

Letters Home: Reflections from Canada on the Plight of the Poor from Rural Southern England in the Years 1832–1837

Judith Hill

To understand the poor, and the plight of the poor, rural agricultural labourer, one must consider the priorities held by the poor themselves. My assessment of the changing quality of life experienced by the agricultural labourer in southern England at the beginning of the nineteenth century is based on the priorities set out in letters sent by poor labouring emigrants from Canada. At the time of their emigration the problem of high prices, population growth, disbandment of the army, some farm mechanisation and the decline of some domestic industries created a general crisis of poverty among agricultural labourers in southern England, which resulted in a combination of male under-employment, inadequate wages, along with female unemployment. Labourers in the southern counties were 'caught in the flooded rural labour market of the post-war years'¹ and research by Smith, Barker-Read and King has reinforced this general picture.² As Burchardt has noted, 'agricultural employment failed to keep pace with the rapid increase of the rural population, especially in the South', and the seasonality of labour demands characteristic of arable farming also resulted in increasing

- 1 P. King, 'Social Inequality, Identity and Labouring Poor' in H. French and J. Barry (eds), *Identity and Agency in England, 1500–1800* (Basingstoke, 2004), p. 75.
- 2 R.M. Smith, 'Ageing and Well-being in Early Modern England: Pension Trends and Gender Preferences under the English Old Poor Law 1650–1800' in P. Johnson and P. Thane (eds), *Old Age from Antiquity to Post-Modernity* (London, 1998); M. Barker-Read, 'The Treatment of the Aged Poor in five selected West Kent Parishes from Settlement to Speenhamland 1662–1797' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Open University, 1989); S. King, *Poverty and Welfare in England. A Regional Perspective* (Manchester, 2000).

numbers of paupers having to resort to the poor relief system for assistance.³

There is a great body of scholarship about nineteenth-century poverty, but the voices of the rural poor are seldom heard. Smith comments that they 'are reduced to faceless components of some abstract model'.⁴ As Alannah Tomkins and Steven King have indicated, the Webbs and D. Marshall portray paupers 'as illustrations of policy in practice rather than as individual people'.⁵ Unfortunately, it is difficult to recreate the real world of the agricultural labourer. As Keith Snell has stated: 'The social insensitivity of so many nineteenth-century commentators makes this hard to assess'.⁶ Even so, it is sometimes possible to glean a few basic facts by nominal linkage. Labourers can be traced in parish records, vestry minutes and overseers' account books, farm papers, settlement certificates and in the documentation generated by the many labour schemes instituted by parishes after the Swing riots of 1830. Nonetheless, this information is limited. As 'we are dealing with one of the most illiterate, subdued, silent, maligned and shadowy classes in nineteenth-century society' there is a paucity of written evidence by the poor themselves.⁷ Thus, in order to try to identify what their priorities were, to gain a greater understanding of what the poor considered most important in their 'standard of living'⁸ we have to examine in detail the few records that they did leave.

One valuable source for historians is pauper letters, written requesting relief from the parish. From his study of Essex pauper letters, Sokoll considers them 'of paramount interest to anyone concerned with the history of the English poor law'.⁹ He concedes that every pauper letter is 'a narrative account written for a specific purpose and, as such, it is bound up with strategic interests', but at the same time it is a territory 'which

- 3 J. Burchardt, *The Allotment Movement in England 1793–1873* (Woodbridge, 2002), p. 9.
- 4 G.C. Smith, 'The Poor in Blindness,' in T. Hitchcock, P. King and P. Sharpe (eds), *Chronicling Poverty the Voices and Strategies of the English Poor 1640–1840* (Basingstoke, 1997), p. 211.
- 5 S. Webb and B. Webb, *English Poor Law History Part 1: The Old Poor Law* (London, 1963 reprint); D. Marshall, *The English Poor in the Eighteenth Century. A Study in Social and Administrative History* (New York, reprint 1965); S. King and A. Tomkins (eds), *The Poor in England 1700–1850. An Economy of Makeshifts* (Manchester, 2003), p. 2.
- 6 K.D.M. Snell, *Annals of the Labouring Poor Social Change and Agrarian England 1660–1900* (Cambridge, 1985), p. 9.
- 7 K.D.M. Snell, 'Deferential Bitterness. The Social Outlook of the Rural Proletariat in England and Wales' in M.L. Bush (ed.), *Social Orders and Social Classes in Europe since 1500: Studies in Social Stratification* (London, 1992), p. 162.
- 8 Snell, *Annals*, p. 9.
- 9 T. Sokoll, *Essex Pauper Letters 1731–1837* (Oxford, 2001), p. 3.

provides us with the rich subject matter for historical interpretation'.¹⁰ Predominately the voice heard is the voice of the agricultural labourer living outside his parish of settlement, because non-resident paupers had to write asking for relief and the letters often give detailed descriptions of personal circumstances. The letters are written in a certain tone, justifying the need for relief and making the case of being one of the 'deserving poor'. The poor had to demonstrate they were industrious, thrifty, sober and show deference to their social superiors if they were eligible for relief.¹¹ Peter King recognises that as the poor struggled to obtain some social autonomy and agency, it was important that they should distinguish themselves as deserving.¹² Pamela Sharpe has pointed out that the paupers writing to the overseers employed strategies to strengthen their case for obtaining a higher level of relief or regular payments. These varied depending on the character of both the pauper and the overseer they were dealing with – some letters are 'deferential in tone, some obsequious, others demanding'.¹³ This meant that paupers were unable to speak freely, nor could they step outside the acceptable parameters for, if they did, parish officials often threatened to withdraw their assistance. Steven King has also noted a certain 'moral tinge'¹⁴ in the treatment of paupers caught up in the out-parish relief system. If a pauper obtained a bad reputation in one locality and then moved to another parish 'reputation could easily follow you around'¹⁵ and affect how the vestry judged their case for relief.

Pauper emigrant letters provide another valuable source, especially as they 'contain testimonies from people who do not normally leave archival residue for posterity'.¹⁶ These letters reflect on life in England from a different perspective. As they were no longer dependent on the parish for relief, the writers did not have to be so constrained. The priorities of the writer are made clear in these letters and of course 'may be taken to correspond closely with those of their relatives and friends'¹⁷ to whom

10 T. Sokoll, 'Old Age in Poverty: the Record of Essex Pauper Letters 1780–1834' in Hitchcock, King and Sharpe (eds), *Chronicle of Poverty*, p. 146.

11 French and Barry (eds), 'Introduction', *Identity and Agency*, p. 25.

12 King, 'Social Inequality', pp. 82–3.

13 P. Sharpe, "'The Bowels of Compassion'. A Labouring Family and the Law c. 1790–1834', in Hitchcock, King and Sharpe (eds), *Chronicle of Poverty*, p. 103.

14 S. King, "'It is impossible for our vestry to judge his case into perfection from here". Managing the Distance Dimensions of Poor Relief 1800–40', *Rural History* 16 (2005), 183.

15 Ibid., 184.

16 E. Richards, 'A Voice from Below. Benjamin Boyce in South Australia 1839–1846', *Labour History* 27 (1974), 65.

17 Snell, *Annals*, p. 10.

they wrote. However, the supply of these letters is limited. Charlotte Erickson's research into American migration and emigrant letters points out that the poor were the least literate and were 'not well represented in the surviving American evidence'.¹⁸ Even so, Eric Richards has argued that even if only semi-literate, the migrant in a new colony 'was almost bound to put pen to paper and to write home to his people' and would 'record his own thoughts, possibly his view of the world, in a direct manner'.¹⁹

The letters I have used are the 144 published letters written between the years 1832 and 1837 by the Petworth emigrants (which include the Dorking emigrant letters). The letters were written by those who had lived and worked in southern England at the beginning of the nineteenth century and had emigrated because of economic difficulties. The men were primarily agricultural labourers, although there were rural artisans among them. They emigrated either as part of a family that depended on 'the wages of a single wage earner trapped in a low wage occupation' or as single men who had difficulty in finding permanent employment.²⁰ The Petworth Emigration Scheme operated from 1832 to 1837 and in total 18,000 men, women and children travelled to Upper Canada under the auspices of the scheme, led by Lord Egremont and organised by the Petworth committee chaired by Reverend Sockett. People chose to emigrate and the socio-economic make-up of the emigrants clearly shows it was not a random selection of the population. Most groups of emigrants contained more young adults and fewer children and old people than the home population. The Petworth project recorded that 48.8 per cent of 1,500 identified emigrants were single males with the largest grouping being young males of 14 to 20 years old, and single females comprising 6.7 per cent of the emigrants. Couples with children made up 33.5 per cent, single parents with children 2.9 per cent and childless couples 8.1 per cent of the identified emigrants.²¹

The Petworth project has also tried to profile the emigrants. The occupation of almost 46 per cent of identified Petworth heads of households is unknown. What is known is that many of the heads of households who did emigrate, both those identified and those not, were receiving parish relief. Of the occupations of identified heads of household 68.8 per cent were classified as agricultural labourers, 20.2 per

18 C. Erickson, *Invisible Immigrants: The Adaptation of English and Scottish Immigrants in Nineteenth-Century America* (Ithaca and London, 1972), p. 20.

19 Richards, 'A Voice from Below', 65.

20 W. Cameron and M. McDougall Maude, *Assisting Emigration to Upper Canada. The Petworth Project 1832-1837* (Montreal, 2000), p. 77.

21 Cameron and McDougall Maude, *Assisting Emigration*, pp. 91-93.

cent of the identified group were grouped in skilled crafts, which included a baker, several blacksmiths, bricklayers, carpenters, a cooper, two fellmongers, sawyers, a number of shoemakers, tailors, weavers, and a wheelwright. A mixed category of 8.5 per cent included a bailiff, five farmers and one yeoman, a gardener, miller, postman, several soldiers or sailors, and servants. The professional category was 1.6 per cent, which included several naval officers, a schoolteacher, and a surgeon but most of these were cabin passengers and 0.9 per cent were classified gentry.²²

The emigrants left England by sailing ship to make a long and hazardous journey to Canada lasting approximately six weeks. They made the difficult journey aiming to settle in Canada, probably never to return to England. It must be recognised that long-distance emigration was a 'psychological, familial, financial and organisational challenge'²³ for the poor of southern England who were one of the least mobile sections of the population. The Petworth committee promoted emigration by extensive advertising and, at the time, it was one of the most successful of a number of assisted emigration schemes. 'In all, close to one hundred parishes sent emigrants on at least one of the Petworth ships'.²⁴ Lord Egremont sponsored those wishing to emigrate from the closed parish of Petworth and from surrounding parishes where he owned much land. Other groups sailed with the Petworth emigrants but were financed either by their own parish, by themselves or by subscription schemes. From Dorking the subscription scheme raised sufficient funds to send a party of seventy-seven men, women and children.²⁵

For every year of sailing, the Petworth committee published small pamphlets or single sheets of one or more letters, which they distributed freely or very cheaply to local inhabitants. Reverend Sockett also sent some Petworth letters to editors of Sussex newspapers for publication. At the time, newspaper editors also published letters from their own sources.²⁶ As emigrant letters were being used at the time as a means of encouraging further emigration, it was important to publish letters that portrayed emigration in a positive light. Reverend Sockett encouraged

22 Ibid, p. 81.

23 E. Richards, 'How Did Poor People Emigrate from the British Isles to Australia in the Nineteenth Century', *Journal of British Studies* 32 (1993), 253.

24 W. Cameron, S. Haines and M. McDougall Maude (eds), *English Immigrant Voices Labourers' Letters from Upper Canada in the 1830* (Montreal, 2000), p. 11 [hereafter *English Immigrant Voices*].

25 C. Barclay, *Letters from Dorking Emigrants who went to Upper Canada in Spring 1832* (London and Dorking, 1833).

26 Portsmouth Portsea and Gosport Herald, Chichester Reporter; United Service Chronicle; Sussex Advertiser; Sussex, Surrey, Hampshire and Kent Advertiser British Newspaper Library Collingdale London [hereafter BNL].

the Petworth emigrants to write home, but at the same time was determined that the Petworth letters he had published were free from any suspicion of being tampered with. Nonetheless, he did operate a selection process. He was also less likely to publish letters from people who had joined the emigration scheme at the last minute to fill the ships. He referred to these (privately) as 'the scum who rose to the top at the last',²⁷ as he saw them as unreliable emigrants and likely to give the emigration scheme a bad name.²⁸ Sockett also explained that many letters 'have been received, but they are either not so explanatory, as those which are given, or merely contain repetition of the same facts'.²⁹ He sometimes did omit certain facts in the published versions of the letters. For example, John Capling reported after the family's arrival in Canada that four of his children and his wife had died. He wrote of their burial that he had to 'wrap them up in the rinds of trees and dig holes and put them in myself' (these details were omitted).³⁰ At the same time, some emigrants reported adversity and Sockett printed these accounts. William Wright wrote of storms at sea 'when the wind was so heavy that they reefed all the sails' and of the 'tedious passage of eight weeks' when he was sea sick for three weeks.³¹ Rebecca Longhurst wrote of her husband's infant sister, 'little Hester died on the salt water'.³² Others encountered illness in Canada and these letters were also published. William Phillips reported in 1832 'Here is a great deal of sickness in the country, the cholera morbus is raging very much in some places'.³³

Of course there are concerns some published emigrant letters may have been altered, were fraudulent or had been carefully selected for publication. There are examples of manuscript letters written by Petworth emigrants, and some of the letters Sockett published survive in more than one copied or published version. Cameron, Haines and McDougall Maude have confirmed 'the manuscript letters in our collection that can be identified as originals are also reassuringly similar in content and expression to the printed letters'.³⁴ Rumours certainly circulated at the time that letters published after the 1830 parish-aided

27 West Sussex Record Office [hereafter WSRO], Rev. Sockett, 'Letter to Wyndham', 23 August 1838.

28 Ibid.

29 The National Archive [hereafter TNA], CO384/30,545.

30 J. Capling, Letter No 21, 28 August 1832 in *English Immigrant Voices*, p. 43.

31 W. Wright, Letter No 14, August 1832, in *English Immigrant Voices*, p. 31.

32 R. Longhurst, Letter No 31, 4 October 1832, in *English Immigrant Voices*, p.61.

33 W. Phillips, Letter No 13, 5 August 1832, in *English Immigrant Voices*, p. 29.

34 *English Immigrant Voices*, p. xxxvi.

emigration scheme from Corsley in Wiltshire were fakes.³⁵ To try to allay fears of fraudulent letters being published, newspaper editors guaranteed the letters' authenticity. Indeed the Petworth printer, Phillips, who published the Petworth emigrant letters, kept the original letters or 'well attested copies' of the published letters, and made them available for examination. When Charles Barclay published the Dorking emigrant letters he insisted that 'The letters are literal copies of the originals except for the spelling and the omission of some repetitions'.³⁶

The letter writers themselves also took measures to prove there had been no letter substitution. One of the most popular ways was to tear off a corner of a sheet of paper that would be left behind and later matched up when the letter arrived from abroad. Other measures used included emigrants taking with them signed pages or a variety of agreed tokens, signs or seals to be included in the letter. Cornelius Cosens from Dorking travelled to the Waterloo Township in Canada in 1832 and in his letter of October 1832 he commented 'Some people in England think that letters are opened, but there is no such thing'.³⁷ However, rumours did circulate that this had been done. When James and Hannah Tilley emigrated in 1833 they were concerned that letters were being altered on arrival in England. As a result, they took with them from Petworth a copy of the published 1832 letters. On arrival in Canada they confirmed in their letter home that 'You need not think the letters are forged which have been sent home; for I have shewed the book to several that sent letters, and they say, that they are exactly as they sent them'.³⁸ Of course there were those who did not write and emigrants who returned home, perhaps discouraged at not finding work immediately, and these stories we do not have. Most published letters 'reflect the desire to be seen at home as having made the right choice, as having made good'³⁹ and the research undertaken by the Petworth project into the Canadian sources has demonstrated after only one or two years many emigrants did prosper.

Of the letters examined, most were written and sent during the first months or years of the writers' emigration, when memory of home and working conditions was still vivid. In them the emigrants usually describe the journey and give first impressions of life in Upper Canada. Occasional comments are made on wages and prices but family news and practical

35 G. Poulett Scrope, 'Conditions of the Labouring Classes. Wiltshire Emigrants to Canada', *Quarterly Review* 46 (1832), pp. 349–90.

36 Barclay, 'Address', in *Letters from Dorking Emigrants who went to Upper Canada in the Spring 1832* (London and Dorking, 1833), pp. 5–9.

37 C. Cosins, Letter 34, 7 October 1832, in *English Immigrant Voices*, p. 63.

38 J. and H. Tilley, Letter No 83, 29 July 1833, in *English Immigrant Voices*, pp. 140–1.

39 *English Immigrant Voices*, p. xl.

information to would-be emigrants are important parts of the letters and many compare their new circumstances with their prior existence in England. At the time of writing the emigrants who had arrived poor were still poor. The people writing these letters were working for others or beginning the clearing of backwood farms. Poor emigrants also noted what they missed of England: the beer, the flowers, fruits and vegetables and of course the emotional support of friends and family.

Charlotte Erickson in her study of emigrant letters identifies a 'longing for leisure' and suggests that in the early nineteenth century it was an important motive for emigration to the United States.⁴⁰ Michael Vance has studied the letters of a group of impoverished Glasgow artisans who left Scotland for Canada in 1820. He believes it would be wrong to conclude that the Canadian emigrants were writing of a world and a promise of complete freedom from work on a par with landed aristocrats, but some possible leisure, along with individual autonomy, could be achieved in Canada.⁴¹ George Hills wrote to his parents confirming he had bettered his condition by emigrating to Canada.⁴² The emigrants commented also on the possibility of upward mobility, visible decline in social deference, the importance of the common table, the freedom to hunt and to travel freely for work, and these are the areas that I have concentrated on. These comments provide an invaluable means of understanding to a certain extent the priorities of the rural poor.⁴³ It is also important to note these are themes that were universal, and repeated in the letters of Scandinavian, German and Irish emigrants.⁴⁴ It is also significant that during the Swing riots the socio-economic demands of the protestors may have varied locally but increased employment opportunities, higher wages and changes to the poor relief system including more generous benefits were common demands,⁴⁵ and again these are some the issues highlighted in the emigrant letters.

⁴⁰ Erickson, *Invisible Immigrants*, p. 28.

⁴¹ M. Vance, 'Advancement Moral Worth and Freedom' in N.C. Landsman (ed.), *Nation Province in the first British Empire* (Lewisburg, 2001), p.155.

⁴² G. Hills, Letter No 16, 5 August 1832, in *English Immigrant Voices*, p.33.

⁴³ Erickson, *Invisible Immigrants*; D. Fitzpatrick, *Oceans of Consolation* (Ithaca and London, 1994); Richards, 'A Voice' and E. Richards, 'Voices of British and Irish Migrants in Nineteenth-Century Australia', in C. Pooley and I. Whyte (eds), *Migrants, Emigrants and Immigrants. A Social History of Migration* (London, 1991), p. 20; Vance, 'Advancement Moral Worth'.

⁴⁴ Vance, 'Advancement Moral Worth', p. 172; C. Erickson, *Leaving England. Essays on British Emigration in the Nineteenth Century* (Ithaca, 1994), pp. 54-6.

⁴⁵ R. Wells, 'Historical Trajectories. English Social Welfare Systems, Rural Riots, Popular Politics, Agrarian Trade Unions, and Allotment Provision, 1793 -1896', *Southern History* 25 (2003), 98.

In southern England, dependency on poor relief in the 1820s allowed little opportunity for social advancement or independence, whereas in Canada there were new opportunities. It is evident that individual autonomy and social advancement are key issues which can be identified in these letters, along with in descriptions of independence. George Hills wrote to his parents 'Dear father and mother, we left you almost broken-hearted, but you may be satisfied that we have bettered our condition by coming here'.⁴⁶ The same was said by Edward Longley who wrote 'I am at liberty to better my condition should the opportunity occur'.⁴⁷ William Taylor Upton echoed this sentiment in his letter written in 1832 'If trade is as bad as it was, anyone would do better in Canada, for here anyone can soon gain an independency'.⁴⁸ In Canada it was reported 'Those who have resolution for a year or two or three at most then become independent and have the sufficiency to support the largest family'.⁴⁹ Timothy Trusler stated 'I think you had better come to this country if you wish to be independent of any other man'.⁵⁰ William Tilley confirms the scarcity of work in England in the early 1830s and the restricted freedom of the agricultural labourer. In Canada 'A man has to live here by the work of his hands and not the assistance of the parish which they can do comfortably if they are steady. There is no fear of starving in this country; there is no beggars in this country'.⁵¹ Frank Mellish also commented that in Canada 'I like the country very well at present; it is far better than being beholden to the parish'.⁵² Simeon Titmouse claimed that 'Any stout, hard labouring man, with family, may do better in this country for them, than he can do at home. But remember he will have to work pretty hard and long days'.⁵³

The letters also reveal that a measure of competency could be achieved by access to land, enabling those of little means to hunt, fish, graze animals, cut timber and glean after harvest.⁵⁴ In Canada, of course, there was unrestricted access to vast tracts of land, and many of the letters clearly show the importance of the wide range of 'makeshift activities'. In 1833 James and William Goldring wrote home that 'We can get firing for

46 G. Hills, Letter No 16, 5 August 1832, in *English Immigrant Voices*, p. 33.

47 E. Longley, Letter No 106, 28 September 1835, in *English Immigrant Voices*, p. 202.

48 W. Taylor Upton, Letter No 26, 16 September 1832, in *English Immigrant Voices*, pp. 51-2.

49 Letter 30 August 1819, published in Vance, 'Advancement Moral Worth', p. 153.

50 T. Trusler, Letter No 105, 8 February 1836, in *English Immigrant Voices*, p. 198.

51 W. Tilley, Letter No 25, 16 September 1833, in *English Immigrant Voices*, pp. 50-1.

52 F. Mellish, Letter No 102, 8 November 1835, in *English Immigrant Voices*, p. 188.

53 S. Titmouse, Letter No 23, 11 September 1832, in *English Immigrant Voices*, p. 47.

54 D. Vickers, 'Competency and Competition: Economic Culture in Early America', *William and Mary Quarterly* 47 (1990), 13.

nothing here, that is a fine thing'.⁵⁵ Ann Thomas 'There is one great comfort here, we have as much wood as we like to burn'.⁵⁶ Ann and Charles Cosens wrote 'There is plenty of very fine wood here without any expense. We can get it any where by cutting it. We need not get cold'.⁵⁷ There were also opportunities to combine wage labour with the possibility of cultivating enough land to feed a family. Many letters include detailed references to the number of animals that the emigrants had been able to buy or graze on rented land. George Hills, a labourer with a wife and six children, wrote in 1832 'I have bought a cow for £5, and a young sow for 12s 6d'.⁵⁸ A year later James Helyer acquired 'a cow and calf for £5 7s, and four hogs for about £4'.⁵⁹ Cornelius Voice wrote 'Our cows and hogs cost nothing in the summer, they run in the woods and keep themselves'.⁶⁰

Some emigrants soon progressed to buying land in Canada, whereas in England this would have been impossible. In fact, Charles Cosens rented Redland farm and other lands in Dorking until April 1831. He left England as a pauper in 1832, along with his wife and thirteen family members, under the auspices of the Dorking Emigration Scheme. The following year his son, Cornelius Cosens wrote from Canada that 'you may buy land very cheap here'⁶¹ and in 1839 he was able to report that his father had moved to Huron Tract and 'They are on a farm of their own up there and we are in hopes will do pretty well'.⁶² William Phillips wrote to his mother and father in 1832, asking them to come to Canada 'And bring uncle Carpenter with you, and he, nor you will never repent coming here, for I can get you both a farm, if you want one; and you can earn money enough, in one year, to pay for it yourself'.⁶³

In their letters, many emigrants also referred to the scarcity of food in England, compared to the abundance in Canada. Charlotte and William Willard claimed 'Dear sister you know we could hardly get a taste of meat in England, but now we can roast a quarter of meat'.⁶⁴ John Worsfold, also from Dorking, commented that 'I have everything that I want; I may have beef steaks or other meat for breakfast and what I like to drink'.⁶⁵ Charlotte Willard could have been writing from the personal experience

55 J. and W. Goldring, Letter No 67, 9 April 1833, in *English Immigrant Voices*, p. 115.

56 A. Thomas, Letter No 37, 15 October 1832, in *English Immigrant Voices*, p. 69.

57 C. and A. Cosens, Letter 66, 31 March 1833, in *English Immigrant Voices*, p. 113.

58 G. Hills, Letter No 16, 5 August 1832, in *English Immigrant Voices*, p. 32.

59 J. Helyer, Letter No 90, 29 September 1833, in *English Immigrant Voices*, p. 152.

60 C. Voice, Letter No 101, 20 September 1835, in *English Immigrant Voices*, p. 185.

61 C. Cosens, Letter No 34, 7 October 1832, in *English Immigrant Voices*, p. 63.

62 C. Cosens Letter No 141, 28 September 1839, in *English Immigrant Voices*, p. 296.

63 W. Phillips, Letter No 11, 29 July 1832, in *English Immigrant Voices*, p. 23.

64 W. and C. Willard, Letter No 20, 26 August 1832, in *English Immigrant Voices*, p. 41.

65 J. Worsfold, Letter No 48, 1832, in *English Immigrant Voices*, p. 85.

of gleaning corn 'One good leaser could get a bushel of wheat a day, for they rake it in this country. There is no leasers in this country; in this country they let the hogs eat it'.⁶⁶ Charlotte also comments, 'I wish my poor father and friends was here, they would not want bread, I can assure you all'.⁶⁷ Thomas Adsett also commented on the abundance of food in Canada compared to England 'I wish that the poor people in England had the leavings of their table that goes to the dogs and hogs: they live better than most of the farmers in England'.⁶⁸

In Canada, there were no anti-poaching measures, and the emigrant letters reflect the resentment felt towards the English game laws. John Allen Tribe from Chiddingfold claimed 'This is a fine country, and a free country; you can go where you like here, and no one to hinder you; shoot anything as you see, of wild fowl. And here is plenty [of] deer'.⁶⁹ In 1832 John Worsfold wrote that 'There is plenty of deer, rabbits, pheasants, and pigeons to shoot at. It is a fine country to live in, for there is little danger of starving, and the country appears generally pretty well settled'.⁷⁰ William Pannell wrote 'We have plenty of game in America, plenty of deer, and turkeys, pheasants, partridge, and black squirrels and red squirrels'.⁷¹ With no fear of imprisonment James and William Goldring stated 'We have nobody to run over us here, and to order us out of their fields. We can take our gun, and go a deer hunting, when we likes'.⁷² William Spencer also wrote of his freedom to hunt 'There is more privileges here, than is with you: we can fish and fowl as much as we please, and none to make us afraid. There is no gamekeepers, or water keepers here'.⁷³ Edward and Catharine Boxall noted in their letter 'Here is a river runs through the corner of my lot, and plenty of fish in it; and here is wild deer, and turkeys, pheasants, partridges, and rabbits: and anybody may kill them'.⁷⁴

The letters also commented on indirect taxation. In 1832 Thomas Adsett reported 'there is little or no tax in Canada'⁷⁵ and in 1833 James Helyer wrote that 'there is one comfort enjoyed here, that taxes are a

66 W. and C. Willard, Letter No 20, 26 August 1832, in *English Immigrant Voices*, p. 41.

67 Ibid.

68 T. Adsett, Letter No 49, 21 December 1832, in *English Immigrant Voices*, pp. 87–8.

69 J. Allen Tribe, Letter No 36, 14 October 1832, in *English Immigrant Voices*, p. 67.

70 J. Worsfold, Letter, 15 December 1832, Barclay, *Letters from Dorking Emigrants*, pp. 35–8.

71 W. Pannell, Letter No 35, 14 October 1832, in *English Immigrant Voices*, p. 65.

72 J. and W. Goldring, Letter No 67, 9 April 1833, in *English Immigrant Voices*, p. 115.

73 W. Spencer, Letter No 125, 10 November 1836, in *English Immigrant Voices*, p. 240.

74 Edward and Catharine Boxall, Letter No 7, 28 July 1832, in *English Immigrant Voices*, p. 20.

75 T. Adsett, Letter 71, 25 June 1833, in *English Immigrant Voices*, p. 122.

mere trifle'.⁷⁶ George Carver stated 'People can make their own candles and soap without paying any duty; and we can make our own malt, and brew our beer, without paying any duty upon it'.⁷⁷ In a similar vein in 1835 George Coleman wrote, 'We make our candles, soap, and sugar. If I had room, I would tell you the process; but I have room to say, we have no excise man to interrupt us'.⁷⁸

Repeatedly, the letters emphasise that 'forms of self-presentation or action were limited by the social roles available to individuals, and by a strong awareness of the unequal distribution of power'.⁷⁹ In December 1835, after being in Canada for eighteen months, George Coleman wrote 'I am still at work for the same master that I began to work for the second day after I arrived, and not one angry word has passed between us as yet – something different from discharged twice in a fortnight. I speak my mind here the same as I did in England but the masters in this country love to hear the truth'.⁸⁰ When Thomas Adsett wrote, he commented 'We do not have to take a piece of dry bread, in our pockets, and go to our 6d. a day work here; but we go to eat with our master and mistress, and have the best that the world can afford of all kinds'.⁸¹ In 1833 George Carver commented 'It is no use of high spirited farmers wishing to come out to this country; for they will not get their servants to wait upon them as at home, and to sit down at a second table to eat their crumbs. The servant is made equal with his master, in all respects of that kind, and not treated as a great many of the light headed farmers at home treat them as dogs'.⁸² Richard Neal claimed that 'This is good country for one thing, the people are all of one sort, their servants lives with their masters, and they gets good wages'.⁸³ William and Charlotte Williard also noted this contrast with English farm life 'They don't put up dinners in this country, but they dine along with the masters and mistresses as you call them in England, but they, will not be called so here, they are equals-like, and if hired to anybody they call them their employers'.⁸⁴ Henry Heasman wrote 'Jack is as good as his master here. Masters are glad to get servants, and come to hire them: no running after masters'.⁸⁵ In 1836 Mary and Edward Burch

76 J. Helyer, Letter No 90, 29 September 1833, in *English Immigrant Voices*, p. 153.

77 G. Carver, Letter No 87, 18 August 1833, in *English Immigrant Voices*, p. 148.

78 G. Coleman, Letter No 103, 17 December 1835, in *English Immigrant Voices*, pp. 188–90.

79 French and Barry, 'Introduction', p. 28.

80 G. Coleman, Letter No 103, 17 December 1835, in *English Immigrant Voices*, p. 189.

81 T. Adsett, Letter No 61, 4 March 1833, in *English Immigrant Voices*, p. 107.

82 G. Carver, Letter No 87, 18 August 1833, in *English Immigrant Voices*, pp. 148–9.

83 R. Neal, Letter No 5, 20 July 1832, in *English Immigrant Voices*, p. 18.

84 W. and C. Willard, Letter No 20, 26 August 1832, in *English Immigrant Voices*, p. 39.

85 H. Heasman, Letter No 96, 19 October 1834, in *English Immigrant Voices*, p. 167.

commented 'I should like to hear of my old master, tell him this is a good place for farmers, but they must not think to do here as they do at home, telling men if they do not like it they may go, for the masters here must humble more to the men, than the men to the master'.⁸⁶ William and Jane More stated 'We like the country much, as labouring people are much more comfortable, and are more looked upon here'.⁸⁷ All these comments show more favourable social relations in Canada.

A certain bitterness can be detected in these letters when emigrants reflect on how they were treated as workers in England. Writing from Canada, George Coleman referred to the way the 'deserving poor' were relieved in Canada, compared to the treatment previously received in England 'I have not been able through illness to work for five weeks; but, thanks to Providence, I am fast recovering, and now have not to meet the frowns of the overseer, and be called a poor pauper, but I am looked upon, and receive kindness without grudging'.⁸⁸ Of course, in Canada labour was at a premium and boarding-in of labourers was common and with it there seems to have been a much greater sense of equality. In Upper Canada it was usual for farmers to have hired help for the year and it was common practice for employers to provide labouring families with housing. Ann and Charles Cosens wrote 'The working man is thought just as much of as his master. We are not obliged to set down to a piece of bread and hard cheese. The table is set all the time, loaded like as though there was feasting'.⁸⁹ This is reflected in William Voice's letter 'Father is working at the squire's, and John and Trap, and they have their dinner every day along with the squire and daughter, sits down after they have done to the same'.⁹⁰ George Hills noted 'Farmers and labourers all sit at one table here. We get 5s per day English money [in harvest] and be boarded'.⁹¹

In England many labourers protested that parochial relief was often inadequate to keep a man and family. The prevailing attitude in rural England that able-bodied pauperism was due to indolence on the part of the pauper, and dependence on poor relief had weakened the labourer's sense of independence, was also reflected in the attitude to emigration. According to this argument, only those people with an entrepreneurial spirit would be prepared to work and succeed, for the idle and feckless

86 M. and E. Birch, Letter No 107, 13 April 1836, in *English Immigrant Voices*, p. 205.

87 W. and J. Moore, Letter No 89, 5 September 1833, in *English Immigrant Voices*, p. 151.

88 George Coleman, Letter No 103, 17 December 1835, in *English Immigrant Voices*, p. 189.

89 C. and A. Cosens, Letter No 66, 31 March 1833, in *English Immigrant Voices*, p. 114.

90 W. Voice, Letter No 98, 27 October 1834, in *English Immigrant Voices*, p. 172.

91 G. Hills, Letter No 16, 5 August 1832, in *English Immigrant Voices*, p. 33.

would not be attracted to emigration. The poor law commissioners believed:

'The same causes which those who are dependent on the poor-rates, listless in seeking employment at home, render them unwilling to undergo the temporary privations and inconvenience which must attend their settlement in another country. Those persons are generally most forward to emigrate who are least corrupted by the abuses of the system of relief. Those are most willing to remain a burthen to their parishes who are most thoroughly profligate and useless'.⁹²

C.H. Maclean in 1834 commented that of those who left under the auspices of the Petworth scheme 'the majority were considered men of excellent character and such as were likely to do well anywhere'.⁹³ On the other hand, speaking of a number of the Dorking emigrants:

'Many of them had been chargeable, and many were of indifferent character. If chargeable these paupers would go, the parish would be willing to raise a large sum; but this class of persons naturally prefer an idle but certain dependence on the parish at home, to an uncertain independence abroad, to be procured by industry and good conduct'.⁹⁴

The letters written by the Longhurst and Cosens families, all of whom emigrated from Dorking, refute this claim and show that these people were prepared to work hard to succeed. Rebecca Longhurst wrote to her mother in October 1832, shortly after arrival in Upper Canada 'We like the country very well and we have all plenty of work'⁹⁵ and Cornelius Cosens 'I can earn plenty of money here at any work'.⁹⁶

By the 1820s the depression in agriculture and the increase in the population in southern England had created almost a permanent, pauperised workforce. Able-bodied men, hitherto only forced to go to the parish in times of sickness were now becoming regular recipients of relief. In fact, the situation was made worse after the three consecutive poor harvests of 1828–1830 which, by reducing peak earnings at harvest time, jeopardised the customary source for labourers to meet annual Michaelmas house-rent payments and buy replacement clothing and

92 British Parliamentary Papers [hereafter BPP], Report of the Royal Commission on Poor Laws [hereafter PLCR] 1834, Extracts from information received Poor Law Commissioners 1834 XXVII, p. 355.

93 BPP, PLCR Appendix A part I XXVIII Assistant Commissioners Report for Surrey C.H. Maclean, p. 574A.

94 Ibid.

95 R. Longhurst, Letter 31, 4 October 1832, in *English Immigrant Voices*, p. 61.

96 C. Cosens, Letter No 34, 7 October 1832, in *English Immigrant Voices*, p. 63.

footwear for their families. As Moses Duck, an assistant overseer for the parish of Egham in Surrey noted, labourers were unable 'to pay their rent and furnish clothes'.⁹⁷ In 1829 a petition was presented to the House of Commons from the inhabitants of Middlesex and Surrey 'deeply affected with the prevalence of national distress, especially the alarming privations of the industrious classes of the community'.⁹⁸ Mr Martin, a surgeon of forty years standing in Reigate, stressed the 'increasing degradation and wretchedness of the farming labourers' as a result of 'the disproportion between the wages of labour and the prices of the necessaries of life'.⁹⁹

Life for the agricultural day labourer was precarious men were laid off in inclement weather with no pay. An incomplete but extensive survey of Sussex parishes undertaken for the Duke of Richmond in 1831–32 identified 3,283 able-bodied labourers out of work that winter.¹⁰⁰ Across southern England many parishes adopted labour schemes which operated in winter months to provide unemployed labourers with some work. In Surrey Charles Barclay, chairman of the Dorking vestry, complained that 'During the winters of 1831 and 1832 there were constantly between seventy and eighty persons employed by this parish, either upon the roads or in the gravel pits'.¹⁰¹ In 1833 the depressed state of the labour market meant that in the parish of Ewhurst, owing to sickness, bad weather and scarcity of employment, a labourer would be without work 'from eight to twelve weeks in a year'.¹⁰² Mr Drewitt, a farmer from Guildford, reported on the increase of unemployed labourers in the area and Mr Smallpiece from Cobham commented 'now we have a great number of surplus labourers'.¹⁰³ By the late 1820s, the English labourers' 'spirit of independence and self-respect' may well have become numb, as increasing numbers of them found that their only source of income was parish poor relief.¹⁰⁴ Thus, in time of want, the labourer depended entirely on the goodwill of the employer and on the parish. William Cobbett commented in 1830 that 'No human being were ever before treated so unjustly with so much insolence and with such damnable

97 BPP, PLCR, Rural Queries for Surrey Appendix B Part 1XXX [hereafter Rural Queries] Replies Question 10, Moses Duck p.479a.

98 TNA, *Journal of the House of Commons* 1829, Vol. 85.

99 Surrey History Centre [hereafter SHC], 325/1/2, 'Letter from Dr Martin to the committee of the Useful Knowledge Society 1829'.

100 WSRO, Goodwood MS 671, f. 8, MS 1456, f. 87.

101 Barclay, *Letters from Dorking Emigrants*, p. 6.

102 BPP, PLCR Rural Queries, Replies to Question 10 Reply Ewhurst p.480a.

103 BPP, Select Committee into the Present State of Agricultural V [hereafter SC] 1833.

104 Lord Ernle, *English Farming* (London, reprint 1963), p. 329.

barbarity as the working people of England have been within the sixteen and particularly the last ten years'.¹⁰⁵

By the 1820s writers also bemoan the weakening of old attachments and relationships. Both John Clare and Cobbett lamented the end of the old social order, but this was different from the recurring 'generational tendency to bemoan a more harmonious rural past'.¹⁰⁶ Between 1820 and 1824 Clare wrote *The Parish: A Satire* in which he expressed his sadness at the end of the old social order of the farmers and labourer working and living alongside each other. He identified a breakdown in the social order, partly because farmers 'hate their farms and ape the country squires'.¹⁰⁷ William Cobbett also commented on the practice of farmers withdrawing from labour and no longer identifying with their workers. He wrote a great deal on the demise of the free and easy relationship between master and worker. He complained that 'Since the pianofortes and the parlour bells and carpets come into the farmhouse the lot of the labourers has been growing worse and worse'.¹⁰⁸ The growing luxury of the farmers and the widening social gulf between them Cobbett blamed for the decline of the common meal at the common table of farmer and labourer, which symbolised the old system.¹⁰⁹ French and Barry have observed the importance of identity, formation and agency in society that was influenced by the experience of constraint.¹¹⁰ The letters confirm that in England many labourers had felt a growing sense of alienation and social isolation in the face of the hostility and disapproval of the propertied classes and the restrictions imposed on them.

In England it appears the commonality between labourers and farmers was being lost. As a result, the rural agricultural worker experienced a growing feeling of isolation. The traditional rights of the poor were being eroded and this resulted in a breakdown of the relationship between labourer and employer.¹¹¹ Snell notes the deterioration in social relations in southern agriculture with the changing conditions in employment and wage payments for the poor.¹¹² Many farmer labourers had become essentially casual labourers, hired and dismissed at will, which further weakened the ties that had traditionally bound the farm servant to his employer. In 1828 the select committee on parochial settlement urged

105 W. Cobbett, *Two Penny Trash*, 1 November 1830.

106 Snell, 'Deferential Bitterness', p. 165.

107 J.W. Tibble and A. Tibble, *John Clare Selected Poems* (London, 1984), p. 140.

108 W. Cobbett, *Political Register*, 22 December 1832.

109 W. Cobbett, *Rural Rides* (London, reprint 1985), pp. 227–9.

110 French and Barry, 'Introduction', p. 23.

111 E.P. Thompson, *Customs in Common* (London, 1993), pp. 185–258.

112 Snell, *Annals*, p. 69.

the abolition of casual hiring 'to revive that almost forgotten but excellent practice of domesticating the agricultural labourer in the establishment of his employer and thereby improve the moral feelings, industrious habits and real comforts of the poorer classes'.¹¹³ William Cobbett commented that in a farm house he visited in Reigate in 1825 'There appeared to have been hardly any *family* in that house, where formerly there were, in all probability, from ten to fifteen men, boys and maids: and, which was the worst of all, there was a *parlour*!'¹¹⁴ Wells believes that Cobbett painted 'far too rosy a picture'¹¹⁵ of living-in, and gives examples of farmers and their wives exercising 'tyrannical powers in their households'.¹¹⁶ In the letters, emigrants note how they valued dining along with their employers, and a certain bitterness is evident when emigrants reflect on how they were treated as workers in England before their departure to Canada.

In England, the issue of access to land for the labouring rural poor, together with the game laws, caused a great deal of tension and ill feeling between rich and poor. For most cottagers, enclosure meant not only the loss of land on which to grow crops, but also a decline in the ownership of livestock, the loss of a cow or pig. It seems clear in southern England that small farmers, and even labourers, were able to sustain agricultural undertakings by the use of commons and by sub-letting small plots of lands for planting.¹¹⁷ Leigh Shaw-Taylor does not accept enclosure had a widespread effect on agricultural labourers but he accepts it is not possible to assess directly the overall impact of enclosure on labourers' total income, as the loss of fuel rights was significant and the numbers affected may have been considerable.¹¹⁸ Jeremy Burchardt also supports the Hammonds' view that enclosure had a serious effect on the income of the poor through 'the loss of the minor rights of common, whether exercised legally or illegally'.¹¹⁹ Snell also notes that the enclosure movement was

113 BPP, SC On The Law of Parochial Settlements, IV 1828, p. 1.

114 Cobbett, *Rural Rides*, pp. 226–7.

115 R. Wells, 'The Moral Economy and the English countryside' in A. Randall and A. Charlesworth (eds) *Moral Economy and Popular Protest Crowds Conflict and Authority* (Basingstoke, 2000), p. 222.

116 Wells, 'The Moral Economy', p. 222

117 M. Reed, 'The Peasantry of Nineteenth-Century England. A Neglected Class?', *History Workshop Journal* 18 (1984), 53–76.

118 L. Shaw-Taylor, 'Parliamentary Enclosure and the Emergence of the an English Agricultural Proletariat', *Journal of Economic History* 61 (2001), 644; L. Shaw-Taylor, 'Labourers, Cows, Common Rights and Parliamentary Enclosure: the Evidence of Contemporary Comment c. 1760–1810', *Past and Present* 171 (2001), 95–126.

119 Burchardt, *The Allotment*, p. 9; J.M. Neeson, *Commoners: Common Right, Enclosure and Social Change in England, 1700–1820* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 158–84.

another factor 'aggravating social ill-feeling', and resulted in higher poor relief costs.¹²⁰ Wales observed that the minority who could mobilize rights of pasture were significantly less likely to burden the parish.¹²¹ Charles Jerram of Chobham estimated access to the common for the labourer was worth about £2 a year for firing alone.¹²² Of course these resources were not valuable enough to confer independence for labourers, but make up part of the economy of makeshifts whereby labour raised income in a variety of ways. Historians are now focusing on the rich variety of makeshifts employed by the labouring poor in England to survive in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Work which includes day labour and casual jobs, paid with cash and in kind, poor relief, formal charity and common rights (which involve keeping cows or pigs and gleaning) 'were at the core of this economy of expedients and welfare'.¹²³ Recent work on the economy of makeshifts has shown that poor relief was only one element in the wider strategies deployed by individuals and families to survive.¹²⁴ What is evident is that the loss of 'makeshift activities', including grazing rights, cow, pig and geese keeping, as well as fuel collection, had a detrimental effect on the independence of the poor.¹²⁵ Humphries recently has shown the value for the poor of these activities.¹²⁶ By the 1830s, the weakening of the economy of makeshifts led to more substantial life-cycle and point-in-time poverty than had previously been experienced. These changes inevitably led to a substantial increase in the proportion of labouring families dependent on poor relief. Increasingly, out-relief became a vital element in the maintenance of the household economy of the poor. It is also evident from the letters how highly valued the emigrants rated these 'makeshift

120 Snell, 'Deferential Bitterness', p.167; Snell, *Annals*, pp. 138–227.

121 T. Wales, 'Poverty, Poor Relief and the Life-Cycle. Some Evidence from Seventeenth-Century Norfolk', in R. Smith (ed.), *Land, Kinship and Life-Cycle* (Cambridge, 1984), pp. 370–8.

122 BPP, Charles Jerram, Rural Queries, Evidence Question 10 p.477a.

123 S. Williams, 'Earnings, Poor Relief and the Economy of Makeshifts. Bedfordshire in the Early Years of the New Poor Law', *Rural History* 16 (2005), 21.

124 King and Tomkins (eds), *The Poor in England*; Hitchcock, King and Sharpe, 'Introduction' in *Chronicle of Poverty*, pp. 1–18.

125 P. King, 'Gleaners, Farmers and the Failure of Legal Sanctions in England 1750–1850', *Past and Present* 125 (1989), 116–50; E.L. Jones, 'The Agricultural Labour Market in England 1793–1872', *Economic History Review* 17 (1964), 324–6; Williams, 'Earnings, Poor Relief', 21–52; M. Hanly, 'The Economy of Makeshifts and the Role of the Poor Law: a Game of Chance?' in King and Tomkins (eds), *The Poor in England*, pp. 76–99.

126 J. Humphries, 'Enclosure Common Rights and Women: The Proletarianisation of Families in the late Eighteenth and early Nineteenth Centuries', *Journal of Economic History* 50 (1990), 17–42.

activities', which helped them in Canada to achieve a certain competency, by having access to land which assisted them in maintaining a better quality of life.

To achieve a certain independence and self-sufficiency, the ownership of livestock was also important.¹²⁷ Arthur Young estimated the value of a cow to family at as much as 5s-6s a week.¹²⁸ More recently, Humphries has calculated that at the end of the eighteenth century the produce of a cow over the course of a year was worth almost half as much as the wages of a fully employed male agricultural labourer.¹²⁹ Shaw-Taylor has noted from his research that the loss of pasture rights as a result of enclosure only affected a relatively small proportion of labourers,¹³⁰ but the letters do illustrate how highly valued the ownership of livestock was. Many emigrants, once in Canada, were anxious to acquire livestock, and their letters' give detailed references to the numbers they had been able to buy and stress, were able to graze freely in summer time. This, of course, would give them considerable independence of wage labour, which they did not have in England.

These letters home then provide the historian with valuable insights into life in England at a time when the emigrants departed for Canada. Many day labourers in England by the 1820s had found themselves socially segregated and unprotected against unemployment and price fluctuations. There is evidence of a demoralized rural labour force dependent on parish work, and a growing resentment towards farmers who were not only their employers but were also those who 'controlled the vestry, made poor law policy and took decisions respecting individual claimants'.¹³¹ The letters reflect the low wages, the grievances connected with under-employment and the isolation felt by many labourers when they compare their standard of living in Canada to what they have left behind in England. They highlight the major concerns of the poor labourers back at home and enable the historian to glimpse into the rural world of the poor. Most of those who left on the treacherous journey across the Atlantic never returned. As George Hills wrote, 'Dear father and mother, we left you almost broken-hearted, but you may be satisfied that we have bettered our condition by coming here'.¹³²

127 Snell, *Annals*, pp. 174-6.

128 Young, *An inquiry*, pp. 6-9, 14, 102.

129 Humphries, 'Enclosures Common Rights', 17-42.

130 Shaw-Taylor, 'Parliamentary enclosure' p. 659; Shaw-Taylor, 'Labourers, Cows, Common Rights', 95-126.

131 Wells, 'Historical Trajectories', p. 89.

132 G. Hills, Letter No 16, 5 August 1832, in *English Immigrant Voices*, p.33.