

The agricultural labourer and the 'Hodge' stereotype, c. 1850–1914*

by Mark Freeman

Abstract

This article examines the stereotyping of the agricultural labourer as 'Hodge' in the nineteenth century, showing how the changing economic, social and political position of the labourers affected the ways in which they were represented in the social investigations and rural literature of the period. It is argued that the stereotype changed significantly in the 1880s and 1890s, and although it had largely fallen out of use by the 1900s, many of the attributes that made it up did in fact persist into the later period. The label Hodge was rarely used without being subject to contestation from labourers themselves and their spokesmen, and this article shows how it became a potent weapon in the social and political conflicts that characterized rural England in this period.

It was common in the nineteenth century to stereotype the agricultural labourer as 'Hodge', and to describe him and his life in terms which epitomized many of the ideas that the appellation was intended to convey. Like 'Paddy', the Irish immigrant of the famine years, and 'Sambo', the plantation slave in the United States, Hodge became a widely-used and usually derogatory label; and, like Paddy and Sambo, historians have begun to give Hodge some attention.¹ In the only article hitherto devoted to the interrogation of the Hodge epithet, Alun Howkins has traced the 'reconstruction' of the English agricultural labourer, arguing that the activities of the National Agricultural Labourers' Union (NALU) in the 1870s, the panic about urban deterioration in the 1880s, and the concerns over rural depopulation in the 1890s initiated a reappraisal of the labourer, the constructions of whom shifted from those which emphasized his degeneracy and ignorance to those which highlighted his 'timelessness and permanence', revalidated his work, and made him 'the bearer of Englishness'.² This model of transition undoubtedly reflects

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¹ Perry Curtis, *Apes and Angels: The Irishman in Victorian caricature* (1971); R. F. Foster, 'Paddy and Mr Punch', in Foster, *Paddy and Mr Punch. Connections in Irish and English history* (paperback edn, 1995), pp. 171–94; Stanley M. Elkins, *Slavery: A problem in American institutional and intellectual life* (3rd edn, 1976), pp. 82–9, 131–3, 190–1, 307–9; Daniel J. Leab, *From Sambo to Superspade: The Black experience in motion pictures* (1975); Barbara A. Huddleston-Mattai and P. Rudy Mattai, 'The Sambo mentality and the Stockholm Syndrome revisited. Another dimension to an examination of the plight of the

African-American', *J. Black Studies* 23 (1993), pp. 344–57; Jan Marsh, *Back to the land. The pastoral impulse in Britain from 1880 to 1914* (1982), ch. 4; Alun Howkins, 'From Hodge to Lob. Reconstructing the English farm labourer, 1870–1914', in Malcolm Chase and Ian Dyck (eds), *Living and learning: essays in honour of J. F. C. Harrison* (1996), pp. 218–35; K. D. M. Snell, *Annals of the labouring poor: social change and agrarian England, 1660–1900* (1985), pp. 5–14, 381–91.

² Howkins, 'From Hodge to Lob', p. 226 and *passim*.

a reappraisal of the agricultural labourer among the classes who wrote about him, but it underplays the degree of contestation that the employment of the Hodge stereotype provoked. Howkins suggests that the most important aspect of the 'reconstruction' was a changing attitude 'among an essentially southern, artistic/intellectual, and urban elite';³ but, although he recognizes the importance of agricultural trade unionism as a contributing factor to the transition, his analysis downgrades the element of conflict in the story of the stereotyping of the labourer. It also overlooks changes in the meanings attached to the label in the 1880s and 1890s, when Hodge was reassessed taking account of new social and political circumstances. Moreover, although by the 1900s the label itself was rarely used in written descriptions of the labourer, many aspects of the stereotype continued in common use, albeit frequently provoking dissension. Indeed, although K. D. M. Snell has argued that the Hodge stereotype is 'the more significant for having been largely unchallenged by contemporaries',⁴ this article will show that, at least after the formation of the NALU in 1872, its employment frequently provoked direct contestation. Debates on the status and condition of the rural population often coalesced around the stereotyping of the labourer; and, like many derogatory labels in other contexts, Hodge became a potent weapon in rural social and political conflict.

I

Before going further, it is necessary to review who Hodge was, and what his life was, supposedly, like. As Howkins has pointed out, the epithet, although dating back at least to Chaucerian times, and used in the eighteenth century, only became 'totally synonymous with backwardness and lack of sophistication' from the 1820s onwards;⁵ and it was used most regularly and most uncontestedly in the mid-nineteenth century, coinciding with the nadir of the labourers' economic fortunes. Jan Marsh, reminding us of the term's derivation – it was a diminution of 'Roger' – has remarked that Hodge sounds like 'a cross between hedge (where he spent much of his time, especially in bad weather) and clod (the substance on his boots and in his brain)'.⁶ Hodge was heir to the 'clown' that was in common usage in the literature of the eighteenth century as a derogatory synonym for the agricultural labourer. Simon Dentith has described the use of this term by the 'peasant poet' John Clare as the result of Clare having 'internalized ... rather too much of the downward glance of his betters'.⁷ The use of 'clown' did in fact survive well into the nineteenth century, as for example in William Gardiner's long poem *The Adventure of Hodge and the Monkey* (1852) in which 'Hodge' and 'the clown' are used interchangeably.⁸ Nevertheless, Hodge, although never a universally employed stereotype, was entering increasingly common usage by mid-century. Hodge was characterized pithily by one commentator as 'unimaginative, ill-clothed, ill-educated, ill-paid, ignorant of all that is taking place beyond his

³ Ibid., p. 225.

⁴ Snell, *Annals*, p. 6.

⁵ Howkins, 'From Hodge to Lob', p. 218.

⁶ Marsh, *Back to the land*, p. 60.

⁷ Simon Dentith, *Society and cultural forms in nineteenth-century England* (1998), p. 81.

⁸ William Gardiner, *The adventure of Hodge and the Monkey: a comic tale* (1852), pp. 3, 4, 5, 9, 19. Other poems

and songs in the same genre characterised 'Tom Cladpole', including 'Tom Cladpole's Trip to London' and 'Tom Cladpole's Trip to Merricur', collected by Lucy Broadwood from the Horsham singer and bellringer Henry Burstow (Henry Burstow, *Reminiscences of Horsham, being recollections of Henry Burstow, the celebrated bellringer and songsinger* (Horsham, 1911), pp. 107, 110–11, 119).

own village, dissatisfied with his position and yet without energy or effort to improve it'.⁹ Farmers were not immune from such stereotyping – in Benjamin Gough's poem *John Hodge on Ritualism*, farmer Hodge, of Coddling Farm, Slogham-on-the-Wold, Sussex, announced 'I'm no pertickler fist at writing, and my spellin's rather queer'¹⁰ – but it was more common for farmers to follow urban elites in stereotyping the labourer. One farmer thought that '[t]he very fact of [the labourer] having so little to exercise his mental faculties is the secret of their being generally so uncultivated';¹¹ and another referred to 'the illogical mind of Hodge', whom he characterized memorably as being 'of strong faith and a gross feeder'.¹² The terminology was frequently animalistic: 'They seem scarcely to know any other enjoyments than such as is common to them, and to the brute beasts which have no understanding ... So very far are they below their fellow men in mental culture'.¹³ (The labourers' animalism explained their non-communicativeness; it could also explain the irrationality of their occasional outbreaks of violent discontent.¹⁴) In short, the labourer was usually seen as deferential, dependent and ignorant, even where the label Hodge was not used directly.

Hodge lived and worked in the south of England, where wages were lower, the rural community more fragile and the social separation of employer and employee more complete. The west country, and to a lesser extent East Anglia and southern England, was the region in which he seemed to stand supreme. As Thomas Hardy pointed out in 1883, Dorset was the county 'where Hodge in his most unmitigated form is supposed to reside'.¹⁵ The west was known as the region with the lowest agricultural wages and in many respects the worst conditions of labouring life to be found in the country. In the North – where labourers were likely to be working closer to alternative sources of industrial employment, wages were higher, the 'living-in' system more common and opportunities for recreation (at any rate in the less remote areas) greater – Hodge was not regularly identified. Richard Heath, writing in 1870, found that the labourers in Northumberland, despite poor cottage accommodation, were happy nonetheless, mainly due to the sturdiness of their race, the superiority of their education, and the opportunities they enjoyed for advancement within the hierarchy of the Presbyterian church: the 'noble people' of Northumberland contrasted with the 'depression and hopelessness' of the Devonians and the 'superstition, ignorance, immorality, and poverty which prevails in the Weald of Sussex'.¹⁶ Similarly, the labourer in south Wales ('John Jones' rather than Hodge), according to one observer in the 1880s, was literate, Sunday-school-educated, 'a bit of a politician [and] often, too, a literary character in a small way'.¹⁷ Like the Northumbrians, Welsh labourers enjoyed higher wages and a strong tradition of community-based Non-conformity. However, it was from the south of England that most descriptions – in official inquiries and in country books – of the labourer and his life were derived, and it was the

⁹ J. Dent, 'The present condition of the English agricultural labourer', *JRASE*, 2nd ser. 7 (1871), pp. 343–4.

¹⁰ Benjamin Gough, *John Hodge on ritualism* [1874], p. 3.

¹¹ Anon., *A farmer's views on the agricultural labour question, by one of them* (Norwich, 1873), pp. 21–2.

¹² 'A Wykehamist', *The agricultural labourer* (1873), p. 10.

¹³ John Eddowes, *The agricultural labourer as he really*

is, or village morals in 1854 (Driffield, 1854), pp. 12, 16.

¹⁴ See Foster, 'Paddy and Mr Punch', pp. 171–2 for a similar point about British stereotyping of the Irish.

¹⁵ Thomas Hardy, 'The Dorsetshire Labourer', *Longman's Magazine* 2 (1883), p. 252.

¹⁶ Richard Heath, *The English Peasant: studies historical, local and biographic* (1893), pp. 217, 82, 191–2.

¹⁷ Beriah Gwyne Evans, 'The peasantry of south Wales', *Longman's Magazine* 6 (1885), p. 299.

south of England that generated the dominant images, both positive and negative, of the late nineteenth-century countryside.¹⁸

Snell has argued that the Hodge label was the result of 'social ignorance and class isolation':¹⁹ a failure on the part of social investigators and other commentators on rural life to overcome or even to acknowledge 'the difficulties of social understanding'.²⁰ The label emphasized the cultural distance that lay between the reader of books, pamphlets and articles on rural life and the rustics about whom he read. Because Hodge appeared ignorant, it was rare for social investigators in the mid-nineteenth century to allow him space to air his views in their inquiries. Eileen Yeo has made a similar point with regard to urban investigations, such as those carried out by James Kay-Shuttleworth, who characterized the poor as 'loathsome', 'squalid', 'disgusting' and 'revolting': this 'did not come from or lead to mutual respect ... People "rubbished" in this way were not likely to be regarded as having legitimate access to the arena of public speech'.²¹ Similarly, the agricultural labourer was given little or no space in inquiries into his own condition; and even where he was consulted at first hand, for example by the *Morning Chronicle* investigators in 1849, he was found to be 'timid and shrinking, his whole manner showing that he feels himself at a distance from you ... often doubtful when you address, and suspicious when you question him; he is seemingly oppressed with the interview whilst it lasts, and obviously relieved when it is over'.²² The agricultural labouring class threw up few spokesmen to challenge such portrayals: there was no rural equivalent of the 'Journeyman Engineer' (Thomas Wright), who commented lucidly on the condition and outlook of his own class in books and periodicals.²³ As Howkins has pointed out, even those who did emerge, such as Alexander Somerville, 'the Whistler at the Plough', appear to have internalized some aspects of the Hodge stereotype.²⁴ In any case, by the very act of escaping from the plough, men like Somerville and George Mitchell ('One from the Plough') had distinguished themselves from the body of the labouring population and to this extent shaken off the appellation of Hodge. Those whom they left behind were a target for the contempt of urban radicals: one former London Chartist, describing the rural labourer, believed that 'the squire is his king, the parson his deity and the tap-room his highest conception of earthly bliss'.²⁵ The labourer before 1872, as Howkins remarks, was 'seen as stupid but contented, the far end of a chain of paternalism';²⁶ in the words of a near-contemporary commentator, he was 'below the notice of history'.²⁷

¹⁸ Alun Howkins, 'The discovery of rural England', in R. Colls and P. Dodd (eds), *Englishness: politics and culture, 1880-1920* (1986); id., 'From Hodge to Lob', p. 230.

¹⁹ Snell, *Annals*, p. 5.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

²¹ Eileen Janes Yeo, *The contest for social science. Relations and representations of gender and class* (1996), p. 73.

²² Quoted in Snell, *Annals*, pp. 6-7.

²³ For example [Thomas Wright], *Some habits and customs of the working classes* (1867); [Thomas Wright], *The great unwashed* (1868); A. J. Reid, 'Intelligent artisans

and aristocrats of labour: the essays of Thomas Wright', in J. Winter (ed.), *The working class in modern British history. Essays in honour of Henry Pelling* (1983), pp. 171-86.

²⁴ Howkins, 'From Hodge to Lob', p. 220.

²⁵ Quoted in Alun Howkins, *Reshaping Rural England: a social history, 1850-1925* (1991), p. 133.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 186.

²⁷ D. C. Pedder, *The secret of rural depopulation* (Fabian Tract 118, 1904), p. 4.

II

Although the NALU never counted more than a small minority of the agricultural labour force among its membership, and its long-term effects on the material condition of the labourer were generally unspectacular, it shook the complacency that had made the reiteration of the Hodge stereotype so easy. Howkins argues that 'the assertion of power that the Union represented convinced sections of the elite that the labourer had changed'.²⁸ It certainly suggested to some that the labourer's position was inconsistent with the stereotyping of earlier years, and provoked a significant, although often indirect, challenge to the old view. T. H. S. Escott, no supporter of agricultural trade unionism, urged in 1879: 'Talk to the average country labourer to-day, and you will find him no longer the dull, despondent being that he was a decade since, the horizon of his views and knowledge being the boundaries of his parish, or the field in which he was plying his task. His senses have been quickened, his moral and mental nature has been breathed upon with the breath of life'.²⁹ Escott and others linked trade unionism, a more sophisticated and less physically threatening expression of discontent than the rick-burning and rioting of the 1830s and 1840s, to other advances such as the spread of education and newspapers, which tended to broaden the labourer's horizons.³⁰ Other supporters of the union directly contested the use of the Hodge label, viewing it as indicative of the attitudes of those who sought to keep the labourer in a state of 'serfdom'. Thus Canon Edward Girdlestone, vicar of Halberton in Devon and an early supporter of the NALU, explained:

As for the labourer, such sort of landowners call him Hodge. They think of him as Hodge. They treat him as Hodge. In their eyes the labourer is a serf, and ought to remain a serf. He must be content with a cottage, in comparison of which a barn or a stable is a palace; wages barely enough when he is at work every day and all day long to keep body and soul together ... with nothing in prospect but parish pay and the union.³¹

Another effect of the 'awakening' of the labourer which the union represented was to encourage the collection by social investigators of more information and opinion directly from labourers: thus Archibald Forbes of the *Daily News*, Francis Heath of the *Morning Advertiser* and even Frederick Clifford of *The Times*, who toured rural England in the wake of the agitation of the early 1870s, all relied heavily on what labourers told them, and generally expressed approval of their communicativeness and veracity.³² All paid tribute to those who willingly supplied them with information; they rarely if ever used the name Hodge.³³

Thus a more sympathetic approach to the rural population began to erode the stereotyping of the labourer; but the labourer also had an opportunity to contest such stereotyping himself. As one farmer told the readers of *Fraser's Magazine*, '[t]he newspapers have got hold of the

²⁸ Howkins, 'From Hodge to Lob', p. 222.

²⁹ T. H. S. Escott, *England: its people, polity and pursuits* (2 vols, 1881 [1st edn 1879]), I, p. 341.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 388; F. G. Heath, *Peasant life in the West of England* (1880), p. 386.

³¹ Edward Girdlestone, 'Landowners, land, and those who till it', *Fraser's Magazine* 78 (1868), p. 735.

³² F. G. Heath, *The English peasantry* (1874); Frederick

Clifford, *The agricultural lock-out of 1874, with notes upon farming and farm-labour in the eastern counties* (1875); Mark Freeman, 'Social investigation in rural England, 1870-1914' (unpublished Ph.D thesis, University of Glasgow, 1999), pp. 51-77.

³³ Forbes did on one occasion, but only when referring to the pre-NALU subservience of the Warwickshire labourer (*Daily News*, 28 Mar. 1872).

working man ... and ... the working man has got hold of a newspaper': the *Labourers' Union Chronicle*.³⁴ The Union and its mouthpiece gave the labourers a chance to hit back at some of their detractors. Thus, when the *Daily Telegraph's* special correspondent travelled around the south of England in the wake of the NALU strike, mocking the crude political opinions he heard in the tap-rooms of public houses, and describing with some relish how the labourers he met did not know the difference between Liberal and Conservative and took no interest in current affairs, the *Chronicle* responded angrily, characterising him as

'our own commissioner,' which is another word for 'a reporter' who runs about in search of impressions, which he throws into black and white as quickly as they are made, and sometimes, apparently, before, and which are of the same intrinsic value as thistledown, which is blown about hither and thither, bearing everywhere thistle crops of superficial sentiment and opinion, instead of solid corn and wine of earnest thought and heart-feeling. We need hardly say that our 'commissioner' looks down from a pretty considerable elevation upon 'John Whopstraw,' as he pleases to call the agricultural labourer, in weariness of repeating the more hackneyed name of 'Hodge'.³⁵

The terminology was slightly different; the implications the same. The *Chronicle* protested that the *Telegraph* correspondent was judging the labourers 'by superficial standards, and upon the briefest possible acquaintance':³⁶ a good example of the possible reactions of a rural population to an apparently intrusive investigator whose representations of them did not accord with their own priorities. The labourers' advocates who wrote in the *Chronicle*, much as they might be denounced as 'agitators' by the opponents of agricultural trade unionism, came to represent a class of men previously unknown and, it had appeared, unknowable. The Union threw up men like Joseph Arch, Henry Taylor and Arthur Clayden, who, while not necessarily from a labouring background themselves, became spokesmen for a generation of agricultural workers;³⁷ and it became harder to exclude the labourer from involvement in representing his own condition.

III

Hodge was by no means killed off by the Union; however, the stereotype took on somewhat different meanings in the 1880s, and it can certainly be argued that the Hodge of this period was a very different character to his predecessor of the 1850s. The beginnings of concern about rural depopulation (which would become widespread panic in the 1890s) caused the stereotype to be allied to the apparent spiritual and cultural poverty of rural England: a consensus

³⁴ 'A Wykehamist', *The agricultural labourer*, p. 9.

³⁵ Quoted in Arthur Clayden, *The Revolt of the Field. A sketch of the rise and progress of the movement among the agricultural labourers, known as the 'National Agricultural Labourers' Union', with a reprint of the correspondence to the Daily News during a tour through Canada with Mr Arch (1874)*, p. 95.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Nevertheless, as Howkins shows elsewhere, the

relationship between many of the agricultural trade union leaders and the labourers they represented was an uneasy one: men like Arch and George Rix, schooled in Primitive Methodism and temperance or teetotalism, disapproved of many of the cultural activities that characterised labouring life (Alun Howkins, *Poor labouring men: rural radicalism in Norfolk, 1870-1923* (1985), pp. 65-6, 179-80 and *passim*).

developed around the notion that rural life was dull, and had a dulling effect on the population. Although one reason for migration to the towns was clearly the higher wages obtainable in industrial employment, it was also generally agreed that the real or perceived social attractions of town life were also a significant factor. It was easy to contrast the town, with its colourful markets, music halls and, later, cinemas with the unappealing village whose only social amenity was the public house. By extension, the minds of the urban population were quickened by their better, and rapidly improving, opportunities for social interaction and intellectual advancement, while the country-dweller remained backward and, despite the spread of education to the villages, ignorant. Arguably the two most influential non-fictional writers on the countryside of the 1880s, Richard Jefferies and Augustus Jessopp, vicar of Scarning in Norfolk, both subscribed in some measure to this view. Jefferies, for example, contrasted life in rural Wiltshire with life among the employees of the Great Western Railway in Swindon, whom he found to be generally intelligent, well-travelled, well-read and disinclined to drunkenness and immorality. Even amongst this huge workforce, there was a perceptible *esprit de corps*, and the cream of them, intellectually speaking, were 'full of social life, or, rather, of an interest in the problem of social existence'.³⁸ By contrast, in the villages, the reading rooms were frequented by the skilled workmen and tradesmen rather than by the labourers, and there was little organized social activity: the labourer did not even enjoy getting drunk. There was 'absolutely no poetry, no colour' in his life.³⁹

Jefferies was especially significant because of the unusually wide dissemination of his work, and was more responsible than anyone else for the diffusion of the Hodge stereotype and its associated meanings in the 1880s. From a farming background himself (and an opponent of agricultural trade unionism in the 1870s), he was a prolific contributor to a wide range of metropolitan periodical publications. Jefferies's view of the labourer married the prejudices of the southern English farmer to a broader conception of what the townsman wanted to read about the backward countryman. As Karen Sayer has explained, '[u]sing his own experience as a farmer's son, he wrote in London for a predominantly urban readership and effectively developed the dominant descriptive mode of writing on the countryside'.⁴⁰ His two-volume book *Hodge and His Masters*, although selling very few copies when published in 1880, was serialized in the *Standard*, with a readership of around 180,000.⁴¹ Perhaps more importantly, much of his output remained widely read into the Edwardian period (although Jefferies himself died in 1887), and thus helped frame the discourses of a later period, a fact which helps to explain the persistence of the Hodge stereotype in many quarters. Although Jefferies's published views of the labourer varied greatly – at other times he dismissed allegations that countrymen (including labourers) were ignorant or backward – his portrayal of country life as exemplified by *Hodge and His Masters*, or his memorable character sketch of 'Roger' ('One of the New Voters'), in many respects defined urban perceptions of rural life in the 1880s.⁴² Jessopp, writing on 'Arcady' for the *Nineteenth Century*, tended to avoid using the Hodge label – he did employ the word 'bumpkins',

³⁸ Richard Jefferies, *The hills and the vale* (1909), p. 129.

³⁹ Richard Jefferies, *The toilers of the field* (1907 [1st edn 1892]), p. 97.

⁴⁰ Karen Sayer, *Women of the fields. Representations of rural women in the nineteenth century* (1995), p. 149, citing

Marsh, *Back to the land*, p. 33. Original emphasis.

⁴¹ Samuel J. Looker and Crichton Porteous, *Richard Jefferies, man of the fields: a biography* (1964), p. 136.

⁴² Richard Jefferies, *The open air* (1893 [1st edn 1885]), pp. 94–111.

and was immediately criticized for it – but his articles echoed much of what Jefferies had to say.⁴³ Thus the young men of Scarning, at an age when they had a small margin of income to spend on rational recreation, lounged around displaying no apparent interest or ambition:

In Arcady one never hears people laugh ... You may see half-a-dozen hulking young men literally sprawling in the ditch smoking their pipes, and sunning themselves on their stomachs in the summer evenings, doing the only thing they have any power of doing – nothing. Do you wonder if these young fellows get tired of it, and vaguely find it dull?⁴⁴

Jessopp's labourers retained some of the animalistic qualities of earlier descriptions: their eating habits, for example, were compared to 'chewing the cud', a phrase also used by Jefferies.⁴⁵ These descriptions were followed by other writers. For example, an observer from Hertfordshire thought the labourer 'prefer[red] slouching to any other condition';⁴⁶ west country labourers 'appeared to have lost even the desire to better themselves';⁴⁷ a Leicestershire commentator summed up much of the problem when he pointed to the labourers' '[i]ncessant work ... the same dully, dreary mode of life, without a chance of bettering their condition';⁴⁸ in Wiltshire the 'slow, plodding' labourer lacked 'push and enterprise' and even a 'mental object';⁴⁹ and as for the Scarning labourers, '[l]ogic can they no more understand than they can understand the Differential Calculus'.⁵⁰

Although it was easy to contrast the comparatively well-paid and highly-educated townsman with the agricultural labourer, and although many made the most of this comparison in their writing, Hodge in the 1880s was in many respects the product of urban culture, and this is where the term, as used in this period, becomes problematic. Much of the degeneracy of country life as identified by Jessopp could be traced to the pernicious influence of urban cultural patterns in rural communities. Even country speech had been debased. The Scarning labourers spoke with the 'townsman's gabble': 'it is as if their sentences are made by machinery'.⁵¹ Jefferies noted that many of the songs sung in rural communities were the products of music-hall culture, and might be heard sung by London street-arabs. In this context, the emptiness of rural labouring life was a product of the impact of urban mass culture and the demise of the rural culture of the folk. Thus Jefferies thought that the English labourers 'have no myths; no heroes. They look back on no Heroic Age, no Achilles, no Agamemnon, and no Homer. The past is vacant. They have not even a "Wacht am Rhein" or "Marseillaise" to chant in chorus with quickened step and flashing eye'.⁵² There was a new generational aspect in this construction of the Hodge character, reflected later in the upsurge of interest in English folklore and the perceived need to collect 'survivals' of decaying cultural forms. Although material conditions had undoubtedly

⁴³ Augustus Jessopp, *The trials of a country parson* (1890), p. 93; Anon., *Other views on the trials of a country parson* ([1891]), pp. 19–20, 31.

⁴⁴ Augustus Jessopp, *Arcady: for better for worse* (1887), pp. 112–13. Original emphases; for other examples see pp. xviii, 27, 74–5.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 74; Jefferies, *Toilers*, p. 180.

⁴⁶ C. Scrivener, *Our fields and cities, or misdirected industry* (1891), p. 80.

⁴⁷ Heath, *English peasantry*, p. 45.

⁴⁸ Quoted in Liz Bellamy and Tom Williamson, *Life in the Victorian village: the Daily News survey of 1891* (2 vols, 1999), I, p. 106.

⁴⁹ Richard Jefferies, 'After the county franchise', *Longman's Magazine* 3 (1884), p. 372.

⁵⁰ Jessopp, *Arcady*, p. 124.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 36, 50.

⁵² Richard Jefferies, *Hodge and his masters* (2 vols, 1880), II, p. 204.

improved, it could be argued that the labouring population had become culturally impoverished. Thus for Jessopp, the decline of traditional community events such as the fair, the maypole and the wake, had by now made the life of the labourer a 'dull, uninteresting' one compared with that of the urban artisan.⁵³ By 1914 Jessopp could claim that while 'England's peasantry' were undoubtedly better fed, better educated, better housed and less overworked than their counterparts a century earlier, their ancestors had nevertheless '*enjoyed* their lives much more than their descendants [and] had incomparably more laughter, more amusement, more real delight in the labour of their hands', which were the true 'constituents of happiness'.⁵⁴

There was an element of guilt behind this realisation. Crucial to the definition of the Hodge of the 1880s was a consciousness of the history of the declining involvement of village elites, notably but by no means exclusively the clergy, in the social life of their communities. Jefferies regretted the destruction of the 'former general goodwill and acquaintanceship' that previously existed between farmer and labourer;⁵⁵ while Jessopp thought it a mistake on the part of the clergy to have acquiesced in the decline of fairs, wakes, maypoles and other pagan indulgences. (Even the barbaric practice of cock-fighting had given the labourers *something* in which to take an interest.⁵⁶) This passivity on the part of the rural clergy was identified as one of the causes of the labourer's degradation: the country parson Charles William Stubbs, of the Christian Social Union, partly blamed the clergy for the creation of '[a] class of men, the stolid helplessness of whose ignorance has become proverbial'.⁵⁷ Others more explicitly pointed to the complicity of clergymen in the perpetuation of elite governance of village communities, Arnold Taylor, vicar of Churchstanton in Devon, noting that the labourer viewed parsons as having 'a determination at all costs to keep things as they are, to oppose all reform, and especially to oppose all efforts on the part of Hodge himself to obtain a voice in the management of parish affairs'.⁵⁸ Stubbs and many of his fellow parsons busied themselves in providing social amenities, educational opportunities and access to the land in the form of allotments, hoping that this would 'fire the imagination' of the labourer.⁵⁹ Thus the apparent demoralisation of the labourer was constructed as an effect of the social severance of the past century; and rural elites exhibited a similar 'consciousness of sin' to that identified among urban elites by Beatrice Webb, and which precipitated many of the social changes of the 1880s.⁶⁰ Men like Stubbs were becoming conscious of the very class isolation which had long maintained the Hodge stereotype: a stereotype which resulted from the failure of the natural leaders of the community to socialize the labouring population into the kind of village life of which they approved.

The concession of the wider rural franchise in 1884 contributed to the reassessment of Hodge. Stubbs argued that the franchise would be 'the first step in raising him from the condition of an eating, drinking, and toiling *animal* to the true dignity of a working *man*', only a first step but nonetheless helpful in shaking off the animalistic descriptions so frequently applied; and

⁵³ Jessopp, *Arcady*, pp. 36, 50, 230-2, 241.

⁵⁴ Augustus Jessopp, *England's Peasantry, and Other Essays* (1914), pp. 40-1. Original emphasis.

⁵⁵ Jefferies, *Hodge*, I, p. 229.

⁵⁶ Jessopp, *Arcady*, pp. 230-2.

⁵⁷ C. W. Stubbs, *Village politics: addresses and sermons on the labour question* (1878), p. 174.

⁵⁸ Arnold D. Taylor, 'Hodge and his parson', *Nineteenth Century* 31 (1892), p. 361.

⁵⁹ C. W. Stubbs, *The Land and the labourers: facts and experiments in cottage farming and co-operative agriculture* (1893), p. 29.

⁶⁰ Beatrice Webb, *My apprenticeship* (paperback edn, 1971), pp. 191-5.

the degree of independence it conferred built on the activities of the NALU in shaking the conviction that the labourer was incurably deferential and dependent.⁶¹ In 1892 William Bear remembered that observers had been wrong when they suggested that 'the labourers would not be independent voters, but would driven to the poll, like sheep to the fold, by their employers' (the sheep analogy is notable).⁶² The constructions of the 1880s and 1890s focused more squarely on Hodge's ignorance, or on his lack of interest in the aspects of country life (especially nature study) which enthused writers like Richard Jefferies and his many imitators. Hodge often remained outwardly sullen, but this sullenness was also seen to disguise an inwardly violent hatred of his 'masters'. This realisation, again, stemmed partly from the upsurge of rural trade unionism in the 1870s and Hodge's electoral behaviour. Henrietta Batson, a Berkshire parson's wife writing in 1892, found that '[w]hen Hodge is sober, his attitude to his superiors is extremely dignified and even sullen; he feels then, acutely, that the parson, the squire and the schoolmaster are provided with good things that he cannot share ... [he] hates his employer, he hates his squire, but, above all, he hates his parson'.⁶³ Drunkenness could temporarily overcome this hatred; but usually sullenness was a strategy of concealment employed by the labourer 'so that he may still benefit by [the] kindness' of these village elites. Here, then, we have a defiant Hodge – and one capable of manipulation in order to gain access to charity – and yet in Batson's final judgement the labourer remained 'incapable of appreciating anything more refined than the village pot-house'.⁶⁴ Indeed, his case in the final analysis was as hopeless as it had been forty years earlier: 'let us leave Hodge and his troubles. We are not likely at present to improve him by advice or rebuke, or by any effort that we may make on his behalf'.⁶⁵

Nevertheless, the labourer and his spokesmen were beginning to make their own cases for reform, and in these crusades the ignorance of the labourer was a powerful political weapon with which to beat the traditional paternalist axis of squire, parson and farmer. Thus the conception of rural social relations advanced by labourers' spokesmen in this period – although usually unencumbered by the specific use of the word Hodge – conceded much of the ignorance ascribed to the labourer in less sympathetic descriptions, and emphasized the historical and contemporary role of rural elites in keeping him in this condition. Supporters of the NALU in the 1870s, disproportionately nonconformist in their religious affiliation, indicted the clergy with failure to prevent the degradation of rural life. Charles and Henry Cox, strong supporters of agricultural trade unionsism, writing in 1872, could not help coming 'to the conclusion that the State clergy are, in the main, responsible for the conversion of our rural population into a servile, time-serving, and man-fearing race – a condition of mind from which they are only now awakening, and which has allowed them for so many years tamely to submit to a degrading life'.⁶⁶ This view was expressed even more forcefully in a pamphlet, published in 1885, in which 'An Agricultural Labourer' admitted the ignorance of the bulk of his class, but blamed it squarely on those who wished to ensure their continued subservience:

⁶¹ Stubbs, *Village politics*, p. 191. Original emphasis.

⁶² William E. Bear, 'Farm labourers and their friends', *Nineteenth Century* 31 (1892), p. 160.

⁶³ Henrietta M. Batson, 'Hodge at Home', *Nineteenth Century* 31 (1892), p. 178.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 180.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 180.

⁶⁶ J. Charles Cox and Henry F. Cox, *The rise of the farm labourer. A series of articles illustrative of certain political aspects of the agricultural labourers' movement* (1874), p. 8. The article cited was first published in 1872.

What do these rich men tell you my fellowmen, they tell you that you are ignorant, and I am sorry to say that to some extent it is true. But who is it that has kept you ignorant? Why these rich lords and squires and capitalists, they have ever tried to keep you ignorant to serve their own ends, and yet these people will taunt you with being ignorant ... and it is they who are to blame for it, they have ever tried to keep you back in your ignorance, and why? Because they knew that when you had more knowledge, you would not be contented with your miserable condition ...⁶⁷

Accusations of the labourers' ignorance, then, could be turned around and used in the indictment of rural elites; and the usefulness of the stereotype to the arguments of even the most radical advocates of reform helps to explain its persistence.

IV

Howkins has argued that this period witnessed a transition in perceptions of the agricultural labourer, a shift from the dominance of Hodge to that of Lob. Lob – the title of a poem by Edward Thomas – was not used as a label in the way that Hodge was, but an impressive array of evidence bears witness to a three-pronged movement away from the old construction. The labourer's permanence became valued as a counterbalance to the changing industrial and urban social landscape; agricultural work was revalidated and accorded new respect as a skilled employment; and the labourer was made 'the bearer of Englishness', the carrier of a folk tradition that transcended and superseded the ephemeral culture of the towns.⁶⁸ The works of the social investigator F. E. Green, the fruit-farmer-turned-labourer 'Christopher Holdenby', the folk-song collector Cecil Sharp, the painter George Clausen and the photographer P. H. Emerson are all cited as representative of the new approach to the labourer.⁶⁹ Howkins relates these developments to rural depopulation and the growing unease as to the position of English urban industrial society in a period of undoubted relative economic decline. However, there was no simple transition: although the Hodge label was less frequently used – it had become, to employ an anachronism, 'politically incorrect' by the 1900s – the power of the old stereotype was not broken. Paradoxically perhaps, rural depopulation may have worsened perceptions of the labourer: as the physically, mentally and morally strongest labourers deserted the land, only a residuum of the 'feeble and decrepit' remained.⁷⁰ Representations were still often unflattering. Thomas Kebbel, a long-standing investigator of rural life, whose *Agricultural Labourer* had first appeared in 1870, described one group of labourers, in the fourth edition of the book, published in 1907, in dehumanising terms that recalled those employed half a century earlier:

They grow up mere animals. In their demeanour they are rude, coarse, and insolent ... These knots of loutish lads, who regularly assemble at the same hour under some favourite wall or sheltered corner, never seem engaged in talk. There they stand, like the cows,

⁶⁷ 'An Agricultural Labourer', *The position of the agricultural labourer in the past and in the future* ([1885?]), p. 50.

⁶⁸ Howkins, 'From Hodge to Lob'.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 226–33. 'Christopher Holdenby' was a pseudonym.

⁷⁰ Alfred Williams, *Life in a railway factory* (1915), p. 86.

apparently finding pleasure in the company of their fellows, and possibly communicating with each other through some organs which, to ordinary mortals, are unintelligible; but to all appearance they are as dumb as the brute creation ...⁷¹

Kebbel did not employ the term Hodge, but, like Jessopp, there can be no doubt whom he was describing. Rider Haggard provides another example. In 1899 he defended the labourer against the stereotype and its implications:

It is the fashion, especially in the comic papers, to talk of the agricultural labourer as Hodge – a term of contempt – and to speak of him as though he had about as much intelligence as a turnip. As a matter of fact, after a somewhat prolonged experience of his class, I say deliberately that, take it all in all, there are few sections of society for which I have so great an admiration.⁷²

Nevertheless, this admiration did not stop Haggard remarking in 1901, echoing the complaints of the *Morning Chronicle* investigators half a century earlier, that 'the labourer is a shy bird; also he is suspicious. In any case it is difficult to persuade him to talk, or to be sure when he does talk that he is saying what is really in his mind'.⁷³ Moreover, the labourer's backwardness could still be used by more sympathetic observers as a stick to beat village elites with: thus the Fabian reformer D. C. Pedder explained in 1904 that labourers yet remained 'individually as submissive and as incapable of assertion of their personal rights as they had been through long generations of practical serfdom'.⁷⁴

By this time, however, such representations were far less likely to go unchallenged than they were half a century earlier. In addition to, and partly because of, the higher social and political profile of the agricultural labourer, many influential writers on country life were coming to issue serious challenges to the validity of the stereotyping of the labourer as ignorant and backward. This was not a wholly new development. In the early 1880s Thomas Hardy had suggested that 'Hodge, the dull, unvarying, joyless one' would cease to exist if the subscriber to the stereotype spent six months in a labourer's cottage.⁷⁵ The country parson and publisher Charles Kegan Paul explained in 1899 that the rural poor 'are not stolid and stupid, as is so often assumed. What they lack is book-learning, but for one who can talk their language and understand their thoughts, there is much to repay the attempt to know them better'.⁷⁶ However in the 1890s and 1900s these challenges were complemented by a more systematic revalidation of rural working-class cultures, and an insistence on the value of a longer-term and patient association with the labouring classes if a genuine understanding was to be gained of them and their lives. Working-class defensiveness was reasserted, but in a way that carried with it new forms of validation. Stephen Reynolds, who lived with a fisherman's family in Sidmouth for much of the Edwardian period, portrayed the outward manifestations of his friends' behaviour

⁷¹ T. E. Kebbel, *The agricultural labourer* (4th edn, 1907 [1st edn 1870]), pp. 84–5. This was the earliest edition in which this passage appeared.

⁷² H. Rider Haggard, *A farmer's year, being his commonplace book for 1898* (1899), p. 67.

⁷³ *Daily Express*, 30 May 1901; H. Rider Haggard, *Rural England, being an account of agricultural and social*

researches carried out in 1901 and 1902 (2 vols, 1902), I, pp. 225–6.

⁷⁴ Pedder, *Secret*, p. 5.

⁷⁵ Hardy, 'Dorsetshire labourer', pp. 253–4.

⁷⁶ C. Kegan Paul, *Memories* (1971 [1st edn 1899]), pp. 187–8.

from another point of view, showing that apparent deference was not indicative of feebleness and dependence, but rather of a deliberate defensive strategy. 'Respectfulness is less a tribute to real or fancied superiority, than an armour to defend the poor man's private life'.⁷⁷ The fishermen with whom Reynolds associated not only lived in a separate, vibrant and valid cultural world from those who legislated for, inspected and investigated them, but they defined much of their cultural identity in terms of opposition to this dominant culture. Reynolds was not writing about agricultural labourers, but, as other writers of the period argued, many of his conclusions could equally be applied to them.⁷⁸ Reynolds, along with George Sturt, R. L. Gales and others, went one step further than those who suggested that Hodge had existed but was now disappearing, and argued that Hodge had never existed except as a convenient construction of the labourer by unsympathetic outsiders.⁷⁹

It was gradually becoming apparent that the Hodge stereotype would not stand up to a closer inspection. Hodge was identified where interaction with the labouring population was superficial, and this was more likely when the writer was one who enjoyed only fleeting contact with the people about whom he wrote. There was plenty of evidence that labourers deliberately misled or simply refused to cooperate with investigators. As A. H. Baverstock explained in 1912,

Today the townsman reporter will visit some country village ... find it very dull, and only amusing from its very dullness. A superficial article is penned which discourses lightly of 'Slocum-in-the-Marsh', and leaves an impression of 'Hodge' as a gaping booby with little object for his existence save to be laughed at. Meanwhile 'Hodge' – be it said in passing – has had a little enjoyment of his own of which his interviewer knows nothing ... For 'Hodge' is a shrewd judge of character ... and has summed up that young man from the town, who 'did spake zo vast, lookee, and were off agean afore a man mid zay a word', in a way that would astonish him. The townsman comes to the country for his flying visit, and goes away to gibe, no wiser than he came. Ask him about the problems of the village community, the capacities and the needs of the farmer or the labourer, and he can tell you nothing of them. He has only learnt to give them nicknames!⁸⁰

The insider had the advantage; the observer from another class who was able to approach the labouring population without the cultural preoccupations of a Jefferies or a Jessopp, and could accept the validity of a culture predicated on different principles from his own – and in addition accept that access to this interior cultural life was likely to be restricted to anyone who was not prepared to earn the confidence of those who lived it – was better placed to represent the internal coherence and meanings of the life of the rural poor rather than merely its observable externalities.

This is not to suggest that the outsider could overcome the cultural distance between himself and the labourers simply by reconstructing them in a nobler light; the lionisation of the labourer

⁷⁷ Stephen Reynolds, *A poor man's house* (1909 [1st edn 1908]), p. 80.

⁷⁸ Freeman, 'Social investigation', pp. 207–8.

⁷⁹ R. L. Gales, *Studies in arcady, and other essays from a country parsonage* (1910); id., *Studies in arcady, and other essays from a country parsonage, Second*

Series (1912); id., *The vanishing country folk, and other studies in arcady* (1914); Stephen Reynolds, Bob Woolley and Tom Woolley, *Seems So! A working-class view of politics* (1911); Freeman, 'Social investigation', ch. 8.

⁸⁰ A. H. Baverstock, *The English agricultural labourer* (1912), p. 1.

did not reflect an achievement of empathy any more than did the reduction to an unflattering stereotype. Indeed, the new construction retained many of the features that had characterized Hodge. Like Hodge, Lob was silent, although his silence now reflected his awesome timelessness and latent strength rather than empty-mindedness and non-cooperation. Thus for C. F. G. Masterman, writing in 1909, the agricultural labourer had a 'racial distrust of the stranger, and all of another class' and 'a mind which maintains such reticence except in moments of overpowering emotion': a 'perplexing enigmatic figure'.⁸¹ However, it no longer seemed possible to ignore that enigma by constructing the labourer as Hodge: he was now in a position of greater economic and political strength, and was able in some respects to shape his own destiny. Indeed, in this context it was possible to argue that the idea of Hodge was not only inappropriate, but dangerous. In a passage in his poem 'Hodge in the Saddle', a response to the creation of parish councils in 1894, A. G. Butler described the rise of Hodge as a local legislator, and Hodge spelled out his hopes for the future – a future in which he would become the master:

Yer call me Hodge: my name is Jones: there's Joneses by the score
 In churchyard thare: they ollers were stiddy sort, an' shure;
 But yer've two things we 'avn't got, the money an' the gab;
 Yer see, yer cum before us, Zur, i'the fine old game o'grab.
 It's our turn now. 'Tis well for you to tork o'men as brothers:
 We'll do it too as well as you, when we're atop of others.⁸²

The portrayal is ironic and condescending, but epitomizes many features of the Hodge stereotype as it was challenged, and modified, during the late-Victorian period. There are aspects of Lob here – the image of generations of 'Joneses' in the churchyard reflects the permanence ascribed to the labourer in this construction – but there are also indications that the dismissive Hodge label could be turned around and used against those who were the dominant employers of it. Having 'the money an' the gab' were advantages, but only temporary; and Hodge's political assimilation seemed to suggest that he would soon acquire both.

V

This article has examined only some features of the Hodge stereotype; but there are a number of areas in which a closer interrogation of the label and its implications could give a further indication of differences within the complex pattern of perceptions of agricultural labouring life in this period. In particular, a closer examination and comparison of the terminology used by farmers and urban observers may provide a helpful contrast between rural elite and urban views of the labourer; more work on the literature produced by the NALU and other agricultural trade unions could provide further evidence of the contestation of the stereotype; and a comparison between Anglican and Nonconformist views of Hodge might also yield fruitful results, especially given the Methodist background of many of the NALU leaders. In addition, the literature on Hodge might take something from the historiography of Paddy and Sambo:

⁸¹ C. F. G. Masterman, *The condition of England* (1909), pp. 195–6.

⁸² A. G. Butler, *Hodge and the land* (1907), pp. 28–9. The poem was first published in the 1890s.

how far, for example, is there evidence that labourers played up to the stereotype, in a similar way to plantation slaves who made the most of the Sambo construction?⁸³ Hodge implied different things to different observers at different times, and the demise of the label did not necessarily mean the abandonment of all the terminology associated with it; nor did the 'reconstruction' of the labourer entail an effacement of all the characteristics formerly attributed to him. Hodge was the creation of those who shaped the dominant discourses on rural life, and many labourers and their spokesmen saw as one of their most important tasks the elimination of the stereotype as an essential preliminary to reform. Nevertheless, the very existence of Hodge could be employed as an indictment of those members of village elites who conspired (it was argued) to keep the labourer in subjection by denying him access to better education, higher wages, political power and opportunities for personal economic and social advance through the ownership or tenancy of land. Thus the label became a powerful political weapon, wielded by both enemies and supporters of the labourers' cause, and its wide diffusion and variety of implications ensured that it persisted throughout and beyond the 1870s and 1880s when many labourers themselves began to challenge it. Hodge – and, for that matter, Lob – was the outcome of a cultural distance between the agricultural labouring classes and those who described them, a cultural distance that was maintained even after the condition and outlook of the labourer had been widely reassessed in the wake of the economic and social changes of the late nineteenth century. The deeper interrogation of the stereotype could tell us a lot more about rural society in the period during which it was most frequently, and most contestedly, employed.

⁸³ Elkins, *Slavery*, esp. pp. 131–3.