



University  
of Glasgow

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Mark Freeman

## Folklore Collection and Social Investigation in Late-Nineteenth and Early-Twentieth Century England

### Abstract

This article compares the different, but related, activities of folklore collection and social investigation in an important period of English rural history. It is argued that the outputs of both activities reflected a complex series of social and cultural interactions in rural theatres of inquiry, and as such that the methods and concepts underpinning them can themselves illustrate important facets of the social history of the period. The article draws on the model of transition from an “informant” method of data collection—characterised by the consultation of elites rather than the investigated population itself—to a “respondent” method, which relied on first-hand contact with the subjects of inquiry. It is suggested that this model, devised to explain the history of social research, is also relevant to the history of folklore collection. The transition was not smooth, however: rather, it initiated intense methodological conflict between different investigators; and even where the “respondent” method was enthusiastically advocated, there were limits to the extent of empathy that was achieved by collectors and investigators with the population in which they were interested. The article draws on a variety of published sources from the period, including the 1890 and 1914 editions of *The Handbook of Folklore*.

### Introduction

The collection of English folklore in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was largely a rural activity; and the upsurge of interest in folklore, reflected in the formation of The Folklore Society in 1878, coincided with a rediscovery of rural poverty that had remained hidden since the days of the “Swing” riots and the “Hungry Forties.” Following the formation of the National Agricultural Labourers' Union in 1872, and continuing unabated until 1914, there came a steady stream of social investigations of country life, focusing on low wages, poor housing and the paucity or unwholesomeness of village recreational opportunities. The rural poor and the conditions in which they lived came under intense and arguably unprecedented scrutiny; indeed in 1895 one commentator wondered whether “this passion for inquiry...may not become extravagant” (Garnier 1895, 407). The founding fathers of the urban social survey, Charles Booth and Seebohm Rowntree, also worked in rural areas; the government carried out extensive surveys of the condition of the agricultural labourer; and books and pamphlets of all kinds described the rural population and suggested schemes for the improvement of rural life (Freeman 2003). Folklore collection was part of this “passion for inquiry.” Vic Gammon has linked

folklorists and social investigators (along with folk-song collectors) in this period within the broader context of the nineteenth-century “genius for collection and classification” (1980, 74).

This paper focuses on the methodologies developed by folklore collectors and social investigators, mainly at the level of first-hand information gathering, and explores the frequently conflicting constructions of rurality and rusticity that shaped the development and contestation of rural social investigative methods. Social investigations of all kinds in this period transmitted a wide variety of information about the conditions and outlook of the English agricultural labourer: they ranged from poverty surveys along the lines of Booth's (1892-7) and Rowntree's (1902) studies of London and York, through explorations by special-correspondent journalists, to official inquiries into agricultural wages and rural depopulation. Alongside these surveys, a popular genre of country literature conveyed ideas about the English “peasantry” (as the non-landed agricultural labouring classes were frequently labelled) to a broader audience of literate, urban middle-class readers. Much of the information on British folklore and on rural social conditions was transmitted by the same people—Henry Moule (Vicar of Fordington in Dorset), for example, was both an active folklore collector and a campaigner for improved rural housing, while Richard Jefferies (one of the most popular country authors of the late nineteenth century) and Augustus Jessopp (Vicar of Scarning in Norfolk and one of the most prolific writers on rural life in the 1880s) conveyed information and analysis of both folkloric interest and sociological value (Fraser 1961; Drew 1967). Similarly, in the 1900s, several notable writers linked a conception of the “folk” life of the rural people to detailed descriptions of their conditions of life and general outlook—for example, George Sturt, or “George Bourne,” who took his pen-name from the Lower Bourne near Farnham in Surrey where he lived and wrote about the local people in a series of popular books, and Stephen Reynolds, who lived with a fisherman's family in Devon. All these investigative endeavours, like the collection of folklore, involved the adoption of strategies to obtain information about the rural population, its economic condition and its cultural life.

#### Models of Social Investigation and the "Discovery" Of Rural England

Catherine Marsh (1985) has developed a helpful model to chart the changing strategies of social investigators in this period. The “informant” method of inquiry was developed in the nineteenth century, became the mainstay of parliamentary investigations, and was epitomised by Charles Booth's poverty survey of London, which involved interviewing school attendance officers to obtain their opinions of the population they worked with. It was characterised by a reluctance to consult at first hand the subjects of inquiry. The changing position of the British working classes within the political and social structures of the country (especially the gaining of the franchise and the growth of trade unionism), as well as the different kinds of information which it became desirable to obtain (for example, more detailed knowledge of domestic economy), resulted in the informant inquiry giving way to the “respondent” inquiry, which entailed more direct consultation of the people about whom information was wanted. For Marsh, Rowntree's survey of York, first published in 1901, the result of a house-to-house investigation of all working-class households in the city, reflected this transition. The model is useful in contrasting

two different approaches, and explains a growing willingness among social investigators to consult the subjects of inquiry directly. The element of transition, however, is overstated. This paper will show that the adoption of either respondent or informant methods remained contestable, and among many investigators there remained a deep mistrust of first-hand evidence. Moreover, there were significant disagreements among those who adopted the informant method, mostly over who were the best sources of information. To complicate matters, these often involved discussions of the closeness of contact the informant had with the rural working-class population: did those who knew the people best necessarily make the best informants?

The second model, which is helpful in explaining the changing approaches to social inquiry and to folklore collection in this period, is the “reconstruction” of the agricultural labourer, as charted by Alun Howkins. Howkins (1996) argues that the labourer, viewed in the mid-nineteenth century as the ignorant and backward “Hodge,” was re-labelled and reconstructed as “Lob,” a bearer of tradition and lore, and the backbone of the English race. The widespread characterisation of the labourer as Hodge, it can be argued, effectively discouraged the development of a respondent approach to investigation and ensured that local elites were considered the most reliable informants about country life. Hodge was characterised pithily (and in this case ironically) by one commentator as “unimaginative, ill-clothed, ill-educated, ill-paid, ignorant of all that is taking place beyond his own village, dissatisfied with his position and yet without energy or effort to improve it” (Dent 1878, 343-4). Hodge was so alien that he was frequently described using terminology more appropriate to the animals that surrounded him on the farm. One group of agricultural labourers “seem[ed] scarcely to know any other enjoyments than such as is common to them, and to the brute beasts which have no understanding ... So very far are they below their fellow men in mental culture” (Eddowes 1854, 12 and 16). Even in the 1880s, following the “awakening” of the labourer in the 1870s, the Hodge stereotype was still invoked by many commentators, and was associated with the apparent spiritual and cultural poverty of rural England (Freeman 2001). Both Richard Jefferies (1907, 180) and Augustus Jessopp (1887, 74) compared the labourer's eating habits to “chewing the cud,” and Jessopp wrote of his parishioners “[I]logic can they no more understand than they can understand the Differential Calculus” (1887, 124). Irrational and insincere, the agricultural labourer in this construction inhabited a world which was difficult to penetrate—and was not even worth penetrating—and was there to be written about rather than to supply information about his own condition.

The “reconstruction” of the labourer reflected a “discovery” of rural England founded on the precepts of Romanticism but also attached to immediate political concerns (Howkins 1986; Boyes 1993, 26-40). Howkins (1986), building on Gareth Stedman Jones's analysis, has shown that in the 1880s a consciousness of urban degeneracy, especially among casual labourers in London, led to a new vision of rural England that emphasised its permanence and incorruptibility in contrast to the trivialised and debased culture of towns and cities. Rural depopulation, shown to be accelerating at an alarming rate by the reports of the census of 1891, intensified these concerns. In the 1900s, when widespread reports of the unfitness of urban recruits to the armed forces prompted a whole series of concerns about “national efficiency,” and when groups as otherwise diverse as Tories and

Socialists adopted the slogan “Back to the Land,” the clamour for rural answers to the problems of urban England peaked (Howkins 1986, 67-8; Jones 1971, chap. 6 and 16). In this context, the countryman was physically, morally and culturally superior to the townsman. Thus, for folk-song collectors, for example, “the English ‘peasant’ was [no longer] John Hodge, a backward remnant of a collapsed and inferior pre-industrial world, but the unknowing bearer of the essence of English musical culture” (Howkins 1986, 72)—in other words, Lob. Although Lob was never used as a label in the way that Hodge was, the construction conveyed a conception of the agricultural labourer as a long-standing and noble survival. Having said this, whether or not Lob was a different order of being from Hodge, he was still silent, but his silence now reflected his awesome timelessness and latent power rather than empty-mindedness and non-cooperation. Strategies were still required to communicate with him, but he was at least considered to be worth communicating with.

This construction of rural England, however, was fraught with contradiction. Depopulation may have attached a new importance to rural life, but it also appeared to have a degenerative effect on the rural population that remained on the land. Briefly put, the argument ran thus: as the best elements of the rural population left the land for the towns, only a “residuum” of the least fit and the least intelligent remained behind, ill attuned to traditional lore and customs, lacking their ancestors’ intimate knowledge of the flora and fauna around them, and without the sense of village community that had characterised an earlier generation of countrymen. The repeated insistence of social investigators on rural decline—informed and reinforced by a developing historiography of the English countryside that emphasised the damaging economic and social effects of enclosure and other developments of the previous one hundred and fifty years—led many to advocate a revitalisation of community life through new parochial and village institutions which would help to return the population to something approaching their supposedly former independent status and hopeful social outlook. At the same time, the pernicious influence of new urban cultural patterns could share some of the blame for rural degeneration. But whatever the cause, the re-creation of a “folk” culture could not be achieved without the active leadership and inspiration of middle-class folk revivalists. As Georgina Boyes (1993, 64-5) has shown, much of the folk revival was predicated on the belief that the “folk” had shed their own culture and needed to be reinvested with it. Rural elites often accepted their share of the blame for this state of affairs—for example, Charles William Stubbs (1878, 174), a country parson, partly blamed his fellow clerics for the creation of a “class of men, the stolid helplessness of whose ignorance has become proverbial”—and conceived their own role as one of helping Hodge to elevate himself; but the construction still entailed a view of the agricultural labourer that emphasised his backwardness and hopelessness.

Hodge and Lob co-existed, then, within an alien rural world that was conceptualised within a complex and often contradictory series of urban/rural paradigms. The different constructions can be explained partly by regional differences: the south of England was where wages were generally lower and Hodge most readily identified, and its greater geographical proximity to London meant that it was more dramatically affected by metropolitan cultural patterns. Social investigators concentrated on the social problems of

the south, whereas folklore collectors often focused on the north. Of a “representative” list of thirteen English county folklore collections published between 1865 and 1922 listed by Richard Dorson (1986, 320), eight dealt with the northern counties, two with the midlands, two with the south-west and one with Guernsey.

Intergenerational change was also, arguably, a factor—while the older members of the rural population might still carry folkloric survivals, the apparent degeneration of the residual rural population had brought with it a decline in the old beliefs and in the organic village communities of pre-industrial England. Dorson (1978, 11) has drawn attention to these conflicting perceptions, identifying both pejorative and laudatory terminology that shaped views of the rural population. Terms like “backward,” “primitive,” and “superstitious,” stereotyped the population in one way, whereas “another set of terms—simple, unspoiled, pastoral, close to nature—viewed them in a nobler light.” The important feature of both sets of terms was that they constructed the inhabitants of rural England as culturally different.

Whether their culture was debased and dependent, or whether it was a noble survival from a more wholesome pre-industrial age, it operated on premises different from those of the dominant culture from which the social investigator or folklore collector approached it. Although cultural differences came to be recognised and allowed for as the project of communicating more closely with the labouring classes came to occupy more of the energies of social investigators, neither of the prevailing constructions of rural life was likely to affect the way the rural population viewed itself, and thus the rural working-class mind was essentially alien however the investigator or collector perceived it.

The imagery used by many social investigators, especially in the mid-nineteenth century but also frequently much later, reinforced the construction of the rural as remote and alien. In both urban and rural investigations, an exploratory genre represented the poor as foreign and savage. The epitome was General Booth's *In Darkest England* (1890), a response to Stanley's *In Darkest Africa*, which described the metropolitan poor in terms reminiscent of those applied to the “savages” of the African continent. This is no less true of representations of the rural poor. For example, one Yorkshire parson described his parishioners as being “given over to the grossest sensuality, and buried in the darkest ignorance” (Eddowes 1854, 16), and a Dorset clergyman characterised his as “our home heathen” (Moule 1868). Even Francis Heath, the *Morning Advertiser* rural special correspondent and an investigator broadly sympathetic to the demands of the organized agricultural labourers in the 1870s, operated within an exploratory tradition that, as Karen Sayer has argued, was motivated by an unmistakably imperialistic spirit:

He collected his evidence, his facts and information as a colonial explorer might have done ... highlighting the image of the rural working class as somehow distinct from the rest of the mass ... His definition of the rural was of a separate land that was remote, its people historically “uncared for and forgotten,” which was only becoming civilized as social reformers began to explore its depths, and as the state began to legislate for it ... the rural was a mini-empire within the borders of England, which had to be explored (Sayer 1995, 121-2, citing Heath 1880, 296-302, 376-9 and 386).

## Folklore Collection in Rural England

### Informant Method of Enquiry

Among folklorists a similar series of conceptions affected the theory and methodology of their collecting. Folklore was almost by definition a science applied most readily to primitive societies, and as Laurence Gomme explained in his *Handbook of Folklore*, the folk beliefs and customs in which he and his colleagues were interested were “essentially the property of the unlearned and least advanced portion of the community” (Gomme 1890, 2). Gomme's terminology was pejorative—his repeated juxtaposition of “civilised” and “savage,” for example, implied a judgementalism that could not help affecting his and others' methodological endorsements. These judgements extended to domestic as well as foreign populations; as Dorson (1968, 281) has explained, for Charlotte Burne “The rustic differed only in degree from the savage.”

This helps to explain why Burne (1890, 172), writing in Gomme's edition of the *Handbook*, advocated a collection strategy which entailed first-hand communication with members of local elites rather than with the “lowest classes” of the population who actually carried the old traditions and beliefs. She explained that the task of folklore collection was harder “among uncivilised peoples,” and that “caution is needed that savages will not answer questions truthfully.” She directed the folklore collector to lawyers, doctors, “gentleman-farmers” and land agents, and suggested that the personal visitor to a locality call first the parish clerk or sexton, or perhaps the innkeeper or residents of isolated farmhouses. Superstitions could best be discovered by inquiring among the small employers of a district rather than among those who were most likely to know and believe them. Generally, the collector was advised to restrict inquiry, as Georgina F. Jackson had done in her acclaimed work in Shropshire, to the members of local elites “whose lives and occupations brought them much into contact with their poorer neighbours” (Burne 1883, vii). As Burne (1890, 168) explained, “it is the first instinct of the folk to deny all knowledge of superstitious practice, out-of-the-way customs, or curious legends.” A similar strategy was followed by Charles Booth, whose survey of rural life relied mainly on the evidence of Church of England clergymen, and who advised Herbert Samuel, himself thinking of carrying out a social survey in an Oxfordshire village in 1891, that “I think it safest to consult existing local authorities such as schoolmasters, rate collectors, postmasters, relieving officers, the clergy (Church and Dissent), and the doctors, and only to supplement and enliven the information from such sources with what the inquirer himself sees and hears from the people themselves” (Himmelfarb 1991, 98; Freeman 2003, 109). Here, the “people” were presented as curiosities rather than as sources of worthwhile information.

Having said this, there was much disagreement over who, within the village community, was the most reliable and useful informant. On the one hand, the resident was seen to have a number of advantages over the non-resident. The outsider could easily fall foul of the villagers' suspicions of officialdom—Burne (1914, 9) pointed out that informants might clam up due to “fears of annexation or increased taxation” if the inquirer was not careful. The local parson was perhaps the commonest source used by folklorists, and was

viewed as trustworthy in the tradition of the informant method of inquiry. Parsons explained that their authority as informants rested on the closeness of their contact with the local population. Augustus Jessopp (1887, 83), for example, explained how he, the parson, was in a better position than the outsider to gain access to rural religion, lore and superstition: “the people are a great deal too wary to open out to ‘our own correspondent’ if he should come down on a voyage of discovery.” As J. C. Atkinson—vicar of Danby in Cleveland, and an assiduous collector of Yorkshire folklore and dialect—explained, it was only long association and friendship with the moorland people that enabled him finally to enter into their confidence and learn some of their most secret beliefs and lore (1891, 27-8, 58-61 and *passim*). The parson, however, was in an official position, and had his own particular place within the social structure of his village or parish. He was unlikely to be made party to all the occultism and superstition that survived. Jessopp (1887, 52) was forced to admit that a certain “isolation” in his position was inevitable.

Burne also questioned the reliability of the parson as an informant (Burne 1890, 169). She preferred the evidence of schoolmasters, a regularly used source of information about local folklore, who were also useful on matters of political significance. Rider Haggard emphasised the value of their testimony to his analysis of rural depopulation, stating that:

there is nobody who can be so well informed as the local schoolmaster, since all the youth of the village that, in the ordinary course of events, should constitute the adult population of the future, passes through his hands (Freeman 1999, 167).

Doctors were another useful group of informants. Burne noted that a medical training was “often very useful” in gaining the confidence of elderly women (1914, 13), and the moorland doctor R. W. S. Bishop believed that his was the profession through which the deepest acquaintance with the rural population was to be gained:

It is said that the parson knows a man at his best, the lawyer knows him at his worst, but that only the doctor knows him as he really is. This is true. When man is sick and racked with bodily or mental pain, he recognizes his frailty; all artificiality and veneer depart for the while, and his true character is revealed. The country doctor ... is a privileged being, wielding great power and bearing a great responsibility in his little kingdom. He sees Jack and Jill, whom he brought into the world, grow up and develop. He becomes the confidential friend of the family, the trusted adviser in important events, and the depository of sacred secrets (Bishop 1922, 2-3).

However eager the resident to obtain information, there were still certain circumstances which needed to be fulfilled if he were to succeed. Being a resident was not a sufficient condition in itself to guarantee knowledge and understanding of one's neighbours. Richard Jefferies pointed out that one needed not only to live in a village, but also to enjoy the right kind of relationship with the other inhabitants. He considered himself fortunate to be on good terms with the Luckett family, local farmers, and remarked that:

It would be possible for any one to dwell a long time in the midst of a village, and yet ... obtain no idea whatever of the curious mixture of the grotesque, the ignorance and yet



cleverness, which go to make up hamlet life. But so many labourers and labouring women were continually in and out of the kitchen at Luckett's Place that I had an opportunity of gathering these items [i.e. dialect and stories] from Mrs. Luckett and [her daughter] Cicely (Jefferies 1894, 80-1).

As small farmers of the kind Burne recommended as informants, the Lucketts were in a good position to recount the superstitions of the local area, many of which they believed, or half-believed, themselves (Jefferies 1894, 80-1; Burne 1890, 171). Co-residence had to be accompanied by sympathetic personal interaction. George Sturt later came to realize that there was nothing particularly unusual in the conversations he had with his gardener, which provided him with the source material for his popular "Bettesworth" books, but rather in the circumstances in which he had been able to hear them:

The relative positions of master and man are not generally conducive to friendly intercourse ... but fortunately those influences were absent between Bettesworth and myself ... there grew up between us a curious, and to me a most refreshing fellowship, in which social distinctions were forgotten, while I felt, as I gardened occasionally side by side with him, not like his employer, but rather as if I were an apprentice learning my trade from him" (Sturt 1978, 5-6).

As a result he heard many stories and pieces of local lore that would otherwise have remained hidden from elite inhabitants of the village

On the other hand, it was sometimes pointed out that the outsider could have an advantage over the resident, especially if that resident was an active elite participant in village or parish life. The fear of eviction or loss of employment could prompt a working-class informant to be reluctant to give information about the conditions in which he lived to a local investigator. Moreover, residents were often no more aware of local conditions than visitors. Francis Heath (1872, 88; 1880, x) thought many local landlords and farmers unaware of the conditions of the labourers in their midst, and Canon Edward Girdlestone argued that it could be an advantage not to be one of those who "have lived all their lives in the country, and have in consequence been so long accustomed to the miserable plight of the peasantry as to take no heed of it" (1872, 258). F. E. Green (1912, 271; , carrying out his investigations into rural housing in Surrey, found that he had to visit cottages at night so the local farmers and landlords could not see that their tenants were revealing to him the inadequacy of their accommodation. Even the local medical officer of health, some investigators argued, was often compelled by financial, professional and social considerations to overlook some of the poor conditions in which agricultural labourers lived (Crotch 1901, 153; Harben 1913, 129-30; Freeman 2003, 161-2).

As Burne pointed out, an outsider may "be able to penetrate to the confidence of a people more quickly than a resident who is too far removed from them by social rank or official position" (1914, 8). The investigator, resident or outsider, had to be sensitive to the local social and political structure of the area under inquiry; otherwise, the population would deliberately deny him access to the information he sought.

Respondent Method of Enquiry

From the 1880s onwards, the reliance of social investigators on the informant method of inquiry came under increasing challenge. Investigators were increasingly concerned with issues whose investigation required closer contact with the labouring population. The more detailed investigation of the working-class domestic economy required evidence to be taken from labourers, and increasingly their wives. For example, in the early 1890s Charles Booth and his collaborators in the Economic Club investigated in great detail the income and expenditure of twenty-eight British households, among which agricultural households were disproportionately represented. This study required a greater penetration into the details of working-class life than had Booth's widespread and arguably superficial London survey (Economic Club 1896).

In the 1900s Harold Mann (1905) and Maud Davies (1909) both carried out house-to-house surveys, of Corsley in Wiltshire and Ridgmount in Bedfordshire respectively, along the lines of Rowntree's survey of York, conveying intimate details of domestic economy, and Rowntree himself followed up the York survey with an investigation of family budgets in agricultural districts, each budget being accompanied by a "monograph" which described the family in question in sympathetic terms and reported its conversation relatively unpatronizingly (Rowntree and Kendall 1913). Although this development was not entirely new—the family budget survey dated back at least to the late eighteenth century—the popularity of this form of social research at the beginning of the twentieth century clearly fits the model of transition to a respondent method of inquiry.

More important, perhaps, from the 1880s onwards investigators attempted to assess the implications of the labourer's political enfranchisement, the impact of a national system of education and, above all, why so many countrymen were leaving the land. Not all investigators thought a first-hand approach was necessary. For example, whereas George Millin, who investigated rural depopulation for the *Liberal Daily News* in 1891, advised investigators to "stroll down the village and gossip with the people... you can get some valuable side-lights on village life, and most of the folks have something valuable to say" (1891, 73), his most vociferous antagonist, the Tory paternalist Arthur Cooper, scorned Millin's "gossip from farmers, labourers, and old women," preferring the more trustworthy evidence of the "parson and squire" (1891, 5-6). However, there was undoubtedly a tendency to rely more on the evidence of the rural working classes themselves, and books about country life were preoccupied with the potentialities and practicabilities of communicating with the rural poor at an individual level. John Fraser has identified in this period "a marked increase both in a concern with the interior life of the labouring people and the mechanics of their relationships with other classes, and in an awareness of how these things could best be conveyed to the reader" (1961, 193).

Thus, for many investigators, the perceived value of the information they transmitted depended on their closeness of contact with the people who supplied it rather than on the apparent trustworthiness and respectability of the informant. This was paralleled among folklore collectors: Burne's edition of the *The Handbook of Folklore*, published in 1914, contained more advice on the development of interpersonal relationships between

folklore collector and informant than did her section on the “Way to Collect” in Gomme's earlier edition. Her own edition is preoccupied with problems of cross-class communication and strategies for the interrogation of respondents. Thus she began her account with a detailed description of the appropriate behaviour of a collector engaging at first hand with the people:

the requisite in collecting folklore is to enter into friendly relations with the folk. Anything in the way of condescension, patronage, or implied superiority will be a fatal barrier to success ... A kindly, simple, genial manner, much patience in listening, and quick perception of, and compliance with, the local rules of etiquette and courtesy are needful; and the inquirer must be as careful to do nothing that could be resented as an impertinence or a liberty as he would be in the company of friends ... He must adopt a sympathetic attitude, and show an interest in the people themselves and their concerns generally, not merely in the information he wishes to get from them. He should avoid any appearance of undue curiosity, should encourage them to talk, and should listen rather than ask questions. Incredulity and amusement must be concealed at all costs (Burne 1914, 6).

The collector needed to show respect for and sympathy with the people who were to provide him with his raw materials, and patience was the key to his craft. The collector would have to listen to a great deal of irrelevant talk before his informant told him the information he wanted: “When an informant has started it is best to listen as much and to talk as little as possible” (Burne 1914, 13).

The Hidden World of the Rural Mind

Patient and personal inquiry, then, was seen as the key to winning the confidence of the population in sufficient degree to permit the disclosure of meaningful information. Asking questions was not enough; cultural distance needed to be overcome through patient and sympathetic strategies of inquiry. As early as the 1880s, writers like Richard Jefferies tried to document the hidden world of the rural mind, suggesting that much unrevealed superstition and folklore lay behind the apparently unpromising exterior of the agricultural labouring population. Jefferies (1889, 90) noted that more superstition survived than was commonly supposed, but that it was confined “to the inner life of the people” and not spoken of openly to outsiders. In a book on Exmoor, an area to which he was himself a comparative stranger, he explained that the local people had a deliberate strategy of concealment of their folklore:

Not one word of superstition, or ancient tradition, or curious folk-lore, can a stranger extract. The past seems dead ... But ... this silence is not change [sic]: it is a reticence purposely adhered to. By mutual consent they steadfastly refrain from speaking in their own tongue and of their own views to strangers or others not of the countryside. They speak to strangers in the voice of the nineteenth century, the voice of newspaper, book, and current ideas. They reserve for themselves their own ancient tongue and ancient ideas, their traditions, and belief in the occult. Perhaps this very reservation tends to keep up the past among them. There is thus a double life—the superficial and the real (Jefferies 1892, 242-3).

The juxtaposition of “superficial” and “real” here is especially significant. In this construction modern, urban, nineteenth-century culture was a transparent and degenerative substitute for the more honest, “ancient” and noble way of life and thought of the “folk.”

Thus in the 1900s writers like George Sturt and Stephen Reynolds suggested a deficiency of cultural understanding among social investigators, which was both created and reinforced by the second-hand methods used to collect information. To explain how this deficiency had arisen, Reynolds reasserted working-class defensiveness, but in a way that carried with it new forms of cultural validation: defensiveness became a deliberate and organized strategy to maintain social barriers. Thus apparent deference was indicative not of feebleness and dependence, but rather of a deliberate attempt to maintain strength and independence: “Respectfulness is less a tribute to real or fancied superiority, than an armour to defend the poor man's private life” (Reynolds 1909, 80). The fishermen with whom he associated not only lived in a separate, vibrant and valid cultural world from those who inspected, investigated and legislated for them, but they defined much of their cultural identity in terms of opposition to the dominant culture. The observer from another class who could accept the validity of a culture predicated on different principles from his own—and in addition accept that access to this interior cultural life was likely to be denied to anyone who was not prepared to earn the confidence of those who lived it—was better placed to represent the internal coherence and meanings of the life of the rural poor rather than merely its observable externalities.

This is not to suggest that writers like Reynolds and Sturt enjoyed the kind of relationship with the poor that enabled them entirely to shed their middle-class identity and present a more “real” account of rural working-class life. They were more or less identifiably members of local elites, however friendly their intercourse with their poorer neighbours. Indeed, they were aware of this themselves. In his diaries Sturt repeatedly agonised about the level of cultural empathy he had achieved (Freeman 1999, 216-18). Moreover, they sometimes discovered that their agendas were not necessarily shared by their working-class neighbours. Sturt (1930, vii) pointed out that he had been careful to hide from Bettesworth the fact that he had been made the subject of a book, and there are also indications that his relationship with the old gardener was the source of some comment and even resentment in his village (Sturt 1930, 126-7). Reynolds fell out with one of his fishing friends over the contents of his first book (Osborne 1978, 125-6).

In portraying the rural working classes as the bearers of a folk wisdom which was somehow superior to the values of the urban middle classes from which they themselves came, they inflicted an ideological burden on a population that was not necessarily equipped to bear it. This construction of rural life could encourage the investigator to look for things that were not there. Caroline Oates and Juliette Wood, for example, have pointed out that several of Margaret Murray's network of correspondents “attributed their fruitless enquiries to people's reluctance to talk to strangers rather than simply to their lack of knowledge of the subject of the enquiry”; and that Murray herself sometimes “simply heard what she wanted to hear” (1998, 34).

In any case, more frequent and intensive contact with the subjects of social inquiry and the bearers of folkloric “survivals” was by no means an uncontested development; and many investigators remained sceptical of the value of taking first-hand evidence. The power of the stereotype of the ignorant and defensive labourer remained a significant barrier to his fuller integration into the processes of social inquiry. As Rider Haggard explained in 1902 (1: 225-6), “the labourer is a shy bird; also he is suspicious. In any case it is difficult to persuade him to talk, or to be sure when he does talk that he is saying what is really in his mind” (vol. 1, 225-6; see figure 1) Haggard's own survey of rural England, carried out in 1901 and 1902, relied almost wholly on the testimony of farmers and landowners (Freeman 2003, 91-103). Although depopulation seemed to make more urgent the task of rejuvenating rural life and prompted many investigations designed to ascertain how this might be achieved, its apparent corollary—that those who remained on the land were the feeblest, least efficient and least intelligent members of the agricultural community—could itself be a deterrent against relying on the evidence of the rural “residuum.” A concern with the moral condition of the rural poor was reflected in the use of informants to pass judgement on working-class “character,” even in supposedly “scientific” inquiries such as Maud Davies's Corsley survey (Davies 1909, 154-81; Freeman 2003, 127-8).



Figure 1 “Mr Tory's Sheep.” This picture depicts Rider Haggard with two agricultural labourers, at Turnworth, Dorset in 1901.

Even in the most sympathetic investigation of rural life, the labourer remained a subordinate partner in the research process; and this subordination is also reflected in Charlotte Burne's methodological prescriptions of 1914. These seem strategic and

calculating: Burne's rural working-class informants were valued because of the information they could convey rather than on their own terms. This was unavoidable, but the result was often a somewhat insensitive exhortation to collect at the expense of any possible personal friendship. The class from which the informants came was still described by Burne in terms like "the lower culture" and "the lower races" (1914, 7 and 13). She remarked that "[i]t is necessary to be careful not to tire the witnesses, who are probably unused to continuous mental exertion, and easily get confused" (1914, 14). There may have been a reservoir of knowledge hidden in the rural mind that the folklorist could draw from, but there were limits to the trustworthiness of the collectors' sources of information. Although there was a tendency to rely more on first-hand communication with the rural working classes by the 1900s, and to examine in more detail the relationships between the participants in the processes of social investigation and folklore collection, a fuller and more equal integration of the rural labourer into these processes was inhibited by the persistence of attitudes to the rural poor which retained many features of the old Hodge stereotype. One example, from 1907, will suffice:

They grow up mere animals ... These knots of loutish lads ... never seem engaged in talk. There they stand, like the cows ... possibly communicating with each other through some organs which, to ordinary mortals, are unintelligible, but to all appearance they are as dumb as the brute creation (Kebbel 1907, 84-5).

## Conclusion

Thus, even after all the economic and social changes of the previous half century, the agricultural labourer on the eve of the Great War was still thought, by social investigators of all kinds and by folklore collectors, to inhabit an alien world, both geographically, in his isolation from urban life, and culturally, in his distance from the norms and values of the urban middle classes who investigated him and tried to record his thoughts. As such the evidence we have of the folkloric "survivals" with which the county collectors concerned themselves, and of the condition and outlook of the rural working-class population, is filtered through the perceptions of the Victorian and Edwardian middle classes. The activities of the folklore collector, rooted in the preservation of relics of the past, and of the social investigator, concerned with the problems of the present and their potential future solutions, are both illustrative, not only of political and social conflict in the late-Victorian and Edwardian British countryside, but also of the contestability of the source material used by many historians of the period. Although the sources remain valuable, it is important to understand the cultural and political processes that created them. A complex process of "mediation" shaped the creation of these documentary relics of Victorian and Edwardian rural working-class life and culture (Burke 1978, 65; Gammon 1980, 61-2). Folklore collectors and social investigators developed their methodologies during a period in which political and social conflict shaped the questions they asked of their sources—the rural population—and the methods they adopted to interrogate them. As such the evidence they produced poses a difficult but exciting challenge to historians who use it as their source material today.

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