeasable assessor to his door.

If he had reason to fear that the purveyor might follow in the tax-collector's footsteps, the ordinary villager's plight, at times, was indeed parlous. Prof. Miller and Dr Maddicott have, perhaps, made more of the evidence that he lost to the purveyor much of the little he had, than they are entitled to do, if they are not to provoke their readers into asking how the king could possibly have made do with what he got from villagers who, as they have been at pains to show, possessed little that was even worth the bother of taking. Moreover, the fuss made by members of the landed classes when purveyances were being made was undoubtedly greater than it would have been if they had merely been protesting on behalf of others. Purveyance was so intensely abhorrent to members of Parliament, indeed, that there were times when their protests, constantly and bitterly reiterated, recurring in every session, probably held up the business they had been summoned to transact, and made it difficult for those who managed the Commons to control proceedings.³ But their loudly trumpeted denunciation of royal measures taken to provide for what were, in effect, very modest forces, must not be allowed to prevent our seeing what was done, in some sort of reasonable proportion, whether they provided some part of the means for such forces or not.

¹ Miller, loc. cit. pp. 18-19; Maddicott, loc. cit. *passim*. "When it came to bribing royal officials," says Dr Maddicott, "villeins could hardly compete with their social superiors."—P. 20. This was undoubtedly so; but what strikes one as very curious in the extremely interesting evidence Dr Maddicott has put together is how little was apparently required, at least on some occasions, in order to buy the complaisance of those who were willing to take bribes.—E.g. p. 19.

² R. H. Hilton, *The English Peasantry in the Later Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1975), p. 67. ³ *Rot. Parl. passim*.

Dr Prestwich has itemized some of the quantities required from the counties when prises were called for as a result of Edward I's campaign needs.¹ From a much later record, the Black Book of the Household of Edward IV, we have estimates of the cost of running smaller households than that of the king, drawn up so as to give him some idea of what it might cost him to run a more modest establishment in the interests of economy.² They show how lavish was normal expenditure on food and drink in the households of dukes, earls, barons, knights, and the like, and hence how rapidly the purveyances of Edward I's later campaigns could have been consumed by relatively modest forces on the march—with correspondingly modest effects, presumably, on aggregate supplies of food and drink for the community at large. The household estimates are not strictly speaking comparable with the prises, because the estimates budget for a year and the prises for very much shorter periods. But they are suggestive notwithstanding because the estimates reckon on ordinary household demand, and the prises were ordered for armies which were sometimes huge by the standards of the time, as they were in 1296 and 1297.

The purveyances made, and levies imposed, by those who took what the king required and sent it where it was meant to go, were supplemented by the depredations of those who merely helped themselves to whatever they could get. Presumably such depredations were always at the expense of those who could be impoverished or even expropriated with impunity because their fate was of no consequence politically. Prof. Miller and Dr Maddicott are inclined to speak of what was extorted in this way as if it vanished into space once it had been stolen. But wealth was not destroyed once it had been misappropriated. What was not consumed had to be circulated. As a medium of exchange animals, raw materials, and foodstuffs answer tolerably well. As a store of value they are subject to disconcertingly rapid rates of depreciation. Is it not likely, therefore, that a good deal of what was wrongfully taken from the farms found its way back into farming or went to market, as it might have done in other circumstances anyway, and that misappropriated taxes were spent? Naturally all this was not accomplished without dislocation and loss. The taxes that never reached the king were not necessarily spent where they had been levied, and the stolen farm equipment and farm produce were not necessarily sold where they had been seized. Nor were those who had been dispossessed much comforted when they found themselves obliged to buy back what they had lost, even when they were able to do so. But the urgent need to dispose of what could not be used or consumed, and the universal predisposition to spend rather than save, did mean, surely, that the extortion to which the records bear such eloquent witness was less likely to have impaired the community's aggregate capacity to grow food and wage war than to have increased social mobility here and there, shifted the balance of political advantage in certain places, and sometimes, perhaps, altered the way in which the burden of taxation fell upon the various groups at risk.

Moreover it should not be forgotten that purveyance and taxation took money and goods from villages which may very well have had some of the pressure on local food supplies relieved by the commissioners of array. In a world in which

¹ Prestwich, *War, Politics and Finance*, ch. v, *passim*.

² A. R. Myers, ed. *The Household of Edward IV* (Manchester, 1959), pp. 89 f.

so many were superfluous, in the sense that nothing worth reckoning was added to the work of farm or workshop if they no longer took any part in the doing of it, many villages may very well have met the commissioners of array with pleasure rather than foreboding. No doubt key men sometimes went. But the art of tricking or beguiling the commissioners into taking men whom everyone was delighted to spare did not originate with the suborning of the egregious Mr Justice Shallow. And once they had gone, the villages that the commissioners had relieved were doubtless in a better state to endure whatever the purveyors, and even, perhaps, the tax-assessors, had in store for them than they would have been otherwise. If the armies thus raised then went where the king's enemies could be laid under contribution for food, shelter, and all the comforts of military life, the relief experienced by the villages from which the commissioners had recruited their tally of conscripts was shared in some degree by all the villages that were subject to royal taxation and purveyance.

VI

With the coming of deflation in 1333, however, times changed for the big landlords. They encountered unexpected and indeed unprecedented difficulties. With the late fourteenth-century fate of the big estate only half a century away historians have often been tempted to conclude that the difficulties that were eventually to wreck the big estate were already undermining it at this time. When there were difficulties for the big estate before the Black Death, it is indeed generally at this period that they are to be found. And it was at this period that people complained so circumstantially that markets were idle because goods, though abundant, could not be sold.

Much speculation has been excited recently by this extraordinary period. Prof. Fryde, M. Contamine, and Dr Maddicott have all produced evidence to show that both the principal belligerents caused domestic shortages by exporting coin to pay for the war.¹ If coin shortage caused the deflation nothing is more likely than that the war was to blame. Edward III did not scruple to sacrifice anybody or anything to promote the success of the war and keep his allies sweet. He taxed and borrowed as much as he dared for as long as he could. The crisis that culminated in 1341 sobered him somewhat; but the years of intoxicating freedom from accountability were not finally over until 1352, when the last of the English wool syndicates collapsed. And before he was checked Edward had sent vast subventions abroad.

If these subventions had created the shortage of coin that was responsible for deflation, however, we still have to ask how they brought it about. The chronology is not wholly satisfactory because the deflation started before the war did. Nor is it clear as to why the shortage of coin persisted for so long. Those who were caught short by low prices included most of the larger institutions and estates, all of which spent lavishly, in better times, on ornaments of gold and silver. These ornaments in deflationary times were worth, in real terms, much more than they had cost. In such circumstances how many necessitous landowners would, or indeed could, have resisted the temptation to part with their inheritance of pre-

¹ Fryde, *loc. cit.* pp. 256-7; Maddicott, *loc. cit.* 48-9; P. Contamine, 'La Guerre de Cent Ans en France: Une Approche Économique', *Bulletin Institute Historical Research*, XLVII (1974), *passim*.

cious things, and thus augment the money supply not without profit to themselves?

Nor was this the only, or indeed the principal, way in which fourteenth-century England could have relieved a general deflation caused by shortage of coin. The deflation presumably stimulated foreign demand for English wool at a time when it kept native demand for imports low by reducing the money profits of farming. In normal times such changes in the pattern of foreign trade should have brought coin flooding into the country, raising prices and thus restoring the former equilibrium.¹ But times were anything but normal when the king compounded the problems the war created by plunging disastrously into the wool trade, and when ransom and loot flowed to and fro in movements whose magnitudes we are in no position to assess. Consequently, we have a long way to go before we can confidently blame the war for the deflation of 1333-51.

If, however, the war did in fact cause or accelerate the deflation then it seems that any hardships the economy may have had to endure as a result of the wars of the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries were more likely to have been due to monetary disturbances than to the real costs of raising armies, conducting military campaigns, and fighting battles; for the deflation of 1333-51 appears to be all that is left of those possible consequences of the wars of the period to which we can attribute a disruptive or debilitating role.

From the landlord's point of view the chief result of the deflation of 1333-51 appears to have been that landlords lost the initiative that the shortage of land had given them for so many years, despite the fact that land remained as hard to come by as it had ever been. When markets could no longer be cleared at high prices they were cleared at low ones instead. So much is perfectly plain from the price material. Low prices meant that landlords could no longer afford the wage rates they had been paying hitherto. Does this not mean that wage rates followed prices down—no doubt after a painful interval? They could hardly have done otherwise with population pressures causing fierce competition for work; and the wage material certainly suggests they did. Lower wage rates presumably enabled landlords to endure their afflictions more stoically. But what happened to contractual obligations like rent, which were hardest of all to adjust to sudden changes, but impossible, in circumstances of deflation, to enforce? Did farms and cottages stand empty, with evicted families grouped pathetically outside, exposed to wind and cold, because landlords would not tolerate unpaid rents and creditors unpaid debts?

If landlords and others had, in fact, foreclosed upon defaulters, in such conditions, would it have done them any good? Where could they have turned for better tenants or more reliable recipients of their credits? The problem was a perennial one. When the celebrated Coke estate suffered a similar rash of defaults during the depression that followed the Napoleonic war, the agent was eventually instructed to find new tenants, and asked himself, when he had done so, "... will the new tenants (at reduced rents) be enabled to fulfil their contracts,

¹ Some of those who worked at the Mint certainly thought, in 1381, that the outflow of currency of which so many then complained was due to an unfavourable balance of payments.—A. E. Bland, P. A. Brown, and R. H. Tawney, eds. *English Economic Documents* (1914), pp. 220-3. Coin exports by Edward III would not have caused as much inflation abroad as they caused deflation at home because the Continent was in every sense so much bigger than England at the time.

and stand their ground, at the present prices of produce with the same weight of taxation, I give a decided opinion that they will not, indeed it is utterly impossible that they should do."¹

No doubt some of those whom war had enriched, either in battle or as a result of campaigns of extortion conducted in more congenial domestic surroundings at the expense of adversaries who could not offer much resistance, were well able to snap up some of the tenancies that others were too short of cash or credit to be in any position to hold on to or compete for. But, for the rest, what could landlords and other creditors have done apart from adapting themselves, however reluctantly and belatedly, to the novel realities with which they had to cope?

They might have resorted to barter. But we have no reason to believe that barter dominated the economic affairs of the big estate-owners in these decades. They might have revised their terms. Some certainly did, only to regret it bitterly, no doubt, when inflation returned in 1351. Most, however, seem to have done nothing, which is the incorrigible response to adversity of everyone who firmly believes that trouble cannot last. This meant, in effect, that the real burden of contractual obligations which could not be discharged was shifted forward in time so that those with resources to spare found themselves taking more and more of their income by instalment. The grip of the creditor classes tightened, but what they held in their grip were mostly promises. Some landlords did indeed decide to give up the cultivation of their demesne lands, in whole or in part. But the choice was not yet a clear one because, in deflationary conditions, an income in kind was more dependable than one that was supposed to be paid in money and, therefore, might very well not be paid at all.

These unusual circumstances may very well have had more unexpected and even disquieting consequences for the landowning classes than those that followed naturally from the reduction of their power to spend. At a period when the tenantry was not even paying all its dues in full except in promises, or perhaps in kind, it was surely impossible to transfer the real costs of war to the tenantry as it had been possible to transfer them when buoyant prices had rendered the landlords' control of economic affairs unchallengeable. Those who were charged with the responsibility of finding money and provisions and equipment for the king's war no doubt found it harder than ever, during the deflation, to raise what was required without demanding more than it was customary to do from those who had most of everything.

Does this not mean that deflation gave rise to a paradoxical situation as a result of which the real burden of paying for the war, at a time when war costs were at their greatest, fell with more than usual weight upon members of the political classes? And if it does, have we not here an explanation of why the disastrous opening years of Edward III's continental enterprise provoked such passionate and rancorous opposition? Was Edward looking back to those days when he made tax concessions in 1357 "on account of the various adversities which . . . the middling men of the realm have long undergone"?² Prof. Miller and Dr Maddicott believe that we can hear the authentic voice of the poor in the comminatory mutterings enshrined in a set of verses written in 1338 or 1339 when

¹ R. A. C. Parker, *Coke of Norfolk* (Oxford, 1975), p. 150.

² G. L. Harriss, *King, Parliament and Public Finance in Medieval England* (Oxford, 1975), p. 345.

the crisis was approaching its climax.¹ But this work, as Dr Harriss has pointed out, "is no mere lament or tirade; it is a coherent indictment. . . Both in language and argument it strikingly anticipates the petitions of the Commons in the Parliament of 1340 . . . [and] thus reflects the mood of the lesser landowning classes."²

In short, the wars that began in 1294, remarkable perhaps for terminating a prolonged interlude of military inaction, were not remarkable for rendering difficult conditions intolerable for the overwhelming majority of ordinary men and women by imposing upon them a burden of charges which they simply could not bear. England could take in its stride wars fought as they were fought in the Middle Ages. No doubt costs bit deeper at some moments than at others. And no doubt the poor felt their effects first and most cruelly. But costs were never the burden they seem to have been, and were sometimes met, perforce, by those who most confidently reckoned to evade them. If the wars caused death by starvation and disease to be more prevalent than before they did not alter the structure of society by doing so. There was always, in these years, a seemingly endless succession of people to take the place of those who died. Consequently, political crises did not mirror economic crises. And when it went well war was justified in everybody's eyes.

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¹ Miller, loc. cit. p. 26; Maddicott, loc. cit. 65. ² Harriss, op. cit. p. 251.