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1760-1850

CONTEXT AND COMMENTARY

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LIFE AND LABOUR
IN RURAL ENGLAND,
1760-1850

Pamela Horn

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Finally, as always, I owe a great debt of gratitude to my family – particularly to my husband, who has assisted me in so many ways.

Pamela Horn

List of Plates

1. The drawing room of a well-to-do eighteenth-century landed family by John Harden. Mother and daughters are occupying themselves by reading and writing.
Photograph © Abbot Hall Art Gallery, Kendal.
2. *Reapers*, an engraving by George Stubbs, 1791. Even the womenfolk were expected to lend a hand with the harvest, which was the focal point of the farming year.
Photograph © Trustees of the British Museum.
3. *Labourers*, as employed on Lord Torrington's estate at Southill, from an engraving by George Stubbs, 1789.
Photograph © Trustees of the British Museum.
4. Machine-breaking and the firing of ricks were two of the most frightening aspects of the 'Swing' riots.
Photograph © Pamela Horn.
5. The 'Swing' riots of 1830.
Photograph © Museum of English Rural Life, Reading.
6. Children employed in a mid-nineteenth-century agricultural gang in the Eastern Counties. For some of the over-worked and ill-fed youngsters the task proved too much.
Photograph © Pamela Horn.

Editor's Preface

J.H. Plumb has said that 'the aim of (the historian) is to understand men both as individuals and in their social relationships in time. "Social" embraces all of man's activities – economic, religious, political, artistic, legal, military, scientific – everything, indeed, that affects the life of mankind.' Literature is itself similarly comprehensive. From Terence onwards writers have embraced his dictum that all things human are their concern.

It is the aim of this series to trace the interweavings of history and literature, to show by judicious quotation and commentary how those actually working within the various fields of human activity influenced and were influenced by those who were writing the novels, poems and plays within the several periods. An attempt has been made to show the special contribution that such writers make to the understanding of their times by virtue of their peculiar imaginative 'feel' for their subjects and the intensely personal angle from which they observe the historical phenomena that provide their inspiration and come within their creative vision. In its turn the historical evidence, besides and beyond its intrinsic importance, serves to 'place' the imaginative testimony of the writers.

The authors of the several volumes in this series have sought to intermingle history and literature in the conviction that the study of each is enhanced thereby. They have been free to adopt their own approach within the broad general pattern of the series. The topics themselves have sometimes also a particular slant and emphasis. Commentary, for instance, has had to be more detailed in some cases than in others. All the contributors to the series are at one, however, in the belief (at a time when some critics would not only divorce texts from their periods but even from their authors) that literature is the creation of actual men and women, actually living in an identifiable set of historical circumstances, themselves both the creatures and the creators of their times.

ARTHUR POLLARD

‘In the “dark ages”, when I was a boy, country labourers’ wives used to spin the wool, and knit the stockings and gloves that were wanted in the family. My grandmother knitted stockings for me after she was blind. Farmers’ wives and daughters, and servant maids, were spinning, reeling, carding, knitting, or at something or other of that sort, whenever the work of the farm-house did not demand them. . . . Rural affairs leave not a day, not an hour, unoccupied and without its cares, its promises, and its fruitions. The seasons, which wait for no man; the weather, which is no respecter of persons, and which will be what it will be, produce an habitual looking forward, and make the farmer provident, whatever might have been his natural disposition. The farmer’s cares are pleasing cares. His misfortunes can seldom be more than lessons. His produce consists of things wanted by all mankind.’

The Autobiography of William Cobbett (1967) ed. by William Reitzel, pp.15, 234-35. (Cobbett was born at Farnham, Surrey in 1763 and died in 1835.)