The Writing of Rural England, 1500–1800

By the same authors

Dana Arnold and Stephen Bending, eds
TRACING ARCHITECTURE, c. 1700–1840

Andrew McRae,
GOD SPEED THE PLOUGH: THE REPRESENTATION OF AGRARIAN ENGLAND,
1500–1660

The Writing of Rural England 1500–1800

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Introduction

The title of this anthology, 'The Writing of Rural England', is intentionally ambiguous. On the one hand, it indicates a collection of writing *about* rural England in the early modern period. Included in this volume, then, is a collection of material which reflects in various ways upon conditions of life in the English countryside. Yet on the other hand, the title suggests a cultural process through which texts ascribe meaning and order to rural practices and values. According to this perception, if structures of property relations changed in the course of the early modern period, texts not only recorded these changes but also worked to encode new appreciations of the land as property. Thomas More's complaint about the enclosure movement early in the sixteenth century, Gerrard Winstanley's radical vision of the abolition of property in the seventeenth century and Horace Walpole's aesthetic celebration of a landscape founded on principles of absolute property in the eighteenth century equally participated in these processes. Such shifts were by no means clear; rather, as this volume aims to demonstrate, meanings were forged through ongoing contestation. If the advocates of property predominated by the late eighteenth century, they were nonetheless shadowed throughout the centuries by dissident voices, often bringing the perspective of the oppressed and displaced to the debate. *The Writing of Rural England* is designed to document and contextualize these struggles for students of this vital era in the nation's social, economic and cultural development.

In his ground-breaking materialist study, *The Country and the City*, Raymond Williams drew to our attention the significance of certain predominant 'images and associations' of rural and urban life, and set these 'in relation to the historically varied experience'.¹ His analysis of the pastoral tradition, for example, memorably set this literary genre's idealization of the lives of rural labourers against a backdrop of exploitation and dispossession. Yet subsequent work in this field, informed by the critical movements of new historicism and cultural materialism, has developed freshly dynamic models for appreciating the relation between texts and contexts. Texts may be perceived not merely as reflections of external reality, nor as agents of false consciousness in the way that Williams sometimes assumes; instead, they may be seen as active agents involved in constructing a culture's sense of reality. Consequently, textual analysis becomes concerned with how and why cultures produce and naturalize particular constructions of reality, how those constructions interact or conflict with rival representations of reality, and what the political implications of those constructions of reality are. Hence, to give just one example from the plethora of work in this field,

Don E. Wayne has devoted an entire book to Ben Jonson's classic country house poem, 'To Penshurst'. While Williams had argued that this poem works to naturalize oppressive structures of social differentiation, Wayne valuably explores tensions in the text between conflicting ideologies of rural life. 'To Penshurst', he argues, remoulds ideals of stewardship and moral economy in accordance with the imperatives of a new age.²

Another significant consequence of these movements has been an interrogation of the literary canon. Scholars have increasingly challenged the grounds upon which notions of literary value were erected in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as the discipline of English studies took shape. Significantly, many have also drawn attention to writers excluded from the canon, often partly on the basis of gender or class. Texts written by such authors may present strikingly divergent representations of contemporary life: stressing forces of exclusion and oppression, for example, which may be occluded in the work of writers aligned with a social elite. Consequently, this volume aims to accommodate many non-canonical voices and challenges distinctions between 'literary texts' and 'historical documents'. For example, we include ballads written for popular consumption and extracts from prose tracts about agriculture and the lives of the rural poor. Further, the volume embraces a number of texts by women writers: from the early seventeenth-century country house poem by Aemilia Lanyer, 'A Description of Cookham', with its underlying sense of displacement due to the patriarchal prejudices of the aristocracy, to the work of eighteenth-century labouring poets such as Mary Collier and Ann Yearsley. Such texts reveal the extent to which writers, from their various positions within society, actively contested the meaning of the land. There was simply never one clear reality of rural England.

This introduction aims to contextualize the material that follows, by considering some of the more important factors that informed rural writing throughout the early modern period. We will first provide a general overview of rural history before examining issues of aesthetics and genre and finally considering the circulation and readership of texts. More specific points of introduction will be contained with each section of texts in the volume.

The uses of the land

Throughout the early modern period, the land supported a rapidly expanding population, underpinned a growing national economy and provided a home for the vast majority of English men and women. While many texts from these centuries present idealized representations of stability and community, however, the English countryside was in fact diverse and dynamic. As a result of insistent pressures placed upon the rural economy, uses of the land changed significantly from 1500 to 1800, and this affected the fundamental structures of society. At the outset of this volume, therefore, it

will be useful to survey some of these developments; as the texts below will demonstrate, changes in representations and values are intertwined with changes in material conditions and practices.

In 1520, almost 95 per cent of the English population, which numbered roughly 2.4 million, lived in villages and smaller settlements across the nation, and some 76 per cent relied primarily on agriculture for a living. By 1801, while the population had expanded almost 400 per cent and London had become one of the most prosperous and populous cities in Europe, 72.5 per cent of the nation's people still resided in the countryside (though now, significantly, only 36.25 per cent were directly involved in agriculture).³ Moreover, as the population swelled agricultural output increased accordingly. Though at certain times it needed to import grain or cloth and at other times its people suffered from the effects of shortages or dearth, England was generally self-sufficient throughout the early modern period. Further, agriculture provided the raw materials for rural industries, most notably the valuable cloth industry, and also smaller enterprises such as leather-working and woodland crafts.⁴ Despite residual forces of conservatism, farmers consistently proved themselves capable of making rational decisions, which might lead them to switch from one type of farming to another, or to adopt new crops in response to market forces.

There were also marked patterns of regional diversity, which present problems for any attempt to make general statements about the nation. The major distinction in the period was between regions in the north and west, where relatively poor conditions restricted farmers to rearing livestock, and the more fertile and prosperous land in the south and east, which was suitable for grain crops as well as pastoral farming.⁵ Even within these parameters, however, there were countless points of local distinction. Fenland regions, for example, encompassing parts of Yorkshire, Lincolnshire, Norfolk and Somerset sustained unique traditional methods of agriculture, structured around the annual inundation of the land.⁶ Other regions, most notably in Kent, specialized in orchards, while market-gardens flourished on the outskirts of the nation's cities and towns. Even by 1500 structures of marketing had taken England 'a very long way from the era of fully self-supporting rural communities', while ongoing improvements in road and water transportation further encouraged regional specialization.⁷ Hence, at the turn of the eighteenth century the travel diarist Celia Fiennes routinely observed the strengths of local regions and their markets; she noted, for example, the 'vast trade' in serge at Exeter, which 'turns the most money of a week of anything in England'.⁸

Throughout the period, rural society was divided into several categories of social degree. At the top of the scale, the nobility and gentry were the most prominent landowners, typically holding large estates and occupying a leading role in their communities. Next, yeomen generally held land under the gentry or nobility; however, they were distinguished from their neighbours

at once by the substantial size of their landholdings and their greater orientation towards market production. Though they comprised only three to four per cent of the population in 1500, their numbers increased considerably in the course of our period, as market forces increasingly polarized the rural population.⁹ A larger number of husbandmen held smaller parcels of land, and their production was typically directed by a concern to provide for the family. While their situations could often be precarious, many husbandmen also seized opportunities to rise into the yeomanry: through a combination of individual endeavour and favourable economic conditions (such as those afforded by the early decades of the sixteenth century).¹⁰ Beneath that level, a considerable number of men and women survived as cottagers, labourers and servants in husbandry, often piecing together a subsistence from very small landholdings, rights of use in common lands and paid labour on the farms of those of higher degree.¹¹

At least in theory, the social structure was held together by the interlinked institutions of the parish and the manorial estate. The parish provided the most tangible social and administrative frameworks for the average woman or man.¹² Since the Church was involved in matters ranging from the administration of social welfare to the legal enforcement of moral standards, ministers and parish officers carried a considerable weight of responsibility. The manorial estate, which usually covered a similar – though not identical – region as the parish, was lauded by conservative commentators as a site within which men and women of all degrees might live together harmoniously. It was, as one Jacobean writer declared, ‘a little commonwealth’, and the bonds between the lord and his inferiors were like those of a father and his children.¹³ Such rhetoric, of course, is more wish-fulfilment than reality. Nonetheless, most historians agree that vertical bonds of deference and responsibility, within parish and manor alike, were commonly more important in day-to-day lives than the horizontal ties which characterize a modern class structure. Moreover, the agricultural activities of individual farmers were profoundly interconnected, particularly when an estate adhered to the common field system, which required intricate patterns of cooperation and coordination.¹⁴

But while this model remained important, the realities of life in many parts of the country were considerably more complex. Despite the ideal of a resident landlord, much of the nation’s land, particularly early in the period, was in fact owned by institutions, such as the Church or the Crown, and on countless other estates the landlord was not resident, and thus contributed little to local society. Conditions for yeomen and husbandmen could also vary enormously, and many moved from one place to another, either out of necessity or with an eye to economic advancement. The labouring population was similarly mobile. Many people spent at least some of their lives – especially in their youth – as servants, often moving beyond their home villages in order to find positions. Others were forced into itinerant

lives, especially in times of dearth and famine. Further, as several historians have demonstrated, the manorial model was more common in the lowland fielden regions than in the upland areas of forest. In the latter, settlement patterns were less concentrated, landlords were more frequently absent, and there was less need for cooperation, so manorial control was more difficult to maintain.¹⁵ Population patterns in these regions were also volatile, as they attracted considerable numbers of immigrants, particularly from the poorer levels of society. Woodland villages in the Midlands, for example, 'grew by 30 to 50 per cent more than open-field ones in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, largely because of immigration'.¹⁶

Conditions of life were also affected by differing forms of land tenure. Despite often considerable regional differentiations, the three most important categories were: freehold, which was close to modern conceptions of property ownership, though often also required a minimal fixed rent; copyhold, which usually involved the payment of a substantial 'fine' on admittance to the land, as well as a lower annual rent; and leasehold, for terms up to 21 years.¹⁷ These offered widely variant levels of security and flexibility. Some freeholders and copyholders were able to prosper under conditions of inflation, if the terms of their tenure kept their costs low while prices rose. Most landholders, though, were subject to more severe increases in rents, and many landlords converted copyholds into leaseholds, which tended to be more remunerative and market-sensitive. In the sixteenth century a wealth of moral discourse castigated landlords who chose to 'rack and stretch out the rents of their houses and lands'; yet rack-rents – literally, rents charged annually at market rates – became increasingly prevalent.¹⁸ In many instances land would stay in the same family's hands for generations. Among the gentry and nobility, codes of patriarchy and primogeniture were framed in the interests of continuity down a male line, while at the lower levels of society parents were also concerned to provide for their children (though they typically did so in a more equitable manner).¹⁹ But the land market was lively, and there are myriad cases of family fortunes rising or falling. In the mid-sixteenth century, the Crown's seizure and sales of monastic lands provided an enormous stimulus to the market; subsequently, the level of sales was impelled largely by the accumulation of capital on the one hand, and the tendency of landowners to become enmeshed in financial difficulties on the other.²⁰

Women were generally forced into subordinate positions within these structures by virtue of legal and cultural restraints. A girl would be raised under the control of her father, and in marriage a woman could typically hold no property of her own and would have little say over the management of her husband's land. Yet these strictures were not universally enforced, and women could sometimes assert significant influence, particularly if they survived their husbands and assumed control over property as widows.²¹ Moreover, beyond this limited access to authority, women played a vital role

in the rural economy. Thomas Tusser, Elizabethan author of the best-selling *Five Hundred Points of Good Husbandry*, recognized their contributions when he added a section of 'Points of Huswiferie' for the text's second edition.²² The tasks he teaches are chiefly those concerned with managing the house and supervising servants. Women also comprised a substantial part of the rural workforce, employed mainly as labourers and servants, particularly before marriage and later in life. In arable regions, their most common work was weeding, harvesting and gleaning, while in pastoral regions they were widely employed in the cloth and dairying industries. But even when women performed the same work as men they were routinely paid less, while the considerable labours involved in child-rearing were entirely unremunerated. For poorer women, especially those who were widowed or deserted, the countryside could be a site of bitter and incessant struggle.²³

The pace of social and economic change across rural England was driven, above all else, by the nation's growing population. The rate of population increase was by no means steady, either across time or space. For example, it fell slightly in the latter half of the seventeenth century; however, from 1751 to 1801 it surged from 5.7 million to 8.7 million.²⁴ Similarly, whereas the population of Cambridgeshire rose only 34 per cent in the hundred years after 1563, that of Staffordshire expanded by about 130 per cent in the same period.²⁵ These developments placed considerable stress on existing structures of rural society, particularly as they raised demand for agricultural produce. A related problem – equally volatile and equally feared – was inflation. In the second half of the sixteenth century, for instance, the real wages of an average agricultural labourer steadily declined until in the 1620s his or her daily wage bought only half what it had in the late fifteenth century.²⁶ These conditions were exploited by some, who translated success in the marketplace into increased landholdings: indeed in the arable farming regions there was a gradual concentration of ownership and occupancy of land into fewer hands.²⁷ Other people, however, moved into the forests and wastelands, bringing new land under cultivation with varying degrees of success. And at the bottom of the scale, many suffered extreme hardship, especially at times when harvest failures and consequent food shortages created conditions of mortality crisis.²⁸

The most notable and controversial manifestation of rural change – attitudes to which we will trace throughout the book – was enclosure. The act of enclosure replaced traditional common-field structures of farming with stricter definitions of individual rights. It occurred either on wastes and commons, or else in arable fields where cultivated strips could be exchanged and consolidated in the hands of individual landholders.²⁹ Although it was not a new phenomenon, since by 1500 roughly half of the country was already enclosed, its effects were particularly striking in the early modern period. In fact, it seems clear that the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were pivotal in the history of English enclosure, with over a third of the

nation's total surface area being enclosed in these years.³⁰ And since the progress of enclosure was at any one time highly localized, its impact as a consequence was typically concentrated in ways that observers found either disturbing or exhilarating. Most significantly in our period, enclosure transformed that half of the country, 'most of it lying in the East Midlands, the south and the south-east, where corn-growing systems of farming predominated'.³¹ In the late eighteenth century, it also reshaped the agriculture and society of many wastes and commons, including hitherto unaffected northern regions.

Though generally described as a 'movement', it is equally important to appreciate the way in which decisions to enclose could be influenced by particular attitudes and interests. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it might be effected either unilaterally at the behest of a powerful landowner, by agreement among all landholders with an interest in an estate, or by various combinations of coercion and assent.³² Some estates hurried towards change because the landlord or some of his larger tenants saw an opportunity for economic advancement, while others held out against regional trends due merely to a tradition of conservatism within the resident landowning family. In the eighteenth century, enclosure was more commonly brought about by an Act of Parliament. Indeed these parliamentary enclosures, which gathered pace in the latter decades of the century, were especially sweeping in their impact, transforming the society of certain regions in the space of a generation. Much of the Yorkshire Wolds, for example, was enclosed within just two decades, between 1760 and 1780.

Enclosure reshaped pre-existent structures of rural society and economy. It was most controversial when it led to depopulation as a result of a decision by a large landowner to convert land from arable to pastoral uses. And while depopulation did not happen in the majority of cases, the fundamental point is that enclosure created this possibility, by encoding new concepts of absolute property. Under the common-field system, a farmer did not necessarily 'feel fiercely that he *owned* this land, that it was *his*'. Instead, the individual landholder held

a place within the hierarchy of use-rights; the right to send his beasts, with a follower, down the lane-sides, to tether his horse in the sykes or on the baulks, the right to unloose his stock for lammas grazing, or for the cottager the right to glean and to get away with some timber-foraging and casual grazing.³³

By contrast, enclosure underpinned a system within which a landholder could make entirely independent decisions about issues of land management. Therefore, although it was not necessarily a process undertaken for capitalist ends, it created the conditions within which capitalism could emerge. As Tusser proclaimed, in an early endorsement of rural individualism:

'Again what a joy is it known, / When men may be bold of their own!'³⁴ Yet for those lower in the social scale, who had been dependent upon rights of common and who gained at best meagre plots of land after an enclosure settlement, there was less cause for 'joy'. One effect of enclosure was the creation of a class of people loosened from the communal bonds of the manorial estate, with little or no rights in land.

Throughout the sixteenth century and into the seventeenth century, public opinion was weighted against enclosure. In the mid-sixteenth century, as the nation experienced a series of erratic harvest fluctuations and conditions of steep inflation, preachers and writers depicted enclosure as a quintessential manifestation of covetousness. Like many others, Thomas Becon invoked the authority of the prophet Isaiah, as he inveighed against 'rich men' and 'sheepmongers', who 'join . . . lordship to lordship, manor to manor, farm to farm, land to land, pasture to pasture, house to house'.³⁵ Tudor governments shared this anxiety, and passed a series of laws aimed to protect the production of grain and to limit the size of sheep-farms.³⁶ Moreover, people affected by enclosure sometimes took direct action in an effort to protect their rights. In theory the common law offered some protection for tenants, although the extent to which these interests were in fact upheld in the courts remains unclear.³⁷ In other cases, villagers rioted in opposition to enclosing landlords, and physically uprooted hedges which had been planted to enclose fields. The Midlands' Revolt of 1607, for instance, was essentially a popular action against local enclosures. As in many other enclosure riots, the participants in this uprising were united in their 'perception of the extent of enclosure which required legal redress by the government'. Rather than perceiving themselves as outlaws, the rioters in fact 'felt that they were putting the King's laws into execution'.³⁸ Although such actions were rarely successful, they occasionally prompted government inquiries, and in a surprising number of cases the rioters escaped punishment.

Through the course of the early modern period, however, opinion gradually turned in favour of enclosure. In the 1630s, while Archbishop William Laud was reputed to have had 'an almost fanatical prejudice against enclosers', his pursuit of depopulators appears to have been conceived by the government 'primarily as a revenue-raising device, rather than as a remedy for social evils'.³⁹ Similarly, attitudes shifted among the gentry and aristocracy. Enclosure was freshly represented as a spur to individual initiative; as the eighteenth-century agricultural writer Arthur Young declared, 'Enclosing has changed the man as much as it has improved the country'.⁴⁰ This development necessitated a similar transformation in ideas about poverty. Whereas the poor had once been understood as the responsibility of a local community, they were now refigured as a 'productive resource', whose unnecessary idleness could be translated into economic gain. A medieval commitment to charity thus gave way to a discourse of improvement, as seventeenth-century economic writers 'frequently treated their

audience to calculations of the daily consumption, daily lost labour, daily savings when idleness was turned to industry'.⁴¹ Finally, by the eighteenth century the government decisively swung its weight behind the movement, sponsoring new swathes of enclosures. For many rural communities, these were especially devastating, and as a consequence this century was marked by some of the most bitter anti-enclosure protests of all.

Changes in the structures of landholding were accompanied by wider processes of innovation. The term 'agricultural revolution' is often used to describe a nexus of developments in economic practices, social relations and farming methods, which led to substantial increases in productivity. Although historians once agreed that this movement took place in the latter part of the eighteenth century and the early decades of the nineteenth century, more recent research has identified important changes much earlier, so that the revolution might now be seen to span the period 1560–1880.⁴² One aspect of this process was a drive to bring more land under cultivation, particularly by the drainage of fens and the disafforestation of forests.⁴³ More importantly, farmers in established agricultural regions introduced new methods, such as the floating of water meadows (temporary and controlled inundation used as a method of fertilization), and the use of 'up-and-down husbandry' ('the conversion of permanent tillage and permanent grassland or of temporary and shifting cultivations, to permanently cultivated arable alternating between temporary tillage and temporary grass leys').⁴⁴ Also significant was the spread of new crops, including root vegetables such as carrots and turnips, and cash crops such as tobacco and woad.

By the end of the early modern period, largely as a result of these interconnected changes in the distribution and use of the nation's land, rural society had been transformed irrevocably. Those with land and money were in a position to benefit from the developments, and many rose to positions of increased wealth and authority. It has been estimated that between 1500 and 1620 the size of the gentry and aristocracy trebled, a process attributable 'partly to the increase of land in private ownership', and partly also 'to the generation of new wealth in trade, the law, office and agriculture'.⁴⁵ The land market was a vehicle through which individuals could legitimize their success by transforming capital into landed property; throughout the period, land provided the basis for social status and political influence. After the rise of the local gentry in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, however, from the late seventeenth century the most significant development was a tendency for land to be accumulated by the owners of very large estates.⁴⁶ Though always highly stratified, English society had perhaps never been so markedly polarized between the rich and poor.

As we have already seen in the case of enclosure, this process was accompanied by a shift in attitudes towards rural society. While the relation between attitudes and practices is complex and dynamic – a point underscored time and again by the texts in this volume – the terms of debate over rural England

gradually shifted over the course of the early modern period. Although pockets of conservative resistance remained, even into the nineteenth century, economic conditions increasingly favoured the innovators and the individualists.⁴⁷ In the words of the seventeenth-century reformer Samuel Hartlib, qualities of 'experimental industriousness' held the promise of 'infinite increase . . . beyond that which is attainable in the ordinary way'.⁴⁸ Those among the yeomanry and lower gentry were often the quickest to seize upon such ideas, though even individuals holding the nation's greatest estates were increasingly ready to 'embrace a market philosophy'.⁴⁹ As a result, relations between landlords, tenants and labourers were increasingly dominated by commercial forces. Moreover, the gradual decline of traditional values of manorial community was manifested in new forms of architecture and estate planning, which isolated landlords from the society of their land. As will become apparent in Chapter 7, the eighteenth century was the great age of landscape design, as landowners sought to mould their estates as aesthetic objects which would signify to the nation their taste and status.⁵⁰

At the lower levels of the social scale, the effects of change were frequently crushing. By 1800, conditions of tenure had become less secure and more exposed to market forces, while labourers were more commonly employed for short periods rather than being incorporated into the life of an estate as residential servants.⁵¹ Countless people were simply displaced from the land. From the Tudor period onward, historians have documented the emergence of 'a growing army of landless, or almost landless, labourers . . . dependent on wages alone for their livelihood'.⁵² While many such people stayed in the same locality, often becoming dependent upon poor relief, others chose to move. Rates of internal migration were high throughout the period, and many people drifted into small rural industries or made their way to the towns and cities.⁵³ Some fell into itinerant lives. In the early part of the period in particular, such people lived on the margins of society and in constant fear of the law which defined them as vagrants or 'masterless men'.⁵⁴ Indeed the period's ideology of placement, though founded upon paternalistic ideals, was often oppressive in its impact, coercing individuals into remaining in hopeless situations. Even the labour demands of the early Industrial Revolution did not significantly affect these conditions: while some of the displaced found work in urban factories, the vast majority remained trapped in rural poverty.

Genres, modes and literary traditions

One purpose of this anthology is to demonstrate that literary modes of writing are not simply something which poets do or which bear no relation to a world beyond the literary: the choice of genre or mode is part of the way in which writers articulate their understanding of, and position in, the world. Here, we should begin by recognizing an important distinction

between mode and genre. For, while genres tend to be mutually exclusive – lyric, epic, tragedy and so on – a mode can have a far more widespread influence across a range of genres. In the seven chapters which follow we offer a wide range of modes and genres, from satire and drama to prose essays and the novel, but we also draw particular attention to two modes: pastoral and georgic.⁵⁵ There is much these two modes share – their focus on rural life, their attachment to classical models and their concern with the relationship between leisure and labour – but there are also crucial distinctions to be made and inflections to be recognized.

As a specialized form, georgic has been given a section to itself, whereas pastoral is at once so central to and pervasive in rural writing that it will be found in various kinds of writing throughout the anthology, including lyric poetry, drama and the novel. However, this is not to say that pastoral is unaffected by genre: throughout the early modern period, the idea of decorum and the hierarchy of genres (first established by Horace in his *Art of Poetry*) continued to be influential. According to such thinking, nobility and royalty are the proper subject of ‘high’ genres such as epic and tragedy whereas peasants, shepherds and labourers are fit only for ‘lower’ forms. As a schema this was far from rigid and Shakespeare famously plays with, and ridicules, the convention (as for example in *Hamlet*, II.ii when Polonius speaks of the ‘tragical-comical-historical-pastoral’); but it continued to be a matter of concern well into the eighteenth century, whether in Gay’s *Shepherd’s Week*, with its burlesque mismatch of vulgar rustic life and elegant pastoral forms, or in Samuel Johnson’s dismissal of pastoral as simply an outdated mode for the modern age.

Part of the complexity of pastoral as a form arises from an awareness of audience. For all that it takes ‘nature’ as its subject, as Frank Kermode has noted, ‘the first condition of pastoral is that it is an urban product’ and it is created for a largely urban audience.⁵⁶ That is, pastoral looks from the city to the country but also uses this imagined country to look back at the city: it faces in opposing directions simultaneously and if it is implicitly a satire on the city (the country is imagined to offer those things the city makes unavailable) it is also written from the normative viewpoint of a sophisticated urban culture. In this sense, then, it is important to recognize that pastoral conventions take their own conventionality in part as their subject. Pastoral should not, therefore, be dismissed as mere ‘escapism’, rather, as Michael McKeon has argued, it ‘exists to oppose nature and art in such a way as to intimate simultaneously their interpenetration... An artful impersonation of nature, pastoral deploys the sophisticated technology of poetic culture to represent its absence, and it is in the self-consciousness of this paradox that we recognize the characteristic complexity of the genre’.⁵⁷

While we may tend to think of pastoral as denoted by shepherds and shepherdesses – and certainly this is the origins of the term (‘pastor’ is Latin for ‘shepherd’, ‘bucolic’ is from the Greek for ‘herdsman’) – in practice it has

always had wider concerns: even the classic setting of pastoral – a Golden Age of long ago – invites a comparison between the past and the present, and thus raises questions of progress and the moral state of ‘primitive’ and contemporary cultures.⁵⁸ Twentieth-century critics have taken this a stage further by seeing the shepherds and shepherdesses of what we might term *formal* pastoral as simply the trappings or signifiers of a mood. The most notable exponent of this very broad account has been William Empson in *Some Versions of Pastoral*, in which he identifies the pastoral process ‘of putting the complex into the simple’, and pastoral as any text which contrasts a simpler life imagined to exist in the past with the complexity of the modern age. Here the pastoral *mode* is the articulation of longing, the desire for simplicity, innocence, sensuous pleasure and freedom from death and mutability. Part of the purpose of this anthology, however, is to resist the notion that pastoral is somehow timeless or divorced from the period in which it was written. As a nostalgic form, pastoral’s representation of the past is fundamentally concerned with the expression of longing in the present and it is important to recognize that the audience for pastoral changes across the early modern period and that the language of pastoral changes likewise: we can map out important changes in pastoral’s relationship with social structure and urban and agricultural practices precisely because pastoral questions the relationship between leisure and labour, the country and the city, the past and the present.

If we are aware of what is actually happening in the fields which sustained English rural life, it may seem that the trajectory of pastoral would inevitably be towards social criticism. There was certainly a strong medieval tradition of complaint which represented the shepherd as a struggling, oppressed labourer and the courtier as lazy and corrupt.⁵⁹ However, the huge increase of pastoral verse produced in the courtly culture of Elizabeth and James (1559–1603, 1603–25) is striking for nothing so much as the way in which it rejects that element of social subversion and instead establishes pastoral as a quintessentially aristocratic mode. In part this was achieved by representing the shepherds of pastoral as ‘naturally’ aristocratic and in part by insisting that the landscape of pastoral was a place of mythical perfection with only the most limited relation to the English fields.

Central to Renaissance justifications of the pastoral mode and of retirement was the state of *otium*: broadly, an escape from business, whether public or private, an escape from worry, an escape from thoughts of death, but also therefore an opportunity to cultivate true happiness and intellectual endeavour. If its opposite, *negotium* (business, public duty, the city), was never far away, it was this ability to link leisure with intellectual activity, meditation and true happiness which was to prove one of pastoral’s major attractions but which, for Renaissance writers, was also to establish it as a mode only available to the cultural elite. In these terms, pastoral is not simply a way of seeing, but a way of seeing fundamentally predicated on

social status and the wealth which allows individuals the leisure to 'see'. Thus, as a justification of aristocratic leisure, pastoral is inevitably also a rejection of plebeian labour.

This is not, however, to say that Elizabethan and early Jacobean courtly culture was unaware of what was happening around it: as Raymond Williams has noted, one of the most influential works of Elizabethan pastoral, Sir Philip Sidney's *Arcadia*, 'was written in a park which had been made by enclosing a whole village and evicting the tenants'. What this demonstrates to us, he argues, is that 'The elegant game [of pastoral] was then only at arm's length – a rough arm's length – from a visible reality of country life'.⁶⁰ In turn, what we should then recognize is that if poets knew of the social realities and upheavals taking place around them, the choice of pastoral conventions is precisely that: a choice. On the face of it, that choice may seem to be an odd one, but as Louis Montrose has argued, 'Such a poetry is not concerned to embrace the lot of Elizabethan husbandmen or to advance egalitarian ideas but to recreate an elite community in pastoral form'.⁶¹ While pastoral could serve the ends of the individual in the ways Montrose suggests, it could also lay claim to a larger national agenda. For if there was a concern to separate pastoral landscapes from the language of complaint, there was also a sustained attempt to anglicize classical traditions (notably for example in the work of Spenser); and we should recognize this not simply as something happening in literary tradition, but as part of a larger political process which aimed to raise the stature of England, which engaged in an emergent nationalism based on England and which used the rural environment both as a physical / social foundation and as a site for national myth-making.

Critics have long noted the decline of formal pastoral by the eighteenth century, with Pope's youthful *Pastorals* (1704, published 1709) being among the last to insist on a world of idealized shepherds and shepherdesses. Even here, while Pope includes these traditional figures in his poems, the purpose of pastoral is explicitly the imagination of a simpler world in a past age and emphatically not the representation of modern manners among lowly rustics.⁶² Moreover, the fun to be had in using the language of contemporary 'rustics' within the elegant forms of pastoral poetry was not lost on his contemporaries, and Pope's close friend John Gay was to explore exactly this mismatch of ideas and ideals in his *Shepherd's Week* of 1714. By the mid-eighteenth century formal pastoral was undoubtedly on the wane and the degree to which it had fallen from favour is famously marked by Samuel Johnson's uncomprehending dismissal of Milton's *Lycidas*. According to Johnson, 'Its form is that of a pastoral, easy, vulgar, and therefore disgusting: whatever images it can supply, are long ago exhausted; and its inherent improbability always forces dissatisfaction on the mind'.⁶³ For Johnson, 'an intelligent reader, acquainted with the scenes of real life, sickens at the mention of the crook, the pipe, the shet, and the kide, which it is not

necessary to bring forward to notice, for the poet's art is selection, and he ought to show the beauties without the grossness of the country life.⁶⁴

Johnson's insistence on 'real life' is effectively a rejection of formal pastoral as simply out of date and inappropriate for the modern age. It is also quite recognizably, of course, a repetition of that much earlier insistence on gentility and good manners. Thus the problem with pastoral here is not that it evokes a simple life but that it confuses simplicity with vulgarity in a manner not suited to a genteel audience. We have already seen how Gay's *Shepherd's Week* parodies that elision, but the eighteenth century was also to see a new form of writing which insisted not on an aristocratic vision of pastoral ease, but on the hardship of physical labour in the fields. Modern critics have termed this new 'realism' a form of anti-pastoral and we can trace it in the poetry of rural labouring poets like Stephen Duck, Mary Collier and Ann Yearsley, but perhaps more insistently at the end of the century in Crabbe's anti-pastoral, *The Village*, where he famously writes that he represents rural life, 'As truth will paint it and as bards will not'.

If formal pastoral, with elegant shepherds and their crooks, no longer retained the cultural centrality it had in Spenser's time, pastoral as a form of rural nostalgia continued unabated and in various forms. In the late eighteenth century, Goldsmith's *Deserted Village* offers us something clearly recognizable as pastoral, with its plaintive language of nostalgia, but the 'trappings' have undoubtedly changed: we are no longer offered shepherds and shepherdesses but a recognizable 'modern' society, both rural and urban. What is pastoral in Goldsmith's poem is not simply the focus on rural community, nor even the emphasis on easy labour, but the lament for a lost way of life, and specifically a way of life now lost to the poet. In this, though writing well over a century later, Goldsmith shared something with the royalist poets in the first half of the seventeenth century whose evocation of English rural life was also an insistent lament for the loss of an older social order. Among royalist poets the choice of pastoral marks a keen awareness of what is at stake in the larger ideological battles of the mid-seventeenth century. In Herrick's poem, 'The Hock Cart', for example, it is a georgic understanding of rural labour which ultimately undermines and sees through pastoral conventions and those who adopt them. In Goldsmith's poem we might argue the reverse. From his opening lines, Goldsmith offers us the happy labouring swain whose world is being destroyed by enclosure; but if labour here invites us to think of the georgics, it is an easy and welcome labour – a pastoral labour – which could only exist in an idyllic past. What both poets draw to our attention is the complex ways in which pastoral leisure and georgic labour, pastoral nostalgia and georgic progress, are intimately intertwined. It is to georgic, then, that we should now turn.

So far we have mapped out the importance but also the effective decline of formal pastoral across the early modern period; against that decline, however, we can also trace the striking rise of that other most rural of forms,

the georgic.⁶⁵ If anything, georgic is more of a problem to define than pastoral despite its specific derivation from Virgil's *Georgics*. Like pastoral, it is helpful to recognize georgic as a mode rather than a genre. As Anthony Low has argued, we might see it as 'an informing spirit, an attitude towards life' and 'a mode that stresses the value of intensive and persistent labour against hardships and difficulties'.⁶⁶ Crucially, more than simply being a description of agricultural life, it is also a celebration of the potential of labour to regenerate the individual and improve the nation. In this sense, Virgil's poem provided the basis for a tradition of rural literature which would run counter to that of pastoral.

In *The Country and the City*, Raymond Williams aligned the growing popularity of georgic in England with the growth of agrarian capitalism and saw georgic as a form of apologetic for this new form of economic activity and its social structure. In this account, georgic becomes the expression of a progressivist narrative of history: in speaking of 'improvement' it assumes that human history moves from the primitive towards a state of perfection, but it also assumes that capitalism is part of the answer, part of the reason for 'progress'. More recently, however, critics have come to recognize georgic's ability to articulate something much more complex than this. In particular, critics such as John Barrell and Karen O'Brien have stressed the utility of georgic for writers wishing to engage with an increasingly commercialized and indeed globalized economy.⁶⁷ From Dryden's translation of Virgil in the 1690s until at least the loss of the American colonies in the 1780s, it was georgic which was to provide writers with a ready model for Britain's imperial expansion and massive colonial growth during the eighteenth century. Thus if there is an obvious concern with the relationship between the city and the country in the ways that Williams suggests, recent work points to other concerns: to the way in which georgic can express the newly emerging viewpoint of the middling sort, to the implicit opposition of this to an aristocratic pastoral mode, to the place of farming within the nation as a whole, and indeed to the relationship between nation and empire.

Virgil's poem is very much about physical processes, about man's relationship with the land and the inherent dignity of labour; but it also offers a vision of national greatness and just as it is a poem about agricultural practice, so it is a poem about the wealth of the nation and about the productivity which creates this wealth. A central motif is the seasons, the cycles of nature, and man's place within them. Importantly, in Virgil, and in those who follow him, an account of seasonal changes and cycles is not simply the representation of a single year or a single activity; rather, individual moments and episodes are repeatedly expanded into a vision of man's history, of universal history, and the digressive form of the georgics becomes a means of bringing 'nature' together with science, culture, history and all forms of human activity.

Virgil wrote the *Georgics* at the end of a period of civil war explicitly to celebrate peace and the newly established rule of the emperor Augustus, but also to celebrate a new age of national greatness and of imperial expansion. Thus in a poem which tells us that its concern is how to farm, how to keep bees, what to do during the different seasons of the year and so on, the viewpoint is in fact very wide. Episodes which seem to be focused on the very local and the very specific invite us to see beyond them, to recognize in the small scale and local the global, the international and indeed the universal. In part this springs from a further recognition that agriculture is the basis of national wealth and that all else follows from this; in part it is because, for Virgil, the farmer is an everyman figure, and an everyman precisely because he represents man's struggle with nature.

More than anything, it is that sense of struggle, of labour, which marks out the georgics from pastoral writing. If we look to the classic pastoral motif of the *sponte sua*, of fish willingly being caught and nature offering itself up to aristocratic owners (as, for example, in Jonson's 'To Penshurst' or Carew's 'To Saxham'), something quite different is emphasized in georgic. Here man is not in easy harmony with nature but in competition and must struggle to survive: the laborious taming of nature is part of the process of civilization. However, as we have seen, in the early modern period 'labour' comes to mean quite different things to different groups within society. Notably, for example, in the sixteenth and early seventeenth century a writer's choice of georgic tends to mark a specifically unaristocratic emphasis on labour and is used as much to mark divisions within society as it is to assert a common goal.

As the early texts in Chapter 5 suggest, ideas of 'improvement' could be placed ambiguously between the personal and the national, the spiritual and the economic. By the 1690s, however, and Dryden's hugely influential translation of Virgil, we can see something different again. Written only a generation after England's own civil war, Dryden's *Georgics* not only recognize the farmer as an everyman but use him as an allegory of the nation's distress and of its coming glory. Following Dryden's lead, eighteenth-century georgic tends to place agriculture as the foundation of empire, but whereas earlier georgics tended to emphasize personal labour, what is striking in eighteenth-century georgic is the way in which 'labour' is increasingly used as a ready analogy for the rapidly expanding world of industry and trade. In James Thomson's *The Seasons* and John Dyer's *The Fleece* the concern is most centrally with what we might call the connectedness of things, with the many forms of commercial activity and the intricate means by which all aspects of national and international economy are linked together. Here, a robust British agriculture becomes part of a recognizably global system of commerce in which British trade will export British civilization across the world.

Just as in Herrick's 'The Hock Cart' – where we must ask who is actually doing the labour and how that term is being employed – so in the eighteenth century, we must be aware of the way in which individual labour may be subsumed within the 'industry' of a national economy and personal improvement replaced by claims of national progress. Equally, when texts do focus on individual labour, we must also be aware of the other kinds of exclusions and occlusions: if Stephen Duck chooses to adopt georgic at key moments in order to resist the class bias of pastoral, he also articulates a gendered division of labour which effectively denies the reality of women's work. It is this which Mary Collier was to react against so strongly in *The Woman's Labour*. Thus it is not simply a question of labour which is at issue here, but how the individual is placed in relation to that labour. The crucial question georgic texts raise, then, is not simply who works, but who benefits from work?

Aesthetics of the land

Central to representations of the rural environment is the troubled relationship between leisure and labour and so far we have seen how both pastoral and georgic move between these different understandings of the land. As we have suggested, both of these modes can appear in many different forms of writing and it is to the range of aesthetic responses to land and landscape that we should now turn. The strategies of what we have termed 'formal' pastoral rely on the relatively narrow perspective of an urban elite looking at itself in country guise and finding an idealized vision of social relations; in the late seventeenth and eighteenth century what emerges, however, is a far wider range of people experiencing land as landscape and laying claim to 'aesthetic' experience. What emerges also is new ways of thinking about and representing the English countryside; more than this, we can see how the aesthetic is fundamentally intertwined with the ideological and thus how representations of the rural are used as a means both of constructing an account of culture and of legitimizing a writer's position within that culture. As readers, that is, we must focus not simply on what is described – the material environment being reported – but on the ways in which description is itself framed and the strategies employed by individual writers in order to stage themselves and their relationship with an imagined public audience.

Interest in 'landscape' as a recognizably distinct literary form and a way of seeing only really appears towards the end of the sixteenth century, but it does so in a range of different kinds of writing.⁶⁸ Chapter 2 moves from some of the origins of this new interest in landscape in the early seventeenth century to its widening popularity in the late eighteenth century. Many of the early works here are heavily engaged in merging classical models and traditions with the contemporary landscape and the result

can be that there is little to see except those traditions and conventions. However, in the chorographical works and in poetry which follows, something rather different emerges, as a specifically English setting is layered with different modes of understanding. Thus, for example, in Richard Carew's description of Cornwall, stress falls on the land as a set of 'commodities'; it is a place of pleasure and leisure, but it is also understood in terms of ownership and heredity; it is recognized – in terms explicitly drawn from the visual arts – as a 'prospect', and it relies on the convention of a spectator or viewer separated from the scene which is viewed. In this sense, Carew gives his readers directions not just on *what* there is to see but on *how* to see it.

Like Drayton and Strode, Carew clearly envisages the land as 'landscape' and draws on visual models to order his account of place and space.⁶⁹ Perhaps the most obvious way in which works of both the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are structured, and in turn structure the landscape, is through their mimicking of the eye and its movement across a scene. Strode, for example, appears to offer something close to the lived experience of landscape as the poem follows both the movement of the eye across the land and of the imagination across time. This emphasis on the temporal and geographical – 'here', 'there', 'sometimes' – is characteristic of much of the topographical writing produced in both the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. So too is the recognition that landscape is not simply experienced from a particular viewpoint, but shaped by a point of view. Indeed, as the latter phrase suggests, a viewpoint, then, is not just the ground on which one stands, but the mental structures and assumptions which enable one to see in a particular way. Care is taken to draw this recognition of 'landscape' to the reader's attention, and we may then imagine that what is at issue here is some kind of aesthetic experience deliberately divorced from a world of economic and agricultural activity. But this cannot be the whole story. Notably, for example in Strode's 'Westwell Downs', as the poem continues it becomes apparent that this kind of aestheticization of the land into landscape not only emphasizes pleasure but is reliant for that pleasure on a sense of distance and separation. Moreover, once we come to the lines, 'Here would I sleep, or read, or pray / From early morn till flight of day', Strode signals, only more clearly than elsewhere, those conventions we recognize from pastoral: retirement, leisure, meditation. We return, that is, to an aestheticized landscape as an ideal imagined space in which the meditative mind can operate. As a result, even in works which claim to be quite geographically specific and which may suggest to us a degree of 'objectivity', the modes of understanding and the frames of reference insist finally on the ideas and the ideals of the leisured gentleman, on the importance of the viewer in creating the view.

If in the seventeenth century many writers claimed this as a male preserve and linked the appreciation of landscape with genteel masculinity, the

eighteenth century saw a major expansion in the number of people who travelled in order to enjoy the experience of landscape. An increasingly wealthy middling sort, combined with better roads and infrastructure, made travel far more possible than in previous centuries.⁷⁰ With this came what we might term a democratization of the aesthetic sphere, as more and more people found ways of claiming validity for their own, subjective responses to the aesthetic and their own experiences of 'nature'.⁷¹ Crucially, this emerging language of picturesque taste – previously used only by the cultural elite – became far more widely available to men of the middling sort, but also to women; it is with women and with the picturesque that we conclude Chapter 2.⁷²

More than any writer it was perhaps William Gilpin who was to give the late eighteenth-century public a language and a set of directions with which to see the 'picturesque'. While Gilpin's picturesque works – full of Latin quotations and references to Old Masters – addressed themselves to the traditions of patrician culture, they functioned more importantly to popularize the language of taste and to make it available to both men and women. In this sense the picturesque refocuses landscape in important ways. While seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century writers frequently justify their travels in terms of economic usefulness, Gilpin turns to leisure and to a delight in making pictures which frequently exclude the realities of labour, industry and enclosure. By defining the picturesque as a purely aesthetic experience of picture-making (whether in a Claude glass, on paper or in the imagination), Gilpin repeatedly ignores – or at least seeks to occlude – a vision of the rural as productive space.⁷³

It is very much Gilpin's account of the picturesque which Jane Austen was to satirize in *Northanger Abbey* (begun 1798, published 1818), but that satire was also a recognition that the picturesque – as a language and as a social practice – brought together leisured men and women of all ranks. What both writers highlight for us at the end of the eighteenth century was the effective opening of the aesthetic sphere to women as well as men, and to the middling sort as well as to the elite.⁷⁴ For all of its connoisseurial terminology (in Austen's words, 'fore-grounds, distances, and second distances – side-screens and perspectives – lights and shades'), the picturesque was not the abstruse practice of the few but an inclusive language of polite sociability.⁷⁵ However, if Gilpin brings a new emphasis on leisure to the experience of seeing the countryside as a series of pictures, he shares with many of his predecessors an insistence on the aesthetic distance required to create a 'scene' and the implicit recognition that aesthetic distance is also social distance. In requiring the traveller to create foregrounds, middle distances and side-screens, the picturesque repeatedly frames the rural environment as landscape, and if it brought together leisured travellers in the mutual appreciation of an aesthetic scene it served equally to separate them from a living rural society.⁷⁶

Implicit in much of the writing towards the end of the early modern period is the issue of who can take pleasure in landscape. We have already noted the close relationship between 'landscape' as an aesthetic category and gentility as a social one, and nowhere is this more an issue than in the English landscape garden. By the mid-eighteenth century the landscape gardens created by both great and small landowners were often claimed to be a new and peculiarly English invention. Indeed one of the myths of the English landscape garden in the eighteenth century was of its almost miraculous 'discovery' as a wholly native art in the early years of the Hanoverian succession. In the last twenty years garden historians have challenged this politicized history of gardens, however, and shown it to be the ideological construct that it always was, with its nationalist agenda and its insistence on property, progress and the power of great men. John Dixon Hunt has shown the powerful influence of Italian designs on English gardens of the early eighteenth century;⁷⁷ Tom Williamson has challenged the claims for a gradual transition from the unnatural to the natural, from the formal to the informal;⁷⁸ and Douglas Chambers has shifted the chronology of the landscape garden's genesis back towards the middle of the seventeenth century by looking to Virgil's *Georgics* as a sustaining myth for the garden.⁷⁹ What is undoubtedly true is that the relationship between landscape gardens and the culture of commodities was fraught with contradictions: if landscape gardens suggest a world of landowning apparently distinct from commercial capitalism, they are nevertheless implicated in a culture of commodities and are strikingly concerned with spending money and with conspicuous display. Gardens set out to mark their own difference from the productive agricultural land around them, and it has been suggested that the landscape parks of the second half of the eighteenth century became so widespread because they seemed to offer a shared aesthetic space, and to assert a class identity common to both the propertied middling sort and an aristocratic elite.⁸⁰ According to this account, in distinguishing themselves from economic profit, landscape gardens laid claim to their polite status as products and objects of leisure, and in recognizing the aesthetic value of such landscapes, visitors laid claim to membership of polite society.⁸¹

Such claims of cultural unity become difficult to sustain, however, once we turn to the multitude of ways in which both owners and visitors responded to landscapes which were at once public spaces and private possessions.⁸² Thus in our final chapter we focus on the Midlands gardens of Hagley and the Leasowes in order to explore these concerns and to demonstrate the cultural diversity of those who both gardened and laid claim to gardens.⁸³ Socially, these writers range from influential aristocrats (such as Lord Lyttelton) through to minor gentry (such as William Shenstone) and lowly craftsmen (such as the shoemaker James Woodhouse). Notably, what they articulate is at once the awareness of an appropriate public response to gardens *and* the more personal, subjective and even

impolite reactions which are possible in private company. As Peter deBolla has noted, 'Eighteenth-century visitors "looked" in highly determined ways', and for that very reason the coding of the 'real' offered in descriptions of gardens is 'not an obstruction but on the contrary a significant aid' to our understanding of eighteenth-century culture.⁸⁴ What is at stake in these widely various accounts of gardens is not simply the writers' senses of place in a physical landscape, but their recognitions of what we would now term *space*, that complex meeting point of physical and cultural geography.

The conditions of writing and reading

The Writing of Rural England gathers together a diverse range of texts, written for different purposes and audiences, and consumed in different contexts by different types of people. For example, although anti-enclosure polemic is a feature of many texts in the volume, some of those in which it features are otherwise utterly disparate. On the one hand, More's *Utopia* was written in Latin for an audience of European humanist intellectuals. On the other hand, 'The Diggers of Warwickshire to all other Diggers' was written directly to a local audience, exhorting oppressed rural farmers and labourers to revolt. Yet despite the different readerships envisaged by the respective authors, the texts may not be completely without points of connection. For, although More declared in 1533 that he would rather burn his book than see it translated into the vernacular and applied to the English problems of the day, it appeared in English regardless after his death in 1551, and was consistently invoked thereafter in discussions of the nation's rural problems.⁸⁵ It is by no means inconceivable, therefore, that the anonymous author(s) of the Warwickshire tract were at least aware of More's arguments. Such details highlight the importance of attending in this volume to a text's cultural functions and uses. While specific points about individual pieces will be raised in headnotes, it will be useful at this stage to consider generally conditions of textual composition, publication and consumption.

The technology of print was introduced to England in the latter decades of the fifteenth century, and the volume of printed material soared throughout the early modern era. As the example of More indicates, though, some writers experienced considerable anxieties when they contemplated the uncontrolled dissemination of their work. There were indeed many reasons, from the personal to the political, why some material remained only in manuscript form, and *The Writing of Rural England* includes a number of such texts. For example, the georgic poetry of John Kay of Woodsome (Chapter 5), printed here for the first time, was intended only for a family audience, although it clearly relates to contemporary printed works. Further, 'Andrew Abington's Commandments' (Chapter 6), could not have been printed because it is libellous, satirically inverting the Ten Commandments in order to ridicule a local landlord. Despite remaining in manuscript form,

this text was effectively ‘published’ among its only relevant audience, since it was fixed to the gate of Abington’s church and recited at local gatherings. Among elite poets of the seventeenth century, similarly, distribution of work in manuscript form could be an effective and respected way of reaching an audience. In this period many poets chose to avoid printed publication, and instead circulated poems among select readers, who would copy pieces into personal verse miscellanies. Herrick (Chapter 4) was a popular poet within this context, while Strode’s ‘On Westwell Downs’ (Chapter 2) was only available in manuscript form in the early modern period.

The development of print culture offered new possibilities for the dissemination of texts, across both geographical distances and barriers of social degree. The very possibility of widespread textual circulation influenced the construction of a national state and culture. Thanks to print, a monarch could readily distribute throughout his realm a statement about the purposes and practices of rural recreations, as we may see in the Jacobean ‘Book of Sports’ (Chapter 4). Similarly, as a result of print the same ballad might be sung at once in Cornwall and Yorkshire, whereas once such texts had been products of oral culture and hence profoundly localized in character. The publication of ballads also evidences the capacity for print to bring literature to a socially diverse audience, and as a result of this development new types of authors emerged. A man such as John Taylor (Chapter 5), despite his middling origins, worked through a lifetime of cheap publications to construct for himself a public identity and a considerable following. Like the Renaissance stage, therefore, popular print offered a pathway to fame. The experience of Stephen Duck in the eighteenth century, however, demonstrates the potential pitfalls of this route. After years of lowly rural labour, Duck rose to prominence on the publication of his poem, *The Thresher’s Labour* (Chapter 6). But rather than achieving independence through his publication, he in fact became dependent upon the patronage of Queen Caroline, who gave him a salary and employed him as a guide at Richmond Park. Moreover, under the influence of this patronage he turned in his later work from the brutal realism of *The Thresher’s Labour* towards idealized pastoral representations of the countryside. The grim conclusion to this narrative of dislocation and acculturation was Duck’s suicide by drowning himself in a pond, near Reading.⁸⁶

The example of Duck also highlights the significance of patronage for writers. Early modern England may be described as a patronage society, since networks of patron–client relationships suffused the court and all arms of government, as well as affecting cultural production.⁸⁷ Indeed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, inadequate levels of legal protection for writers meant that few could afford to rely merely on the marketplace for remuneration. Although conditions improved in the eighteenth century, when developments in copyright law ensured that authors would be rewarded in accordance with the sales of their books, patronage remained an

important fact of life for most of the writers represented in this volume. Out of a patronage relationship, a writer would hope to gain financial support, positions of office, various forms of hospitality, and a certain cultural status or authority. In return, he or she might be expected to confer fame upon the patron through artful praise, or to support the patron's moral or political causes. Spenser, for example, spent much of his career glorifying the person and reign of Queen Elizabeth I, motivated in part by a burning desire for preferment within the Elizabethan government. Accordingly, his 'April' eclogue from *The Shepheardes Calender* (Chapter 2) praises the monarch as it praises her land, thereby creating a version of pastoral steeped in royal panegyric. In the following century, patterns of aristocratic patronage underpinned the generic development of the country house poem, which provided poets with a vehicle for indirect praise of their patrons. Most famously, Jonson's 'To Penshurst' (Chapter 3) contains a central image of the poet himself, enjoying the generous hospitality of his patron's table. The mythology of the English country house is to a considerable extent a product of such acts of patronage.

If patronage worked by rewarding authors for producing texts that accorded with the views of those in positions of power, structures of censorship provided a threat of punishment for those who dared to oppose society's dominant forces. The shadow of censorship hung heavily over early modern writers, particularly in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Censorship laws were often vaguely expressed, yet they effectively quashed statements considered to be politically or socially subversive. In some cases direct action was taken against particular books and authors; more significantly, however, every potential author was aware of the strictures on freedom of expression, and the consequent risks associated with transgressive statements. But the lack of such statements does not necessarily mean that the population was universally compliant. Significantly, when the censorship regime collapsed briefly in the revolutionary years of the mid-seventeenth century, a plethora of radical texts was printed.⁸⁸ One such work was Winstanley's *The True Levellers Standard Advanced* (Chapter 6), an eloquent argument for the abolition of private property. Unfortunately it is almost impossible to determine how many people were thinking or saying similar things in other periods; however, it is certainly conceivable that Winstanley brought into the realm of print culture ideas which had a long and continuous existence.⁸⁹ The term 'digger' provides one tantalizing hint of such continuity. While it would be attached to those involved in Winstanley's communist experiment, it appears earlier in the unprinted tract 'The Diggers of Warwickshire to all other Diggers' (Chapter 6).

Finally, even after a text is put into circulation, its cultural significance is determined largely by the size and nature of the readership that it reaches. This was the fact that troubled More: *Utopia* was one thing when read by humanist intellectuals, but it might become something quite different when

read by a more popular audience. Throughout the early modern period, the principal consumers of books were those from the higher levels of society, who had the requisite money and education to participate in literary culture. This fact alone undoubtedly informed the work of many writers. The labouring poets of the eighteenth century, for example, were often painfully aware that their audience was largely composed of members of a social elite, who were curious to discover manifestations of apparently untutored genius, but had little sympathy with the poetry's political content. Yet it is important not to overstate this case. Even among those of the most lowly degree there were people who could read, and texts could also be brought to the illiterate through practices of reading aloud. Ballads, for instance, were cheap and easy to distribute. Within a local community, they were commonly sung at local gatherings, and might even be pasted to the walls of an alehouse for future use.⁹⁰ *A Lantern for Landlords* (Chapter 1) might well have been disseminated in such ways, thereby confirming communal opposition to the exploitative methods of landowners. But nor is it impossible, as we have seen, that some of the readers and listeners in the alehouse were equally familiar with More's *Utopia*. The boundaries between 'high' and 'low' cultures in early modern England remained intriguingly porous.