

Forty Years of Rural History from Below: Captain Swing and the Historians

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Four decades have now passed since the first appearance of Eric Hobsbawm and George Rudé's ground-breaking study of the agricultural labourers' rebellion of 1830, *Captain Swing*. As an addition to the newly developing literature of 'history from below', the book complemented E.P. Thompson's earlier *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), but arose more directly from Rudé's existing interest in crowd studies and Hobsbawm's with the insurgencies of 'primitive rebels'. It was an important corrective. Even after revisiting his short chapter on field labourers for the 1968 second edition of *The Making of the English Working Class*, to 'clarify the argument', Thompson's engagement with Swing came and went in less than four pages and he was quite prepared to admit that the chapter remained 'inadequate to its theme'.¹ In 1969 then, Hobsbawm and Rudé were the first to adapt the agency-driven methodology of the new social history to events in rural England. In this special edition of *Southern History*, we re-assess the book's influence and importance.

The Swing rebellion had attracted little previous attention from any historian, but as they quickly acknowledged, one solitary 'classic of modern social history', originally published in 1911, stood out as an exception. This was J.L. and Barbara Hammonds' *The Village Labourer*, a deeply sympathetic account of English agricultural workers between the mid-eighteenth century and the passing of the Great Reform Act. While the Hammonds had done much to rescue village labourers from historical obscurity however, devoting two full chapters to Swing in the process, their analysis of its cause, its extent and its nature was comparatively thin and the book's undisguised indignation at the labourers' lot sat uneasily

1 E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1968), p. 916.

with its scholarship. The background against which the great drama of Swing was enacted was, in the Hammonds' hands, one in which the complexities of under-employment, poor law dependency, rising crime, plummeting wages and social degradation were collapsed into the neat shorthand terminologies of 'Speenhamland' and 'enclosure'. Hobsbawm and Rudé were neither the first nor the last to find fault with that, and certainly many of *The Village Labourer's* rhetorical flourishes lack objectivity, but we should perhaps remember that the Hammonds wrote at a time when the conservative complacency of much academic history permitted similarly partisan outbursts from their critics to appear reasonable. *The Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, for example, disliked their account of the punishments meted out by the Swing Special Commissions, not because it lacked detail but because 'the barbarity of the penalties which the law then authorised for comparatively trivial offences is insisted on as if it were a special terror of the landowning system, instead of being a manifestation of the brutal spirit of the day, developed in a desperately mistaken, but still sincere, theory of the punishment and prevention of crime'.²

Whatever its shortcomings, Hobsbawm and Rudé were fully conscious of writing in *The Village Labourer's* shadow. 'Virtually all subsequent references to the rising in general historical works are based on the Hammonds', they wrote, 'and what little is known of it by the general public is what is known of their book'. Moreover, they acknowledged a methodological debt. For beyond attempting a thorough and rigorous record of the events themselves, *Captain Swing* was driven by an objective 'which nowadays – and rightly – tempts many social historians, of reconstructing the mental world of an anonymous and undocumented body of people in order to understand their movements, themselves only sketchily documented'. It was as pioneers and practitioners in the new social history 'from below' that Hobsbawm and Rudé noted the insights acquired by the Hammonds' 'fairly systematic use of the then neglected Home Office papers in the Public Record Office which remain to this day the major source for our knowledge of early nineteenth century social

2 J. L. Hammond and Barbara Hammond, *The Village Labourer, 1760–1832: A Study in the Government of England before the Reform Bill* (London 1911); R.H.R., Review of 'The Village Labourer', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society* 75 (1912), 440. The book's geographical conservatism led to its being dubbed by Andrew Charlesworth, 'The Southern English Village Labourer', its legacy an agricultural history 'shot through with southern English insularity': 'An Agenda for Historical Studies of Rural Protest in Britain, 1750–1850', *Rural History* 2 (1991), 238.

agitations'. Indeed, as one anonymous review of the *Village Labourer* noted in 1912, the authoritative detail with which the Hammonds approached Swing was due in no small part to their use of 'Home Office papers, now drawn upon for the first time'.³

To Marxist historians, the Hammonds' shortcomings lay in their Edwardian 'Liberal radicalism', and a discourse shaped by what Hobsbawm would elsewhere call 'moral and other non-material territories'. Essentially, in taking too static a view of class divisions, they had failed to address 'the interaction between the social-economic base and the ideology of various social strata'. By contrast, Hobsbawm and Rudé noted the degraded condition of many small farmers and craft producers and were unsurprised to find them playing an often prominent role in Swing crowds. Although a simple three-class model of landowners, tenant farmers and labourers had been established in much of the countryside since at least the middle of the eighteenth century, the severe depression of the years following the close of the Napoleonic War fractured this traditional model into a more complex triumvirate: landowners, bourgeois capitalist farmers, and then the rest, including small farmers and labourers, whose social and economic marginalism now permitted the discovery of common cause. Swing was therefore to be read as a moment of importance in the 'making' of class at a transformative moment in productive relations. During the early nineteenth century, they argued, the labourer was effectively proletarianised, stripped of his customary rights, under-employed and pauperised while, crucially, 'the nature of his labour and the rural society in which he lived and starved, deprived him even of the relative freedom of the urban and industrial poor' to organise effective resistance. If the Hammonds irritated Tawney for 'writing at times as though the fall of man occurred during the reign of George III', Hobsbawm and Rudé's revisionism was credited by several early reviewers for wearing its anticipated Marxism lightly. They approached *Captain Swing* without hyperbole, avoided reductionist explanatory models based loosely upon enclosure and the poor law, and embraced the systematic collection of quantitative data, which formed its empirical core. By these means, for

3 E.J. Hobsbawm and G. Rudé, *Captain Swing* (London 1969), pp. 13–14. All subsequent references to this book refer to the original 1969 edition unless otherwise stated; E.P., Review of 'The Village Labourer', *The American Political Science Review* 6 (1912), 296. Hobsbawm would later dedicate an essay, 'On History from Below' to Rudé as a 'distinguished pioneer' in the discipline in F. Kantz (ed.), *History from Below: Studies on Popular Protest and Popular Ideology* (Oxford, 1988).

example, they were able dispassionately to show that roughly half of those parishes in the sample that had been recently enclosed had not, in fact, taken any part in Swing.⁴

Understanding collective resistance to proletarianisation in 1830 as backward looking and obstructed by an absence of ideology, was not, however, to deny agency. The consequent emphasis placed in *Captain Swing* upon the agency of the rural poor, so vital to the working out of the new history from below, irritated and alarmed some early reviewers. Gertrude Himmelfarb, a practiced critic of social history in all its forms, was worried that in Hobsbawm and Rudé's hands, 'the victims of history have become its principal agents and actors', a potentially distorting process in which 'Village Labourers' became magically transformed into rather less neutral 'rebels' and 'crowds'. Less equivocally, E.L. Jones thought they had 'subordinated the mechanical but compelling facts of population pressure and sluggish industrial growth too much to the purely social decisions which made for rural under-employment and poverty', while G.E. Mingay complained at the 'exaggerated emphasis (given) to the symptoms of the problem' and a 'neglect of the underlying causes' (low wages and a superabundance of labour).⁵ Further, if the proletarianisation thesis in *Captain Swing* has been taken up and developed by some recent historians, chiefly Roger Wells, it has been criticised by others, such as Alun Howkins, for simply substituting one over-simplification with another, particularly for its assumed corollary, a 'proletarian consciousness', distinct from the world view of the rural elite.⁶ Debates over rural proletarianisation and its relationship to consciousness and ideology may seem less cogent today than they did in 1969, but we should remember that Hobsbawm and Rudé were also contributing to theoretical arguments ongoing at the time in English Marxism. It was a function of the quantitative nature of the methodology driving *Captain Swing* that many of these criticisms arose in the first place, and certainly the broad-brush analyses that flowed from it did not come to define the new history from below in later years. In *Captain Swing*, thought Patricia Hollis, 'we have a fine and definitive anatomy of

4 Hobsbawm and Rudé, *Captain Swing*, pp. 13–19, 180; R.H. Tawney, J. L. Hammond, *1872–1949* (London, 1961), p. 13. For Hobsbawm's critique of the Hammonds' 'feeble' defence of pessimistic accounts of industrialization against the potisivism of J.H. Clapham and others, see his *Labouring Men: Studies in the history of labour* (London 1964), p. 68.

5 G. Himmelfarb, 'The Writing of Social History: Recent Studies of 19th Century England', *Journal of British Studies* 11 (1971), 149; E.L. Jones, *Economic History Review* 22 (1969), 354–55; G.E. Mingay, Review of 'Captain Swing', *English Historical Review* 85 (1970), 810–14.

the riots, but we still know very little about the rural poor'. In 1969, the extent to which a strong structural and sociological framework would guide the methodologies of either the new social history or history from below remained uncertain, but as John Brewer has recently suggested, signs of an 'uneasy tension' between *Annales* and micro approaches had been discernible from at least 1966.⁷ With hindsight, we may conclude that history from below has developed more substantively as a qualitative discipline, distrustful of statistical analysis as a tool for exploring popular *mentalités* and quotidian life. Significantly, E.P. Thompson's admiration for Captain Swing was qualified by a concern that its dispassionate analytical rigour left readers to view events only 'through a slight haze and at a great distance'.⁸ We might argue indeed that it was Thompson rather than Hobsbawm and Rudé who inherited most from the qualitative polemic of the Hammonds. In its profound suspicion of both theory with a capital 'T' and of quantitative econometrics, as much as in its compensatory fascination with the cultural turn, Thompson's work, thought Raphael Samuel, might best 'be seen as a vast elaboration of their original insights'. Indeed, Thompson had made his hostility to quantitative approaches to the history of labour perfectly clear in a benchmark manifesto for history from below published in the *Times Literary Supplement* three years earlier.⁹ Nevertheless, *Captain Swing* remains a foundation text in the development of history from below and, for that matter, the replacement of old 'plough and cow' agricultural histories by the new rural history, with its greater emphasis upon the social, the folkloric, and the regional.¹⁰

- 6 R. Wells, 'The Development of the English Rural Proletariat and Social Protest, 1700–1850', *Journal of Peasant Studies* 6 (1979); A. Howkins, 'Labour History and the Rural Poor', *Rural History* 1 (1990), 117–18.
- 7 John Brewer, 'Microhistories and the Histories of Everyday Life', *Cultural and Social History* 7 (2010), 89–90.
- 8 Hobsbawm and Rudé, *Captain Swing* (Harmondsworth, 1972), p. xv; P. Hollis, Review of 'Captain Swing', *History* 54 (1969), 434.
- 9 For Samuel's comment see the excellent appraisal of the Hammonds' work in David Sutton, 'Radical Liberalism, Fabianism and social history' in R. Johnson, G. McLennan, B. Schwarz and D. Sutton (eds), *Making Histories: Studies in History Writing and Politics* (Minnesota, 1982). E.P. Thompson, 'History from below', *Times Literary Supplement*, 7 April 1966.
- 10 On the new rural history, see L. Bellamy, K.D.M. Snell and T. Williamson, 'Rural History: the Prospect Before Us', *Rural History* 1 (1990), 1. In this sense, rural history has inherited the concerns of the now not-so-new social history; 'the history of social relationships and the culture and of the culture which informs them', as Keith Wrightson expressed it in the same edition of that journal, in 'The Enclosure of English Social History', 73.

For all their quantitative imprecision, the Hammonds had identified sufficient Swing incidents to note the unprecedented scale of the revolt, and they devoted the final quarter of their book to an analysis of its significance. However, by attempting, for the first time, a comprehensive count of Swing incidents as well as the creation of a typology of protest, Hobsbawm and Rudé undoubtedly advanced our understanding of the rising's significance and exposed the relative conservatism of previous scholarship. They re-counted incidents and re-mapped the geography, for even Thompson had realised that Swing 'extended more widely into East Anglia and the Midlands, as well as the southern counties, and lasted longer than is apparent from the Hammonds' account'. Yet, as Barry Reay has recently pointed out, Hobsbawm and Rudé 'underestimated its sheer scale' too, in terms of both its incidence and its spread. This observation was borne out by the findings of the Family and Community History Research Society's (FACHRS) exhaustive survey in 2005, which almost doubled *Captain Swing's* tally of incidents by increasing it from 1475 to 3283.¹¹ Arguments over the ways and means of counting and measuring Swing have been a constant feature of research over the last forty years and they show little sign of abating yet. Moreover, even without going into the difficulties presented firstly by the patchy nature of the historical record, and secondly by uncertainties over the definition of a 'Swing incident', a necessary subsidiary discussion about the relevance of counting things *per se* has been unavoidable. Has further digging and retrieving significantly enhanced what we know about Swing's epicentres, its spatial diffusion, or its social impact? As Gordon Mingay noted in 1969, the Hammonds' survey revealed a 'rising' which began in Kent in November 1830, spread into Sussex and parts of Surrey in the same month, then moved outwards by way of Berkshire, Hampshire and Wiltshire, 'westward to Dorset and Gloucestershire and northward to Bucks', before infecting parts of Oxfordshire, Norfolk, Suffolk, Essex, Cambridgeshire, Northamptonshire and the North: 'Hayricks began to blaze as far north as Carlisle'. Their estimation of incidence may have been crude and incomplete, but for all their 'neglect of the serious outbreaks of unrest in Norfolk, Lincolnshire and Huntingdonshire', wrote Mingay, 'the new statistics show that they were not unsound in stressing the dominant role of the southernmost counties'. And despite demonstrating a considerably more generous scattering of incidents into

11 Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, pp.250–51; Barry Reay, *Rural England: Labouring Lives in the Nineteenth Century* (Basingstoke, 2004), p. 149; M. Holland, (ed.), *Swing Unmasked: The Agricultural Riots of 1830 to 1832 and their Wider Implications* (Milton Keynes, 2005), p. 5.

the midland and northern counties, even the revised Swing map produced by the FACHRS shows the highest concentration to fall south of a line drawn between Hampshire and the Wash.¹²

Hobsbawm and Rudé's quantificatory turn brought immediate approval in some quarters, most notably perhaps from hard-nosed economic historians dismissive of the Hammonds' emotive 'guestimates'. For E.L. Jones for example, the Hammonds had relied too heavily upon 'polemic or microscopic local studies purporting to convey the feel of events which are in truth beyond reliable recall'. Yet many of the problems we continue to rehearse today over quantitative studies, were also noticed at the time, and not least by Jones himself. No sooner had Richard Cobb confidently declared, 'It is unlikely that any village in which there was any activity at all that could be even vaguely associated with Swing has been omitted', than Jones cheerfully pointed out the omission of at least two incidents at Chilbolton in Hampshire.¹³

More theoretical difficulties were raised by Richard Hawkins, Gertrude Himmelfarb and the hyper-critical Mingay. Of concern to Hawkins were the unavoidable generalisations that arose from any analysis of so disparate and vast a body of data. No book could contain sufficient pages to adequately explore each incident for causal and typological distinctions, yet the particular parochial circumstances that surrounded most Swing events made such explorations essential. In the broad strokes of Captain Swing's analysis, local and regional nuances were all but lost. 'The disposition of a parish to riot in 1830 seems, as one might expect, to have been determined by local factors', he noted, 'of which we shall almost certainly remain ignorant, and which hardly lend themselves to generalization'.¹⁴ And the broader the brush strokes, the more Swing began (perhaps too conveniently) to resemble a coherent social 'movement'. This greatly troubled Himmelfarb. George Rudé's determination 'to assign precise figures where the Hammonds made do with adjectives unwittingly gives the impression of greater activity on the part of greater numbers', she suggested.¹⁵ Mingay, on the other hand, virtually inferred that Hobsbawm and Rudé had massaged their own figures by counting as a separate incident every appearance of a crowd in

12 Hammond and Hammond, *Village Labourer*, pp. 258, 268–69; G.E. Mingay, Review of 'Captain Swing', *English Historical Review* 85 (1970), 810–14; Holland (ed.), *Swing Unmasked*, p. 6.

13 R. Cobb, 'A Very English Rising', *Times Literary Supplement*, 11 September 1969; E.L. Jones, *Economic History Review* 22 (1969), 354–55.

14 R. Hawkins, Review of 'Captain Swing', *Historical Journal* 12 (1969), 716–17.

15 Himmelfarb, 'The Writing of Social History', 149.

a village, even though it may have been a single crowd, on a single day, visiting a variety of locations. By these means, a village might be identified as a centre of discontent, whatever the origins of the crowd. Further, a single crowd might, in the course of a day, enact several incidents, of more than one 'type', thereby increasing the number of incidents but not the number of perpetrators, and might arguably be better interpreted as a single evolving event. The fact that Hobsbawm and Rudé recognised these problems but consigned them to a relatively unimportant footnote was enough to convince Mingay that the work was flawed at source.¹⁶ Happily, the historiography of Swing over the last forty years has not centred exclusively upon the difficulty of counting things, but at least two recurrent questions have been closely related to the problem: firstly, are all expressions of rural dissent between August 1830 and February 1832¹⁷ (or any other parameters) to be counted as 'Swing incidents', and secondly, are we to assume their inter-relationship (that is, do they necessarily cohere to make a social movement)?

One of *Captain Swing's* great strengths lay in its introduction of a quantitative typology of protest, revising earlier assumptions that Swing was all about threshing machines. Hobsbawm himself had first approached the rising in those more limited terms as far back as 1952, concluding in 'The Machine Breakers' that Swing was 'essentially a major offensive against farm machinery', and Thompson had confirmed it in *The Making of the English Working Class*, where 'the main assault was on the threshing machine'. Rudé revised this view in *The Crowd in History* (1964), which drew fresh attention to local variation and regarded the breaking of threshing machines as simply 'the spark that set the movement off'. A further refinement followed in 1967 when research for *Captain Swing* was almost concluded. Now Rudé was at pains to emphasise other kinds of action, from threatening letters, assaults and robberies to tithe, enclosure and food riots, 'and, in every one of the twenty-five counties affected, there was rick-burning and the firing of farms, barns and country mansions'.¹⁸

Incendiarism then, has occupied a central position in any subsequent consideration of Swing typology. Back in 1969, Richard Cobb sounded

16 Mingay, Review of 'Captain Swing', 810–14.

17 These dates assume a starting point with the destruction of the first threshing machine at Lower Hardres in Kent and an end point at the close of the Special Commissions.

18 E.J. Hobsbawm, 'The Machine Breakers', *Past & Present* 1 (1952), 58; Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, p. 252; G. Rudé, *The Crowd in History: A Study of Popular Disturbances in France and England, 1730–1848* (London, 1964), p. 150; G. Rudé, 'Rural and Urban disturbances on the eve of the first Reform Bill, 1830–1831', *Past & Present*, 37 (1967), 90.

one of the earliest warnings about conflating incendiarism with Swing, for the covert and anonymous nature of fire-raising meant, 'we cannot even conclude whether they were private persons carrying out vengeance against specified individuals or participants in a mass movement'. Historians should therefore be careful not to read too much into 'what may have been habitual forms of rural pressure and protest'.¹⁹ That incendiarism was an already well established factor in rural social relations is certainly true and Hobsbawm and Rudé were not unaware of it. But for Carl Griffin, perhaps the most prolific of the new generation of Swing scholars, 'the difference between an incendiary attack on a parsimonious farmer during Swing and a similar pre-Swing fire was that the Swing fire was in part inspired by other recent actions and occurred in a context of heightened anxiety'.²⁰ The point is a fair one. However, if many pre-Swing fires were lit over issues that were not directly connected to 'protest' over deteriorating conditions of employment, we should surely be wary of presuming 'protest' in every fire raised *during* Swing. A.J. Peacock once argued, somewhat speculatively, that 'many' post-Swing fires in East Anglia were 'simply the result of personal pique'. Although he accepted that, since most incendiaries were never caught, the actual number was 'impossible to tell', he nevertheless pronounced, 'the proportion must be very high – perhaps as high as a third or a half'.²¹ One doesn't have to endorse parole declarations of this kind to recognise a need for caution however. The brutal hanging of three incendiaries in the Somerset village of Kenn in the summer of 1830 for example, may certainly be seen as an important episode in a loosely defined social war, but its causes were deeply local and associated with the politics of the Informers Act, the prosecution of unlicensed drinking houses and petty agricultural theft, not conditions of employment.²² Had it occurred a few short months later, it might nevertheless have been erroneously credited to Swing.

19 Cobb, 'A Very English Rising'.

20 C.J. Griffin, 'Swing, Swing Redivivus, or Something after Swing? On the Death Throes of a Protest Movement, December 1830–December 1833', *International Review of Social History*, 54 (2009), 465. Griffin has discussed problems with quantitative approaches to incendiarism in 'Knowable Geographies? The Reporting of Incendiarism in the Eighteenth and early Nineteenth Century English Provincial Press', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 32 (2006).

21 A.J. Peacock, 'Village Radicalism in East Anglia, 1800–1850', in J.P.D. Dunbabin (ed.), *Rural Discontent in Nineteenth Century Britain* (London 1974), p. 30. The trend becomes apparent, wrote Peacock, 'the more one reads the local press'.

22 S. Poole, 'A Lasting and Salutory Warning: Incendiarism, Rural Order and England's last scene of Crime Execution', *Rural History* 19 (2008).

There is another side to this problem. Obvious typological differences between clandestine nocturnal fire-raising on the one hand and open daylight machine-breaking on the other do make the assimilation of incendiarism into Swing difficult without a degree of qualification. Put simply, incendiarism was usually committed by persons at pains to preserve their anonymity; the breaking of threshing machines was not. Did the same people commit both kinds of protest? The objection was grappled with by Hobsbawm and Rudé. 'Arson and the writing of threatening letters were, then, individual acts and, even if related to the general labourers' movement, were rarely part of any organised plan'. Robbery had also to be accommodated with care because it too was 'unorganised' and carried out by 'individuals who had strayed from their original group'.²³ The trouble with all this accommodation, sensed Cobb, was that at the end of it, even Hobsbawm and Rudé seemed uncertain whether to regard Swing as a general rising or as a series of independent episodes. Both multi-form and singular events, overt or covert, were regarded as 'significant' (perhaps because of, rather than despite their anomalous nature) but the connection between them remained unresolved.²⁴

The fresh tallies of events produced by the FACHRS project have raised further questions about *Captain Swing's* typological drift. Now that we know what Hobsbawm and Rudé did not know – that incendiary incidents greatly outnumbered incidents of machine-breaking – their assertion that machine-breaking and incendiarism counties were somehow distinct, that incendiarism appeared either as a 'curtain-raiser' for more organised action or else as its 'aftermath', or that 'it rarely appeared where the mass movement was at full strength; and, though a genuine expression of the labourers' grievance, it lay at the fringe rather than at the core of the movement', will require some further reassessment.²⁵ The FACHRS project tried to distinguish Swing incendiarism from other forms of arson by separating fires on farms from fires on other premises. However, this method produced 1,346 Swing fires and only three non-Swing fires, a not entirely convincing outcome.²⁶ By these criteria, for instance, Rutland became a Swing county for the first time, but only because a single incidence of incendiarism was discovered at Empingham. Its connection to Swing was assumed from its date rather than its cause, about which little is known, but which, presumably,

23 Hobsbawm and Rudé, *Captain Swing*, p. 205.

24 Cobb, 'A Very English Rising'.

25 Hobsbawm and Rudé, *Captain Swing*, p. 203.

26 M. Holland, 'The Captain Swing Project' in Holland (ed.), *Swing Unmasked*, p. 7.

prevents its being connected with the 'malicious destruction of ten sheep' on a farm in the same parish two years earlier!²⁷

The uninterrupted presence of incendiarism in the rural south throughout the first half of the nineteenth century raises some important questions about the parameters we place around Swing as an 'event'. For the Hammonds, the savagery of the Special Commissions crushed all resistance and brought Swing to a close early in 1831. In Hobsbawm and Rudé's reading however, Swing had an 'aftermath', measured roughly from the conclusion of the Commissions in January 1831, and characterised by an end to open protest and an upsurge in covert incendiary terrorism. Carl Griffin has recently argued a more adaptive case, in which Swing did not die so cleanly in 1831 but maintained a 'spectral presence' in which 'the resort to open protest was significantly higher than has hitherto been acknowledged'.²⁸ The demarcation of Swing as an event with temporal and typological boundaries has had the effect of disconnecting it from such open forms of resistance as trades unionism, and little association has been made between Swing and the case of the 'Tolpuddle martyrs' just three years later. Rudé re-emphasised the disconnection in 1980, insisting that Swing's 'old-style form' had nothing in common with unionism and that Tolpuddle was instigated by Owenite Grand National Consolidated Trade Union missionaries from Birmingham.²⁹ In work focussed on the Swing heartlands of the south east, Wells has strongly argued a contrary case. Urban unionists may have been involved, but fundamentally, 'Unionist mentalities were central to Swing. The demand for work, on improved wages, was repeatedly made ...' and any accompanying reassertions of moral economy were simply pragmatic.³⁰ Nor were unionist continuities confined to the south east. In May 1831, fifty labourers from four different farms around West Lavington, Wiltshire, struck work when magistrates failed to prevent further wage cuts, and there was a similar incident at Ramsbury. As wages continued to plummet in 1832, discontented crowds were monitored uneasily over several nights at Market Lavington, and as the new Poor Law took effect in 1834, fifty labourers blockaded a vestry meeting at Christian Malford. Some Wiltshire JPs now feared that further strikes,

27 Holland, 'Captain Swing', p. 283 (table); *Newcastle Courant*, 26 January 1828.

28 Griffin, 'Swing, Swing Redivivus', 468–69, 495–97.

29 G. Rudé, *Ideology and Popular Protest* (London, 1980), pp. 155–56.

30 R. Wells, 'Tolpuddle in the Context of English Agrarian Labour History, 1780–1850', in J. Rule (ed.), *British Trade Unionism 1750–1850: the Formative Years* (London, 1988), pp. 118–19.

accompanied (rather than replaced by) incendiarism, were 'inevitable'.³¹ If historians have been wary of linking these protests with trade unionism, Wiltshire magistrates showed no such qualms. Indeed, E.G. Williams of Marlborough congratulated Melbourne on the firm line taken with the Tolpuddle labourers for, had they not been convicted, the county would surely have been:

overrun with trades unions, which the agricultural labourers would more readily have joined in hopes of being the means of raising their wages, now so very lamentably low, lower I believe than in 1830. On Saturday last, a brother magistrate asked me if I did not think there would be riots again, he thought the labourers would join the trade unions. I cannot say that they will but I am quite sure the very proper example that has been made of the Dorchester men will act as a salutary check if not a privation.³²

A second important and recurrent feature of the historiography is the problem of spread and diffusion, and the extent to which escalation might signify a social movement. As suggested earlier, few historians have disputed Hobsbawm and Rudé's conclusion that the counties most affected by Swing fall beneath an imaginary line between Hampshire and the Wash. It is not to the question of static mapping that we turn to here then, but to the pattern of progress. Hobsbawm and Rudé subjected their geographical data to a large range of tests for both association and causation, from parish population density and proportionate land ownership to localised attempts at improvement, and settled, perhaps unsurprisingly, upon broadly *agrarian* factors (and harvest failures in 1829 and 1830 in particular) as determinants. This interpretation was challenged by Charles Tilly who noted an association between the geography of Swing and the displacement of southern rural woollen workers by competition from cotton in the urban north. Hobsbawm and Rudé revisited their data when preparing the Penguin paperback edition in 1972, found insufficient evidence for Tilly's claim, and Tilly himself appears to have abandoned it.³³ More cogently however, historians have

31 *Bath Journal*, 6 June 1831; The National Archive, London [hereafter TNA], HO 52/20, T. Scott and W. Hughes to Lord Melbourne, 29 February 1832; HO 52/25, Rev. E.G. Williams to Lord Melbourne, 22 April 1834; Wiltshire Record Office, A1 145 (1834), Quarter Session depositions, information of Henry Hodges, William Baker and Thomas Doyle; examination of Charles Vines and Jane Bath, 8 November 1834.

32 TNA, HO 52/25 Rev. E.G. Williams to Lord Melbourne, 22 April 1834.

33 C. Tilly, review of 'Captain Swing', *Journal of Social History* 4 (1970), 165–66. For Tilly's later work on Swing, see for instance, *Popular Contention in Great Britain, 1758–1834* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995), pp. 315–21.

puzzled over the timing, speed and direction of Swing's geography. Cobb noted that Hobsbawm and Rudé's Swing crowds avoided main roads, pursuing instead an 'erratic course ... through semi-secret footpaths or tracks cutting through the greenery, nearly always giving the towns a wide berth, along lines of communication known only to the local man, to the poacher and smuggler, to the ploughman as he plods his weary way back to his airless cottage'.³⁴ The first important challenge to this approach came in 1979 from Andrew Charlesworth whose spatial analysis of Swing's progress was designed to 'put another nail in the coffin of the Old Faithful model in which social protests are seen as spontaneous, galvanic eruptions, contagiously spreading across the landscape'. The model he produced prompted reconsideration of assumptions about Swing's strictly economic character and renewed interest in the role of political radicals. Essentially, Charlesworth argued that Swing in the Home Counties may have begun in isolated communities but it spread rapidly and methodically only upon reaching main routes to and from London and that it can then be shown to have spread along them. It was this that facilitated the involvement of more sophisticated radicals and prompted more effective organisation and strategic demands: 'The collective protests should thus be considered not as forerunners of the inevitable storm but more as fortuitous events whose significance had to be interpreted by a politically conscious minority'.³⁵

Charlesworth's assertion of a shared political consciousness reminds us of the difficulties of interpreting Swing as a social movement with recognisable objectives and something approaching an ideology. Hobsbawm and Rudé refer, somewhat loosely, to the collective events of 1830 as a 'movement' throughout the book, and as Peter Jones has pointed out, the attribution has been 'a given for just about every historian who has treated them seriously over the last forty years'.³⁶ If for Wells, the unionist demands at the core of Swing were an indication of class consciousness, it had not been Hobsbawm and Rudé's conclusion, for whom Swing remained ideologically backward looking. They reaffirmed the labourer's mental world as ring-fenced by tradition and custom, and offering few 'signs of a new political or social ideology' despite the presence of a few 'village radicals' and nonconformists. E.P.

34 Cobb, 'A Very English Rising'.

35 A. Charlesworth, *Social Protest in a Rural Society: The Spatial Diffusion of the Captain Swing Disturbances of 1830–1831* (Historical Geography Research Series, 1, Liverpool 1979), preface and p. 42.

36 P. Jones, 'Finding Captain Swing: Protest, Parish Relations and the State of the Public Mind in 1830', *International Review of Social History* 54 (2009), 429–31.

Thompson and E.L. Jones thought them overly cautious, arguing that insufficient attention had been paid to known rural centres of radicalism, particularly in Hampshire. When revising their text in 1972, Hobsbawm and Rudé acknowledged local exceptions but concluded, 'we do not believe that we overlooked it as a general factor'.³⁷ Yet Charlesworth believed that the very thing that made Swing significantly different from earlier protests was its 'special conjuncture of circumstances ... the growing number of radicals in the countryside by that date, the outbreak of agitation for parliamentary reform and its culmination in the reform crisis of early November and the effects of such agitation and crises on both the rural middle and working classes'.³⁸ Indeed, Roger Wells has gone so far as to argue not only that the 'popular, political element to Swing has been seriously underrated by most historians, including Hobsbawm and Rudé', but that the movement, which 'assumed quasi-insurrectionary proportions', was 'the final factor in generating the massive accretion of support for parliamentary reform in the countryside', and later inspired the radical *Champion* newspaper to announce, 'Swing originated Chartism in Kent'.³⁹ We must be careful, of course, not to presume radical political consciousness among Swing crowds from the evident interest shown in them by urban democrats. This was an area never fully explored by Hobsbawm and Rudé, but David Worrall has now looked in some detail at the use made of Swing by Richard Carlile and his republican circle at the London Rotunda. In February 1831, Carlile, who had already been arrested once for a published lecture 'To the Insurgent Agricultural Labourers', produced a play, *Swing, or Who Are the Incendiaries?*, a clear enough piece of insurrectionary propaganda, in which 'an injured people finally triumphs'. This was the essence of Swing's appeal to urban radicals; it was the perfect vehicle for inspirational theatre, noted Carlile, because 'hitherto, all dramatic efforts to exhibit a resistance to tyranny have represented that resistance as unsuccessful'.⁴⁰

37 Hobsbawm and Rudé, *Captain Swing* (Harmondsworth, 1972), p. xiii.

38 A. Charlesworth, 'The Geography of Protests by Agricultural Labourers, 1790-1850' in A. Charlesworth (ed.), *An Atlas of Rural Protest in Britain, 1548-1900* (Beckenham, 1983), p. 153.

39 R. Wells, 'Rural Rebels in Southern England in the 1830s', in C. Emsley and J. Walvin (eds), *Artisans, Peasants and Proletarians, 1760-1860* (London, 1985), pp. 131, 133, 138, 155. See also R. Wells and J. Rule, (eds), *Crime, Protest and Popular Politics in Southern England, 1740-1850* (London, 1997), in which Captain Swing's 'critical misinterpretations' are laid out once again, pp. 9-12.

40 David Worrall, *Theatrical Revolution: Drama, Censorship and Romantic Period Subcultures, 1773-1832* (Oxford, 2006), pp. 340-60.

Debates about labouring ideology in the countryside have, unsurprisingly, hinged to a degree upon the actual or anticipated death of rural paternalism and its effect upon the progress of political economy and proletarianisation. For Charlesworth and Wells, ideological distinctions between urban and rural workers in the 1830s have been over-played. On the contrary, radicalism and the class consciousness that gave it expression were carried freely between town and country by men who lived exclusively in neither. Wells' case is supported by the growth of radical meetings in rural and semi-rural areas close to London which drew a mixed crowd of urban and agricultural workers, and where the vigorous pursuit of the New Poor Law after 1834 delivered a *coup de grace* to tradition.⁴¹

Local studies in rural districts further from the capital however have revealed a different picture. Adrian Randall and Edwina Newman have taken issue over the presumed death of paternalism in Wiltshire, for example, through a closely argued essay on Swing and its aftermath in a single county. 'Where paternalism had survived into the 1830s', they concluded, 'the New Poor Law was much less effective in destroying the values of customary society than some historians have allowed'.⁴² Peter Jones has stressed the importance of locally specific work like this without necessarily expecting coherence. On the contrary, Swing is best understood as a series of inter-related events defined by 'an intense localism and an active rejection of anything resembling a guiding principle or set of demands'.⁴³ His own Berkshire case studies reveal mainly peaceful processions of labourers marching from parish to parish and negotiating terms with JPs and gentlemen as they go. Such activity does little to support their identification as a proletarian movement. In fact, their behaviour is reminiscent of plebeian 'moral economists' and mirrored, for example, by the crowd that toured Stogursey, Nether Stowey, South Petherton, Bridgwater and Otterhampton in the south west in 1801, in pursuit of JPs' signatures to a petition for lower market prices at a time when every community was 'in the same situation and it appears that they are all connected through the different counties'.⁴⁴ It would take a brave historian to refer to this as a proletarian 'movement'.

41 Wells rehearses the political interpretation most fully in 'Mr William Cobbett, Captain Swing and King William IV', *Agricultural History Review* 45 (1997), 34–48.

42 A. Randall and E. Newman, 'Protest, Proletarians and Paternalists: Social Conflict in Rural Wiltshire, 1830–1850', *Rural History* 6 (1995), 218.

43 Jones, 'Finding Captain Swing', 429–31.

44 Somerset Record Office, Acland Papers, D. Davis to J. Acland, 1 April 1801, DD/AH/59/12/14; *The Times*, 2 April 1801.

In fact, the argument presented in *Captain Swing* was not simply a denial of a rural 'working class'. Rather, it is argued that Swing cohered as a social movement in helping to shape a broader ruralist coalition against the ravages of political economy. In this sense it developed 'the air of a general manifesto of county against town, of past against future, carried by the labourers but signed also by the farmers and even gentry'. Ian Dyck's groundbreaking work on William Cobbett was important in further developing such a view. Dyck broke with traditional representations of Cobbett by locating the great agitator not as an uneasy Tory ruralist, but as a regular rural radical, and something close to a guiding spirit (if not political leader) for Swing. At the very least, Cobbett had predicted the rising and warned both farmers and landowners of its inevitability if the economic condition of the labourer was not improved. For Cobbett, he argued, life on the land 'produced economic co-operation and a sort of natural democracy among all countrymen regardless of their proximity to the means of production'.⁴⁵ As a countryside alliance of sorts then, Swing's progenitors might include the previous century's risings against turnpike roads. Open attacks by undisguised crowds on turnpike gates to the south of Bristol in 1749 for instance included not only axe-wielding labourers from a wide range of adjacent parishes, but mounted farmers armed with whips and carrying flags. Urban opposition to the 'country people', mustered by Bristol Corporation, was left to mariners with cutlasses who marched out to engage the Somerset men in a bloody encounter at Totterdown. Anonymous letters delivered to the mayor threatened incendiarism in the city and professed, 'Great at present is ye unesayness between the town and the contery which may as well be in a harmony of peece'.⁴⁶ But, in Dyck's view, this alliance of interests had been in grave danger of collapse throughout the 1820s, and in the inexorable breakdown of rural deference after about 1827, Cobbett had observed, 'the development of class consciousness in the countryside, but it was a species of class consciousness that farm workers did not necessarily share with their proletarian fellows in the towns. There was simply too much long-standing mistrust between villagers and townspeople to allow for a

45 Hobsbawm and Rudé, *Captain Swing*, pp. 13–19; I. Dyck, *William Cobbett and Rural Popular Culture* (Cambridge 1992), p. 47.

46 Bristol Record Office, Town Clerks' Letter Box, 1749, Quarter Session depositions and informations, especially bundles 6 and 7, Voluntary examinations of John Old and others, 27 July 1749 and of Aaron Cross and others, 2 August 1749. See also *Bath Journal*, 31 July 1749. For a recent reassessment of the 'country people' in popular protest prior to Swing, see A. Randall, *Riotous Assemblies: Popular Protest in Hanoverian England* (Oxford, 2006) pp. 153–78.

town-country axis to be forged on the basis of collective economic identity'.⁴⁷

An important development in recent years has been a growing agreement among historians that complex issues about 'consciousness' need to pay greater attention to regional variation. In fact, *Captain Swing* had highlighted the need for a more systematic approach to regional differences from the start. Its authors were critical, for example, of the Hammonds' over-reliance upon modes of suppression found in those counties that tried rioters by Special Commission, overlooking the differences that characterised responses in counties such as Norfolk.⁴⁸ This claim has not been challenged but the response has nevertheless been fragmentary. Hawkins drew attention forty years ago to the thinness of *Captain Swing*'s account of the relationship between local politics of repression and the initiatives of central government, while Cobb thought it insufficiently rigorous in its overall approach to regional difference. Despite their best efforts, he noted, we still had little more than the names, ages, parishes and occupations of participants; oral memory and tradition remained a largely untapped resource; and we had yet to tap such subaltern sources as the contextual commentaries of wealthy water-taking ladies at Tunbridge-Wells. Arguing that detailed local studies were now essential if we were finally to crack open the labourer's mental universe, Cobb issued his oft-quoted directive, 'And now to the study of Lower Hardres', the Kentish parish which 'in a sense launched the whole labourers' collective movement', in Hobsbawm and Rudé's estimation.⁴⁹ Re-reading Cobb's appraisal some four decades after its publication only emphasises the role played by *Captain Swing* as a catalyst for the working out of future agendas for rural history from below. In the second edition, Hobsbawm and Rudé readily endorsed further local study, but warned, 'we doubt whether there are more than a very few, not necessarily typical, villages whose micro-history at this period can be written without enormous preliminary labours of local research'.⁵⁰ The challenge has, of course, been subsequently taken up, particularly in the south east, and we may see its results, in quite different ways, in Roger Wells's work on the troublesome Sussex village of Burwash, in which a single parish's

47 I. Dyck, 'Rural war and the missing revolution in early nineteenth century England', in M.T. Davis (ed.), *Radicalism and Revolution in Britain, 1775-1848: Essays in Honour of Malcolm I. Thomis* (Basingstoke, Macmillan, 2000), pp. 180-88.

48 Hobsbawm and Rudé, *Captain Swing*, p. 13.

49 R. Hawkins, Review, *Historical Journal* 12 (1969), 716-17; Hobsbawm and Rudé, *Captain Swing*, pp. 205-7; Cobb, 'A Very English Rising'.

50 Hobsbawm and Rudé, *Captain Swing* (Harmondsworth, 1972), pp. xiii, xv.

nineteenth century social relations are closely examined through the incidence of property crime, or in Barry Reay's micro-study of the Herne Hill rising of 1838, and his later more expansive exploration of the same Kentish parishes.⁵¹ The broader approach to micro-history that we have seen in Reay's work is perhaps what Charlesworth was calling for in 1991 when he took rural labour historians to task for 'documenting major episodes of social protest' at the expense of the wider 'productive, social and cultural relationships' that gave rise to them. Selecting the right parishes may not be straightforward however. Lower Hardres, he pointed out, was a poor choice because the atypical nature of the community would only lend strength to the old view of Swing as a discretely agrarian problem. Centres of rural radicalism might be more promising, and then only with the adoption of a systematically comparative methodology. What local studies need is synthesis.⁵² Peter Jones has also urged caution. The fitting together of disparate local case studies into a broader structural and explanatory framework has become history from below's orthodox methodology, but in the process, the rough edges of local exceptionalism tend to become smoothed, threatening in turn to simplify further the appearance of Swing's coherence.⁵³

Forty years ago, Hobsbawm and Rudé expressed the hope that the apparent conclusiveness of *Captain Swing* would not discourage subsequent historians. In this they clearly need not have worried for not only were they right to note, 'there remains plenty for them to do'; but, as we have seen, many of their own methods and findings have since been scrutinised and questioned. There are many roads still to travel. We still know next to nothing about women and Swing, a little (but not enough) about the disruptive and antagonistic effect of influxes of cheap Irish labour in Swing parishes, and nothing like enough about the social history of the threshing machine, a mechanical intrusion which not only diminished the demand for winter labour, but caused a significant number of deaths and serious injuries to those who used or played near it. The

51 R. Wells, 'Crime and Protest in a Country Parish: Burwash, 1790-1850' in Rule and Wells, (eds), *Crime, Protest and Popular Politics*; B. Reay, *The Last Rising of the Agricultural Labourers: Rural life and protest in nineteenth century England* (Oxford, 1990); B. Reay, *Microhistories: Demography, Society and Culture in Rural England, 1800-1930* (Cambridge, 1996).

52 Charlesworth, *Social Protest*, preface; Charlesworth, 'An Agenda for Historical Studies', 234-35. Charlesworth has also urged greater concentration on the role of the authorities, something that practitioners of history from below have tended to neglect despite the obvious fact that 'the ruling elite were clearly key players in social disorder and its control', *ibid.*, 235.

53 For Jones, this is the problem with 'moral economy' as well as with *Captain Swing*: 'Finding Captain Swing', 429-31.

enthusiasm of historians for researching local specificities is undiminished, and some excellent examples of it will be found here in the essays of Rose Wallis, Judy Hill and Maggie Escott, but broader contextual work considering Swing's relationship with other movements in other places has progressed more slowly. The comparative allusions to Captain Rock in Peter Jones's essay in this collection, together with Alun Howkins's examination of Swing-inspired folksong, may signal a cultural turn in Swing studies broadly complementary to recent work on General Ludd by Kevin Binfield and Katrina Navickas.⁵⁴ At first glance, Swing had little in common with Captain Rock, whose armed exploits in rural southern Ireland in the 1820s were more insurrectionary in character and occasioned considerable loss of life, but the predominance of threatening letters, incendiarism and mythical leadership in both outbreaks invites further comparison nevertheless. Moreover, Captain Rock's Irish forebears included Captain Slasher, a purveyor of threatening letters and burnings during moral economy disturbances in the same part of Ireland in 1800 (and, in England, a much older character who clashes with St George in mumming plays).⁵⁵ As Adrian Randall shows here however, direct comparison between 'movements' (in this case Luddism and Swing) is as likely to reveal discrepancy as contrast, despite the superficial appearance of common mythical leadership. Many of the problems noted above are addressed directly and in detail in the essays making up this volume. For instance, Dan Myers and Jamie Przybysz revisit debates on the spread, diffusion and the making of movements by applying new quantitative methodologies, Carl Griffin fully addresses the nature and impact of Swing incendiarism as an event type in its own right, and Rose Wallis moves the discussion of local studies forward by directly contrasting the divergent experience of south western and East Anglian counties within the particular framework of the special commissions. New theoretical models are also enriching the field, as Iain Robertson's contribution shows, with its suggestion that 'moral ecology and a sensitivity to the constitutive role of space and local nature/culture relations' might provide a more holistic account of rural protest than we are accustomed to reading. In bringing together many of the most

54 Kevin Binfield (ed.), *Writings of the Luddites* (Baltimore, 2004); Katrina Navickas, 'The Search for General Ludd: the Mythology of Luddism', *Social History* 30 (2005) 281–95.

55 The most recent study of the Irish dimension is James S. Donnelly Jr., *Captain Rock: The Irish Agrarian Rebellion of 1821–1824* (Madison, WI, 2009), but for Slasher see also Roger Wells, 'The Irish Famine of 1799–1801: Market Culture, Moral Economies and Social Protest' in Adrian Randall and Andrew Charlesworth (eds), *Markets, Market Culture and Popular Protest in Eighteenth century Britain and Ireland* (Liverpool, 1996), pp. 183–85.

important Swing scholars working today, this special edition of *Southern History* amply demonstrates the breadth and depth of approaches to the rising some forty years after the appearance of Hobsbawm and Rudé's seminal book. And, significantly, whether early career researchers or established historians, each of us acknowledges a profound and continuing debt to Hobsbawm and Rudé's masterly study. *Captain Swing* is perhaps unlikely either to be intellectually supplanted or commercially outsold by any future monograph on the events of that troubled autumn and winter, and the length of time it has taken for any new volume to appear is perhaps the most fitting testament to their scholarship. As Roger Wells pointed out after Gordon Mingay's critique in *The Unquiet Countryside* (1989), 'Captain Swing is the only academic history book ever to have achieved a slot in the weekly list of top-selling works of non-fiction'.⁵⁶ We hope that this volume will at least be judged a worthy complement to it and a useful signpost for future endeavour.

56 Roger Wells, review of Mingay in *English Historical Review*, 108 (1993), 488.