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Enclosure as Internal Colonisation: The Subaltern Commoner, *Terra Nullius* and the Settling of England's 'Wastes'

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Abstract

In the past decade, scholars of the here-and-now have (re)discovered the concept of enclosure, applying it with considerable zeal and in a bewildering variety of situations: from the securitisation of the Internet, and patenting genes, to attempts to privatise urban 'public' spaces, the English 'enclosure story' is presented as a given, a narrative that is set in stone. One critical aspect of this account is that enclosure was exported to Britain's overseas colonies in a one-way process. This paper shows, however, that from the early sixteenth century – and insistently so from the late eighteenth century – arguments for the enclosure of English commons and wastes were framed using techniques and discourses deployed overseas: the languages and practices of colonialism. Commons and wastes, so the paper argues, were not just increasingly seen as empty spaces, but the peoples that inhabited them were written as if they were uncivilised and unable to manage the land. Further, arguments for the enclosure of wastes were made as an alternative to Britain's overseas imperialism. The paper traces a variety of debates and proposals that collectively constitute a coherent body of 'internal colonial' thought.

Keywords: enclosure; internal colonialism; commons; wastes; England

In a pioneering paper published in 2008, Stephen Thompson argued that historians of enclosure have tended to fixate either on the processes of enclosure or on the impacts of enclosure on the poorest members of rural society, whilst the broader political contexts and languages of enclosure

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have been all but ignored.¹ The point still holds. This paper heeds Thompson's call in addressing the political settings of enclosure, not in a Wrightsonian sense at the level of the parish,² but in terms of wider political discourses that drew directly on the practices of colonialism and on the political languages of colonialism. This paper argues that from the latter decades of the eighteenth century, commons and wastes were explained as empty spaces, *terra nullius*, the claim made in the language – and often in relation to examples – of British overseas colonialism. This is not to say that the idea of wastes being empty spaces was altogether new, this being a discourse used to explain and justify the enclosure of large swathes of fen and forest from at least the turn of the seventeenth century,³ but rather the influences and modes of making claims had shifted. As part of this process the peoples that inhabited commons and wastes were inscribed as uncivilised and unable to manage the land, natives of the place but with no title. Enclosure was thus increasingly conceived of as a form of internal colonisation, something that paralleled settler colonialism abroad, and according to influential thinkers like Arthur Young a counter-movement that did away with the need to establish colonies beyond the bounds of the Metropole.

That the connection between the 'enclosure movement' in England and Wales and the experience of (re)settling colonial territories has not been made by historians is in many ways extraordinary.⁴ Doubly so given that no less a figure than E. P. Thompson suggestively made the link, albeit in a rarely referenced passage in 1991's *Customs in Common* in which he noted that 'the concept of exclusive property in land' which was central to enclosure was 'carried across the Atlantic, to the Indian sub-continent, and into the South Pacific, by British colonists, administrators, and lawyers'.⁵ E. P. Thompson's point, that local customs in territories under British colonial rule were made to yield – or were entirely reinvented – to embrace British conceptions of private property in land and the primacy of exclusive title as necessary conditions for 'improvement', rests on the idea that the legal technologies of enclosure were exported from the Metropole, this following the Lockean model whereby

¹ S. Thompson, 'Parliamentary Enclosure, Property, Population, and the Decline of Classical Republicanism in Eighteenth-Century Britain', *Historical Journal*, 51 (2008), 621–42.

² K. Wrightson, 'The Politics of the Parish in Early Modern England', in *The Experience of Authority in Early Modern England*, ed. P. Griffiths, A. Fox and S. Hindle (1996), 10–46.

³ For instance see K. Lindley, *Fenland Riots and the English Revolution* (1982), esp. ch. 1; E. Robson, 'Improvement and Epistemologies of Landscape in Seventeenth-Century English Forest Enclosure', *Historical Journal*, 60 (2017), 597–632.

⁴ The one exception can be found in one sentence (with a supporting footnote) in Jeanette Neeson's masterful study of common right: Jeanette Neeson, *Commoners: Common Right, Enclosure and Social Change in England, 1700–1820* (Cambridge, 1993), 30 n. 46.

⁵ E. P. Thompson, *Customs in Common* (New York, 1991), 163. The relevant passage can be found on pp. 164–75. The same argument is repeated in Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston, MA, 2000), esp. 99.

the productivity of enclosed English land provided justification for the colonisation and dispossession of territories overseas.⁶

This is not to say that scholars have been entirely remiss in analysing the way lessons from colonial conquest informed English and Welsh enclosure. In a recent paper in *Legal Studies*, Henry Jones makes the point that the ‘development of both English colonialism and land as property are best understood together’ given that, as he sees it, ‘[early English] colonialism drove the development of practices of private property that are essential for enclosure and capitalism’.⁷ Jones’s point is perhaps overplayed, not least in relation to the supposed novelty of new surveying techniques devised in English colonies and exported back to the Metropole. But in his emphasis on the emergence of new legal devices that allowed the clash of jurisdictions between the settler colonial state and the indigenous people to be settled in favour of the state, we see a critical parallel with the clash of jurisdictions between those who wished to project enclosure and those who might suffer the loss of their common rights and its ‘resolution’ in the passing of dedicated Acts of Parliament. Likewise, Allan Greer has noted in his study of ‘commons and enclosure’ in the colonisation of North America that English ‘pro-enclosure propagandists’ believed that ‘improvement’ was ‘equally at odds with common fields in England and uncleared forests in America’.⁸

This paper speaks to a particular historical moment, or rather set of moments, that followed the challenge of funding and running Britain’s North American colonies and their subsequent loss after the American War of Independence. This moment, so it is argued, gave rise to new models of how Britain’s lands might be more profitably managed, something that, conversely, Britain’s subsequent colonial endeavours provided the inspiration, example and justification for. Colonialism was thus both the target and the inspiration. If the specific focus is the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, it is important to understand the deeper histories and genealogies of the ideas and dynamics that informed these discourses and practices of internal colonialism, not least given the paucity of studies on the central concepts that underpin the paper. As such, before analysing how these ideas were framed and articulated, and how detailed schemes to settle the wastes of the Metropole – paying attention to a variety of proposals supported by the Board of Agriculture from the late eighteenth century – were implemented, the paper explores these foundational contexts. It starts by detailing our

⁶ John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge, 1960), see 133–46. This relationship has recently been problematised by Allan Greer who has argued that the practices of settler colonialists were often rooted in forms of custom and common property, the idea, then, that settler colonialism as a form of ‘enclosure’ is problematic: A. Greer, ‘Commons and Enclosure in the Colonization of North America’, *American Historical Review*, 117 (2012), 365–86. For a similar point in relation to the making of new commons in Australia see B. Maddison, ‘Radical Commons Discourse and the Challenges of Colonialism’, *Radical History Review*, 108 (2010), 29–48.

⁷ H. Jones, ‘Property, Territory, and Colonialism: An International Legal History of Enclosure’, *Legal Studies*, 39 (2019), 187–203.

⁸ Greer, ‘Commons and Enclosure’, 67.

state of knowledge of the ‘enclosure story’, goes on to evaluate the concept of internal colonisation, before examining the process of the inferiorisation of the commoner. These contexts established, the paper in the second half examines three settings of internal colonisation: first, Young’s schemes to colonise English wastes as an alternative to the (failed) example of the North American colonies; second, the persistence of the claims and schemes in relation to debates around ‘general enclosure’ at the turn of the nineteenth century; and third, the legacy of the logics of internal colonisation in the ‘back to the land’ projects of the mid- to late nineteenth century.

As a history of an idea – and of the on-the-ground experiments in settling the commons – the paper necessarily draws upon a wide range of sources. It makes particular use of pamphlet literature and the extensive archive of the Board of Agriculture and Arthur Young’s *Annals of Agriculture* in teasing out how the idea was framed and asserted, as well as biography, newspaper reports, parish records and parliamentary papers in analysing the experiments. In what follows, the word ‘waste’ is used to describe all commons and waste lands, this being both legally correct and a reflection of the way in which waste, as a word, was used in relation to debates about enclosure.

On enclosure

As a concept, enclosure was once confined to the heavily economic branch of the ‘ploughs and cows’ approach to the study of rural England. Now it has shed its contextual shackles and can be found deployed in a bewildering array of contexts. Enclosure, so this approach goes, is no longer just about land, let alone the act of consolidating landholdings and making that which was once commonable exclusive, but is a process that has become a kind of shorthand for privatisation, or at least the acts of making private. From the regulation and securitisation of the Internet; assertions of intellectual property and patent claims in the mammalian genome; the imposition of new forms of control and restriction by property developers on hitherto ‘public space’; to ongoing neo-imperial land-grabs in Africa and Latin America, spaces and things told as commons, so the story goes, are becoming private, use rights limited, barriers – literal and figurative – erected, the collective treasury sold off, enclosed. Such work draws – albeit often in a rather skewed and narrow way – on the English ‘enclosure story’ both as conceptual inspiration and as a salutary warning. In this the English historical context is just that, context; the nuts and the bolts, the nuances and complexities of the case are often lost. Indeed, that before enclosure the open fields, commons and other wastes of England were already in private ownership is a point that is often either not understood or just ignored.⁹ By reducing a complex series of processes, incomplete and in some ways ongoing as they are, to the one

⁹ A. Jeffrey, C. McFarlane and A. Vasudevan, ‘Rethinking Enclosure: Space, Subjectivity and the Common’, *Antipode*, 44 (2012), 1247–67; C. Corson and K. Iain MacDonald, ‘Enclosing the Global Commons: The Convention on Biological Diversity and Green Grabbing’, *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 39 (2012), 263–83. For an example of such decontextualisation see R. Sánchez and B. Pita,

narrative – ‘the enclosure story’ – it renders histories of enclosure intellectually inert; the story, as it were, ‘enclosed’, the fences erected, the limits placed. *Enclosure happened*.

The very existence of this paper is testament to the fact that there is much which remains unknown and untold. But what is the state of the enclosure story? We know that the first dedicated Act of Parliament for the enclosure of land was passed in 1604 (although this was not strictly agricultural, the Act allowing for the enclosure of a small parcel of the waste for the creation of a new burial ground in the Dorset parish of Radipole).¹⁰ This legislative moment, however obscure, matters because it prefaced a major shift in state policy from opposition to enclosure as a depopulating social wickedness to actively supporting it as an economic good. Of course, this is to paint with a broad brush, medievalists and early modernists rightly noting the ebbs and flows in the Crown’s role as projector of enclosure on its own estate.¹¹ Further, Elly Robson’s recent study of the enclosure of Gillingham Forest in 1624 relates that such policy could turn on the head of a pin: the 1620s at once marking the end of the long-established policy of holding commissions into depopulation and enclosure and, from Charles I’s accession to the throne in 1625, the extension of disafforestation to royal forests across England in one of the ‘first major projects of state-sanctioned enclosure and “improvement” of “waste” commons’.¹²

By the time of the first attempt to systematise and make more straightforward enclosure by parliamentary Act in the form of the 1773 Inclosure Act,¹³ a decisive shift had occurred: the state was not just projector of enclosure on its own estate but also facilitator across the realm. As Wordie has calculated, between 1604 and 1760 some 228 enclosure Acts were passed (these enclosing 1.1 per cent of the area of England and Monmouthshire). Thereafter, so it was understood, the demand for parliamentary support accelerated. Of the residual 25 per cent of land that remained unenclosed in 1760, the vast majority was subsequently enclosed by parliamentary Acts, the last such enclosure being passed in 1914 at which point only 4.6 per cent of England and Monmouthshire remained unenclosed.¹⁴ Such figures, as Wordie has suggested, overestimate the area actually enclosed by parliamentary means, allowing for areas enclosed by agreement – which for

‘Rethinking Settler Colonialism’, *American Quarterly*, 66 (2014), 1043 (‘Of course enclosures can be established internally, as in the case of displaced serfs in early modern England’).

¹⁰ The earliest statute is 4 Hen. 8 c.19 (1487), the last is 39 Eliz. 1 c.2 (1597). The story of the Acts may be found in, for example, P. Ramsey, *Tudor Economic Problems* (1963) chs. 1 and 5; M. W. Beresford, *The Lost Villages of England* (Lutterworth, 1954), ch. 4. For evidence of enclosure (by agreement), apparently despite the Acts, see A. Baker and R. Butler, *Studies in Field Systems in the British Isles* (Cambridge, 1973), esp. 647–8.

¹¹ R. Hoyle, ‘Disafforestation and Drainage: The Crown as Entrepreneur?’, in *The Estates of the English Crown, 1558–1640*, ed. R. Hoyle (Cambridge, 1992), 353–88.

¹² Robson, ‘Improvement and Epistemologies of Landscape’.

¹³ 13 Geo. 3. c. 81.

¹⁴ J. R. Wordie, ‘The Chronology of English Enclosure, 1500–1914’, *Economic History Review*, 36 (1983). 501.

Hampshire, as John Chapman and Sylvia Seeliger have shown, covered some 2.23 per cent of the whole county – through informal means without agreement, and wherein parliamentary awards either wholly or partly confirmed lands already enclosed by whatever other means.¹⁵ From the start of the Napoleonic Wars, the proportion of land enclosed shifted decisively in favour of the enclosure of commons and wastes against an earlier balance in favour of open fields. This in part reflected a diminution of the area left in open field systems but also reflected that the higher farm-gate prices of the war years made cultivation of once marginal lands now viable.¹⁶

The charting of these complex chronologies and geographies of enclosure dominated the historiography of enclosure until the publication of Jeanette Neeson's *Commoners*, her 1993 study of the role that common rights played in English rural society.¹⁷ Offering a critical rebuke to the long-standing assertion of Chambers and Mingay that the loss of common rights on enclosure represented no great material loss to the rural poor,¹⁸ Neeson's book has done more than any other study to invigorate the study of enclosure, variably provoking critiques and supportive studies around her central thesis.¹⁹ More recently, a sustained body of work has also returned to issues of process, either in terms of complicating our understandings of how it was enacted – Ronan O'Donnell's application of Actor Network Theory to the study of enclosure in the post-medieval north-east and Nick Blomley's highly influential study of the work of enclosure hedges notable examples²⁰ – or how it was opposed, the latter category, though, largely confined to the pre-parliamentary enclosure era.²¹ A series of articles by Briony McDonagh has also usefully, in her words, engaged in 'thickening the concept of enclosure' by placing examples of enclosure into complex *longue durée* narratives and drawing in humans and non-human things often excluded from established enclosure

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 487–8; J. Chapman and S. Seeliger, 'Formal Agreements and the Enclosure Process: The Evidence from Hampshire', *Agricultural History Review*, 43 (1995), 39.

¹⁶ For an analysis of Hampshire see E. L. Jones, 'Eighteenth-Century Changes in Hampshire Chalkland Farming', *Agricultural History Review*, 8 (1960), esp. 11.

¹⁷ Neeson, *Commoners*.

¹⁸ J. D. Chambers and G. Mingay, *The Agricultural Revolution, 1750–1880* (1966).

¹⁹ L. Shaw-Taylor, 'Parliamentary Enclosure and the Emergence of an English Agricultural Proletariat', *Journal of Economic History*, 61 (2001), 640–62; G. Clark and A. Clark, 'Common Rights to Land in England, 1475–1839', *Journal of Economic History*, 61 (2001), 1009–36; A. Howkins, 'The Use and Abuse of the English Commons, 1845–1914', *History Workshop Journal*, 78 (2014), 107–32; J. Handy, "'The Enchantment of Property": Arthur Young, Enclosure, and the Cottage Economy in England, 1770–1840', *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 19 (2019), 711–28.

²⁰ R. O'Donnell, *Assembling Enclosure: Transformations in the Rural Landscape of Post-medieval North-east England* (Hatfield, 2015); N. Blomley, 'Making Private Property: Enclosure, Common Right and the Work of Hedges', *Rural History*, 18 (2007), 1–21.

²¹ S. Hindle, 'Imagining Insurrection in Seventeenth-Century England: Representations of the Midland Rising of 1607', *History Workshop Journal*, 66 (2008), 21–61; B. McDonagh, 'Making and Breaking Property: Negotiating Enclosure and Common Rights in Sixteenth-Century England', *History Workshop Journal*, 76 (2013), 32–56; J. Bowen, "'Before the Breaking of the Day, in a Riotous Manner and With Great Shouts and Outcries": Disputes over Common Land in Shropshire in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries', *Rural History*, 26 (2015), 133–59.

stories.²² Yet, beyond the aforementioned paper by Stephen Thompson,²³ the politics of enclosure in the very era of parliamentary enclosure (and in the age of enclosure by dispossession overseas that became known as settler colonialism) remains remarkably little studied, the study of enclosure itself in many ways ‘enclosed’.

Conceiving the colony

The Latin *colōnia* meant ‘farm’, ‘landed estate’ or ‘settlement’. Strictly, it related to a settlement of Romans in a ‘hostile or newly conquered country’ which also acted as a garrison. It was in this sense that the concept of a colony – and the Roman word *colōniae* – was first transmuted into modern languages as the planting of settlements in newly discovered lands, this meaning solidified in the sixteenth century by Latin and Italian writers and rendered into English by the geographical thinker Richard Eden in his 1555 translation of Peter Matyr’s *The Decades of the Newe Worlde*. The more strictly agrarian *colonie* (‘tiller, farmer, cultivator ...’) was older still, having its English roots in Middle English, and was in use into the seventeenth century, but the impact of the Irish Plantations and the Virginia Plantation meant that the broader-based meaning in use today instead assumed commonplace usage. It was at the same time that the conception of (and the actual word) colonising came into circulation, colonisation (as the action of colonising) a far later addition to the lexicon in the middle decades of the eighteenth century. Thus, the abstract concept and the actual practice of creating colonies was rooted in the idea of settling and making productive, this invariably (at first at least) meaning improving the land through cultivation and the creation of pasture, the integration of lands into the economy. Further, the idea of making productive colonies, of growing the economy (and population) through expanding the settled area, came into political thinking at the same time that enclosure was no longer viewed by the English state as an evil, that is to say the early decades of the seventeenth century.²⁴

It is not a huge leap, then, to draw conceptual similarities between ‘planting’ colonies overseas and planting farmers on wastes and commons at home. Indeed, the idea of ‘internal colonialism’ has a long history. This has been figured as an articulation of dissent at being subject to the imposition of seemingly distant and arbitrary state power; for example, Gramsci noted of communists in 1920s Italy that the ‘bourgeoisie of the North’ had ‘subjected

²² B. McDonagh and S. Daniels, ‘Enclosure Stories: Narratives from Northamptonshire’, *Cultural Geographies*, 19 (2012), 107–21; B. McDonagh and C. Griffin, ‘Occupy! Historical Geographies of Property, Protest and the Commons, 1500–1850’, *Journal of Historical Geography*, 53 (2016), 1–10; B. McDonagh, ‘Disobedient Objects: Material Readings of Enclosure Protest in Sixteenth-Century England’, *Journal of Medieval History*, 45 (2019), 254–75.

²³ Thompson, ‘Parliamentary Enclosure’.

²⁴ Colony, n. OED Online, June 2022, Oxford University Press, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/36547?rskey=FJeWXY&result=1> (accessed 15 July 2022); M. Ferro, *Colonization: A Global History* (2005), 1–3; Peter Matyr, *The Decades of the Newe Worlde*, trans. Richard Eden (1555).

southern Italy and the Islands... to the status of exploited colonies'.²⁵ It has also been articulated as state policy, and as an academic concept, something first articulated by Leo Marquard in relation to South Africa in 1957 and gaining a degree of prominence in the late 1970s amongst post- and de-colonial theorists.²⁶ The same languages were picked up by scholars of popular protest in that remarkably fecund era for the subject, the late 1970s and early 1980s. Keith Lindley asserted of the drainage and enclosure of the Cambridgeshire fens in the late seventeenth century that they represented a form of internal colonialism, although the idea is not explored in any detail nor the source of his inspiration for the phrase related.²⁷ Tellingly though, Lindley draws upon an important example. As the drainer's poet, to use Keith Lindley's description, put it in 1685 of the chance to make money in the enclosure of the Cambridgeshire fens:

And ye, whom hopes of sudden Wealth allure,
Or wants into Virginia, force to fly,
Ev'n spare your pains; here's Florida hard by.
All ye that Treasures either want, or love,
(And who is he, who Profit will not move?)
Would you repair your fortunes, would you make,
To this most fruitful Land yourselves betake.²⁸

Evidently, the example – the challenge even – of Britain's North American colonies made a stark contrast with the hitherto unexploited opportunities to make money through draining and enclosure at home.

In relation to the 'union' of England and Wales, then the Kingdoms of England and Scotland in 1706/7, and from 1801 the United Kingdom of Britain and Ireland (and from 1922 the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland), the idea of internal colonialism has been used only in relation to the acts of subordination carried out by English elites and the Westminster Parliament.²⁹ Most recently Iain MacKinnon has argued that the Gàidhealtachd (the Gaelic-speaking Highlands and Islands of Scotland) was a site of repeated internal colonialisms of which multiple territorial dispossession and later clearances and 'improvements' were continuums. The practice of colonisation, so MacKinnon claims, was at once paralleled by and made possible by the inferiorisation and racialisation of the Gaels, this systematic demeaning part of the process of colonialism being, as Barbara Arneil has

²⁵ Antonio Gramsci, *The Modern Prince and Other Writings*, trans. L. Marks (1957), 28.

²⁶ Leo Marquard, *South Africa's Colonial Policy* (Johannesburg, 1957). On this genealogy see R. Hind, 'The Internal Colonial Concept', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 26 (1984), 543–68.

²⁷ Lindley, *Fenland Riots*, 3–4.

²⁸ Anonymous, *The History or Narrative of the Great Level of the Fens, called the Bedford Level* (1685), 80–1, cited in *ibid.*, 4.

²⁹ The point is also made in relation to Cornwall, a part of the 'Celtic fringe': Michael Hechter, *Internal Colonialism: The Celtic Fringe in British National Development, 1536–1966* (Berkeley, CA, 1977).

put it, 'the theoretical and ideological framework by which ... colonisation is justified'.³⁰

This is one of the fundamental practices of colonisation: discredit and debase indigenous peoples; deny their agency and ability to manage the space and its resources; and make assertions that this inability to make the land productive in ways analogous to the system of English enclosed exclusive title agriculture is evidence of being 'backward', unable to comprehend anything beyond their own situation and intellectually incapable of conceiving of how they might change their lot.³¹ The idea that the colonial other was savage, the brute creation, the human animal, has a deep history, a history as long as the practice of colonisation itself. Paul Slack has recently taken the idea further. We might usefully think, so he claims, of the making of colonies both as an act of 'improvement' and as integral to the development of the idea of improvement in seventeenth-century England. Empowered by biblical decrees 'to go forth and multiply and replenish the earth', the colonial project was underwritten by what Slack has labelled a 'natural right ... to exercise dominion over empty spaces'. Such colonised spaces were empty in the sense that indigenous peoples were portrayed as 'barbarous' and must be brought to a state of Christian civility.³² As Brenna Bhandar has it, these parallel processes rely on twin abstractions: the abstraction of turning land into fungible property, into a commodity; and racialising of the landholding of the indigenous people who are abstracted into savages. This, Bhandar asserts, is a constant of settler colonialism in all settings and all temporal contexts, starting with the plantations of Ireland and North America.³³ And, as the next section shows, we see precisely this dynamic in rural England too.

The commoner as savage

Outside of times of national crisis, the agricultural labourer – the largest occupational group in England through the eighteenth century and until the time of the 1871 Census – was written as a bucolic fool, comfortable and content yet comic, object and subject of humour, this savant trope established by the time of – and further promulgated by – Shakespeare.³⁴ If this is a generalisation, the deeper point holds: the labourer always became what the nation needed, but was only viewed positively if positioned out of actual

³⁰ I. MacKinnon, 'Colonialism and the Highland Clearances', *Northern Scotland*, 8 (2017), 22–48; Barbara Arneil, 'Liberal Colonialism, Domestic Colonies and Citizenship', *History of Political Thought*, 33 (2012), 491–2.

³¹ For important assertions of these dynamics in a variety of colonial contexts see Merete Borch, *Conciliation, Compulsion, Conversion: British Attitudes towards Indigenous Peoples, 1763–1814* (Rodopi, 2004); Karl Jacoby, *Crimes against Nature: Squatters, Poachers, Thieves, and the Hidden History of American Conservation* (Berkeley, CA, 2014), esp. ch. 7.

³² P. Slack, *The Invention of Improvement: Information and Material Progress in Seventeenth-Century England* (Oxford, 2014), 31–2, 68.

³³ B. Bhandar 'Property, Law, and Race: Modes of Abstraction', *UC Irvine Law Review*, 4 (2014), 203–18.

³⁴ A. Howkins, 'From Hodge to Lob: Reconstructing the English Farm Labourer 1870–1914', in *Living and Learning: Essays in Honour of JFC Harrison*, ed. M. Chase and I. Dyck (1996), 218–35.

sight. Even during the Revolutionary Wars and subsequent Napoleonic Wars when politically those that laboured in the fields were represented as the loyal, well-fed John Bull – the representational polar and political opposite of the oppressed, shackled French – no less a figure than the field marshal the Duke of Wellington viewed these men as ‘the scum of the earth’.³⁵ By the late eighteenth century, as I have explored elsewhere, the labourer was being thought of not just as an over-procreating, poor-rate-dependent problem but also as apart from other rural and urban citizens, a process that used racial explanation and language to define the labourer as a racial other.³⁶ The commoner, as we will see, was understood as a different sort of problem, although the processes and language have striking parallels, their relative independence from the structures of agrarian capitalism by dint of finding other ways of getting by outside of the offering of their labour at the heart of why they were viewed with such disdain.

Through the de facto anti-enclosure policy of the Tudor years, the shift to the support of enclosure in the early years of Stuart rule, and then during the Civil War and the Commonwealth where the figure of the commoner took on a particular political charge (amplified by the Leveller and Digger movements), the commoner had an important political stake at the heart of the nation. Of course, this is at once a simplification and a conflation: commoner at once the generic label for the ‘common people’, those undistinguished by rank, and those who held and/or practised common rights. But, outside of the fact that some high-profile regicides such as Major General Edward Whalley were active promoters of enclosure and introduced legislation to Parliament supporting universal enclosure, the distinction, politically, was broadly an irrelevance.³⁷ Indeed, there is an important case to be made that given that so large a proportion of the population was enrolled in Manor Courts and were otherwise in some way reliant on the use of commons, there was no dual meaning, just one: a shared loathing of the copyhold services, obligations and fines, that ‘ancient and almost antiquated badge of slavery’ as a Leveller tract had it.³⁸

While the commoner was both political subject and powerful lobby, the seeds of the making of the commoner as a barrier to enclosure and improvement were evident from the moment of the Ulster Plantations and the Colony of Virginia. To surveyor and cartographer John Norden, commoners

³⁵ J. Barrell, ‘Sportive Labour: The Farmworker in Eighteenth Century Poetry and Painting’, in *The English Rural Community: Image and Analysis*, ed. B. Short (Cambridge, 1992), 105–32; D. Lowenthal, ‘British National Identity and the English Landscape’, *Rural History*, 2 (1991), 205–30, at 211.

³⁶ C. Griffin, *The Politics of Hunger: Protest, Poverty and Policy in England, c. 1750–c. 1850* (Manchester, 2020), ch. 5.

³⁷ W. E. Tate, *The English Village Community and the Enclosure Movements* (1967), ch. 11; J. Healey, ‘The Political Culture of the English Commons, c. 1550–1650’, *Agricultural History Review*, 60 (2012), 266–87. On Whalley see *The Agrarian History of England and Wales, v.ii: 1640–1750* (Cambridge, 1985), ed. Joan Thirsk, 319–21.

³⁸ Anon., *A New Engagement, or, Manifesto Wherein is Declared the Sence and Resolution of Many Thousands of Well-affected People in and About London, and Some Adjacent Counties (viz. Kent, Hartford, Buckingham, and Berks, &c.)* (1648).

were 'as ignorant of God ... as the very savages amongst the infidels', although Norden was not advocating enclosure, the first edition (1607) of his famed *The Surveyor's Dialogue* making only one reference to it, while the 1618 edition added a further critical reference to the 'devastation' that enclosure could cause.³⁹ From the middle of the seventeenth century, anti-commoner discourse became shackled to pro-enclosure rhetoric during the great debates about enclosure of the Commonwealth. For instance, Adam Moore's 1653 pro-enclosure tract *Bread for the Poor* asserted that those who lived on the commons were rapt in 'idleness': 'our poorer people bordering on these Lands, account it to be a sufficient Trade of living to be only a Borderer: and so many Strategems (forsooth) have they to get thrift here, that to seeke other mysteries of gaining, were to incur the danger of sweat, and a laborious life'.⁴⁰ Of course, there is no little irony here in that Moore also claimed that commons were 'fruitless, naked, and desolate', Arabia to enclosure's 'pleasant fruitful fields of Canaan', and that the poor already subject to enclosure might be usefully employed in diking, hedging and fencing new enclosures to save them from 'Begging, Filching, Robbing, Roguing, [and] Murthering and whatsoever other Villainies their unexercised brains and hands undertake'.⁴¹ Similarly, John Evelyn in his famed *Sylva* concluded that the enclosure of the remnant Crown forests 'would be the most likely expedient to civilize those wild and poor Bordurers; and to secure the vast and spreading heart of the Forest'. To Evelyn such forest commoners were 'clamorous and rude' and 'are generally not so civil and reasonable, as might be wished'.⁴² This mirrored pro-enclosure John Locke's belief that those who lived in forests and woods were 'irrational, untaught',⁴³ this itself an established discourse well rooted in popular culture.⁴⁴ There is also an irony here in that commons were, at least in part, peopled by those displaced by earlier waves of enclosure, their eking out an existence on the common now justified as the reason for a new wave of enclosure.

The discourse was already ingrained by the turn of the eighteenth century.⁴⁵ Timothy Nourse in his *Campania Foelix* (1699), subtitled 'a discourse of the benefits and improvements of husbandry', denounced commoners as:

³⁹ J. Norden, *The Surveyors Dialogue* (1618), 103; John Norden's *The Surveyor's Dialogue* (1618): A Critical Edition, ed. M. Netzloff (2016).

⁴⁰ A. Moore, *Bread for the Poor and Advancement of the English Nation Promised by Enclosure of the Wastes and Common Grounds of England* (1653), 6.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁴² J. Evelyn, *Sylva* (1670), 208, 213.

⁴³ J. Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge, 1988), 183. As Neal Wood has argued, Locke was wary of enclosure by parliamentary Act but was a keen advocate of enclosure when agreement could be reached, although waste was fair game and enclosure by any means the only way to make such land yield to improvement through the exercise of labour: N. Wood, *John Locke and Agrarian Capitalism* (Berkeley, CA, 1984), esp. 57–66.

⁴⁴ For instance in *As You Like It*, Silvius is referred to by Orlando as 'forest-born, and hath been tutored in the rudiments of desperate studies': W. Shakespeare, *As You Like It* (2003, first published 1623), 160.

⁴⁵ It is important to note, though, that the argument that enclosures were depopulating continued into the eighteenth century, but this fear related to open fields, not wastes:

[V]ery rough and savage in their Dispositions, being of levelling Principles, and refractory to Government, insolent and tumultuous: What Gentleman soever then shall have the Misfortune to fall into the Neighbourhood of such Boors, let him never think to win them by Civilities; it will be much more easie for him to teach a Hog to play upon the Bagpipes, than to soften such *Brutes* by *Courtesie*; for they will presently interpret a Man's Gentleness to be the Effect of a timorous and easie Nature, which will presently make them bold and saucy ... The Saying of an *English Gentleman* was much to the purpose, That Three things ought always to be kept under, our Mastiff-Dog, a Stone-Horse, and a Clown.

'Such Men', Nourse went on, 'are to be look'd upon as trashy Weeds or Nettles, growing usually upon Dunghills, which if touch'd gently will sting, but being squeez'd hard will never hurt us.'⁴⁶ Fifteen years later, John Bellers took this process of inferiorisation one step further by making an explicit comparison with other subaltern figures of British oppression, substituting Nourse's generic 'brutes' – although note the elision between hogs and the Scots ('to teach a Hog to play upon the Bagpipes') – with 'Indians'. 'Our Forrests and great Commons (make the Poor that are upon them too much like the *Indians*) being a hindrance to Industry, and are Nurseries of Idleness and Insolence'.⁴⁷ W. Pennington returned to precisely the same theme in 1769 – the costs and fallout of the Seven Years War in North America fresh in the mind – in his treatise on the importance of enclosure: 'Let the poor native Indians (though something more savage than many in the fens) enjoy all their ancient privileges, and cultivate their own country in their own way.' This was not an anti-colonial plea but laced with irony, the 'savage' commoners and Indians alike not to be trusted to manage the land.⁴⁸ We shall return to Pennington later.

The discourse of the commoner as savage persisted. Edward Hasted in his survey of Kentish parishes noted in 1799 of the commoners of the 'minnises' between Elham, Lyminge and Stelling parishes that they were 'as wild, and in as rough a state as the country they dwell in'.⁴⁹ Likewise, William Gilpin, the famed theorist of the picturesque, on coming across a squatter's hovel at Exbury in his ethnographic enquiries into the 'savage of the woods' of the New Forest related that:⁵⁰

J. Howlett, *Enquiry into the Influence which Enclosures have had Upon the Population of this Kingdom*, 2nd edn (1786); Thompson, 'Parliamentary Enclosure', esp. 627–8.

⁴⁶ Timothy Nourse, *Campania Foelix, or a Discourse of the Benefits and Improvements of Husbandry* (1700; 2nd edn 1706), 15–16.

⁴⁷ John Bellers, *About the Improvement of Physick ... with an Essay for Employing the Able Poor* (1714), 40.

⁴⁸ W. Pennington, *Reflections on the Various Advantages Resulting from the Draining, Inclosing and Allotting of Large Commons and Common Fields* (1769), 35.

⁴⁹ Edward Hasted, *History and Topographical Survey of the County of Kent*, vol. VIII (Canterbury, 1799), 79. Minnis is a name peculiar to south-east Kent for a common, and potentially derives from the Middle English *gemænnes*, 'land held in common'.

⁵⁰ William Gilpin, *Remarks on Forest Scenery, and Other Woodland Views* (1791), I, 272.

At the door stood two or three squalid children, with eager famished countenances staring through matted hair. On entering the hovel, it was so dark, that we could at first see nothing. By degrees a scene of misery opened. We saw other ragged children within, and were soon struck with a female figure, grovelling, at full length, by the side of a few embers upon the hearth. Her arms were naked to her shoulders, and her rags scarce covered her body. On our speaking to her, she uttered, in return, a mixture of obscenity and imprecations. We had never seen so deplorable a maniac.

On making later enquiries, the woman was understood not to be 'a maniac' but the victim of a blow from her husband, he being 'one of the most hardened, abandoned, mischievous fellows in the country' and she no less 'infamous'.⁵¹ Or as agricultural writer Charles Vancouver put it of the forest commoners, they were an 'idle, useless and disorderly set of people' who subsisted only by their systematic abuse of the vert and venison of the forest.⁵² The idleness of the indigenes was one thing, that of immigrants and newcomers attracted to squat on the wastes of the parish yet another. The Thatcham (Berkshire) vestry complained to the lord of the manor in 1826 that 'non-parishioners' were 'enclosing parts of the wastelands' and in the process gaining settlement, thus becoming chargeable to the parish.⁵³

The temptations of unenclosed land, so reckoned John Middleton in his survey of the agricultural state of Middlesex, actively encouraged and thus bred the wrong sort of people, which became a danger to all agriculturalists. Land without fencing, so he claimed, encouraged 'hunters, who are another species of destroyers: those imitators of the life of savages, are as destructive in a well cultivated country, as foxes and wolves would be in a hen-roost or a sheep-fold'.⁵⁴ The discourse of wastes as not only a breeding and training ground for savagery also extended to their *attracting* criminals. For example, Cranborne Chase, on the border between Dorset and Wiltshire, had a reputation as 'a nursery for and a temptation to all kinds of vice, profligacy and immorality' and was 'a great harbour for smugglers, the woods being very commodious for secreting their goods'.⁵⁵ The abuses of such persons, so the discourse went, devalued commons, and preventing their 'illegal' use was, in turn, a frequent justification for enclosure. For instance, at Chillington in Somerset enclosure was proposed as the solution to the 'down being overstocked and trespassed by strange cattle', whilst the problem of overstocking on Cambridge's commons led a meeting of the town council to conclude the only solution was 'to sell or lease certain parts thereof, i.e. enclosure'.⁵⁶

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, II, 181.

⁵² Charles Vancouver, *General View of the Agriculture of Hampshire* (1813), 496.

⁵³ Berkshire Record Office, D/P130/8/1, Thatcham Vestry Minute, 25 Mar. 1826.

⁵⁴ John Middleton, *General View of the Agriculture of Middlesex* (1807), 152.

⁵⁵ Anthony Chapman, *A Letter to the Noblemen, and Gentlemen, Proprietors of Lands in Cranborne Chase ... for the Disenfranchisement of the Said Chase ...* (Tarrant Gunville, 1791), 22–3.

⁵⁶ Howkins, 'The Use and Abuse', 119; *Cambridge Independent Press*, 19 May 1849.

In ‘improving’ the common through enclosure, the commoner too would be reformed, made to yield, made useful. As William Mavor put it of Berkshire commoners in 1813, ‘Wherever there are large wastes, and particularly near forests, the lazy industry and beggarly independence of the lower orders of people, who enjoy commons, is a source of misery to themselves, and of loss to the community.’ Enclosure would allow them to ‘employ their time in productive labour, which is now so frequently wasted on objects ... incompatible with their duty.’⁵⁷ John Knight, who purchased Exmoor from the Crown in 1818 and proceeded to enclose it, was more pessimistic though. He perceived the residents of the one-time Royal Forest to suffer from, as Leonard Baker has recently put it, ‘moral turpitude’ and as only able to ‘exploit’ the moor. Being unable to yoke them to his scheme to ‘reclaim’ Exmoor for ‘improved’ agriculture, Knight instead settled the enclosed Exmoor with tenant farmers from Lincolnshire and labour from his family’s Irish estate.⁵⁸ Improvement when shackled to enclosure was never just about managing the land, it was also about managing the people: the human resource must be improved too.

Internal colonisation: ideas and applications

Making wastes work

In sum, the enclosure of wastes was a moral act: it made the wasteful productive; it settled the right sort of people on the land; it purified and removed the beggarly and criminal; it colonised the empty – and its proponents relied upon these discourses to justify it. Given that overseas colonial experiments, as we have seen, were also written in precisely this language – extending and deepening the dominion and making it productive – it is not hugely surprising that the two settings became conflated. As Pennington, having placed the English commoner and the ‘native Indians’ of North America on the same scale of savagery, reflected:

It seems very strange to encourage the peopling and cultivation of that extensive region [North America] as a national concern, and at the same time permit large forests, commons and open fields in the mother country to remain in pretty much the same condition as when agriculture and commerce were not half so well understood, or half the consequence they are at present.⁵⁹

While it is beyond the immediate scope of this paper to tease out precisely when this wider discourse of ‘improve our lands first’ was first manifest, it is telling that Evelyn in *Sylva* makes the point that a reliance on foreign timber might prove ‘a greater mischief to the Publick, than the last diminution of the

⁵⁷ William Mavor, *General View of the Agriculture of Berkshire* (1813), 328–9.

⁵⁸ Leonard Baker, ‘The Reclamation of Exmoor Forest’, *Rural History Today*, 41 (2021), 5.

⁵⁹ Pennington, *Reflections*, 35.

Coin', ergo that the Crown forests need to be enclosed and planted alongside a greater campaign of planting the barren wastes.⁶⁰ Indeed, we know that colonial thinking started to permeate through writings encouraging enclosure and other agricultural treatises, Evelyn detailing colonial planting successes: cider-making in the Connecticut Colony and silk-making from successful mulberry trees in Virginia, the mulberry being recommended to be planted in England and 'even in the Moist places of Ireland'.⁶¹

By 1783, Arthur Young, then the chair of the agriculture committee of the Royal Society and with an already established reputation as a prolific commentator on agriculture and wider political matters, could note that: 'For a century past the colonial scheme has been that which guided the administration of the British government.' To Young, writing in the immediate aftermath of the American War of Independence, this concept had been proved to be an expensive fallacy. Foreign colonies – and in this Young excluded Ireland – were not creating wealth for Britain but instead creating commercial rivals. '[L]et not the possession of these countries deceive us into an idea that they can be worth colonizing. If they continue poor they will be no markets. If rich they will revolt; and that perhaps is the best thing they can do for our interest.'⁶² Two wars – 'one undertaken to defend our colonies, and the other to reduce them' – had cost 'no less than ONE HUNDRED AND SIXTY MILLION', a scandal, as Young saw it, in itself, but doubly so given that this sum at the rate of £5 per acre 'would have improved no less than thirty-two millions of waste acres, that is a KINGdom as large as the uncultivated parts of England and Wales ... The money went for America – The wastes remain.'⁶³

This argument formed the central basis for Young's extended opening essay in the first volume of his *Annals of Agriculture*. His plea was for a form of internal colonialism, the 'failure' of the adventure in North America being linked to the 'old system of colonizing' and, by inference, the enclosure of the wastes at home to the new. The premise was simple:

If noxious islands in another hemisphere are to be manured with African blood that Englishmen may raise a monument not of profit, but of bankruptcy and ruin. If with less flattering appearances we are to colonise the deserts, marshes and snows of Canada and Nova Scotia, that the congress of a future period may reap the harvest. If we look to the Ganges tinged with the blood which rapine sheds to gain the wealth that humanity might gather on the Severn.⁶⁴

This might be difficult to achieve but there could be 'no doubt of its propriety' and as such it should be the 'very greatest object of British policy.'⁶⁵ The

⁶⁰ Evelyn, *Sylva*, 278.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 310, 26.

⁶² Arthur Young, 'An Inquiry into the Situation of the Kingdom on the Conclusion to the Late Treaty', *Annals of Agriculture*, 1 (1783), 15.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 53.

solution was to settle the wastes, to found internal colonies. The particular scheme envisaged by Young drew on the example of Sir William Osbourne's settlement of the wastes and mountains on his estate in Clonmel, County Tipperary – visited by Young in October 1776 during his tour of Ireland⁶⁶ – which had involved granting plots of unimproved wasteland to the poor, from which 'ragged beggars became farmers'.⁶⁷ Note, Young's plan was intended for former soldiers and those then resident in poorhouses. At no point are the commoners who would be dispossessed by such a state-sponsored scheme mentioned. They, it is inferred, in the same way as indigenous peoples in North America and in the emergent colonies of India, had no claim to the land which was their home.

Young proposed that the British state would assign a dwelling and ten acres to every family and further support them with a £10 allowance and further cash for fencing, tools, seed as well as a cow and a calf and two ewes (or in some places pigs). The total cash outlay was £27 2s. per family, which Young rounded up to £30. To encourage industry, those who were so settled would forgo any right to poor relief but neither would they pay poor rates or tithes. On this basis, at a cost of £500,000 per year, 16,666 'men' would establish the same number of farms and bring 166,660 acres of waste into cultivation. Over the ten years that Young envisaged the scheme would run for, 166,000 farms would be settled, which at five people per house would increase the population by 833,000 – this at a time of concerns that the population was decreasing, a situation turned on its head by the time of Malthus's famous *Essay* published just fifteen years later.⁶⁸

This establishment would be a new colony, where the principles of American population would be brought into these desert parts of Britain. Fifteen millions of produce would in ten years be created, and an income of 3,333,200l. a year. And all this for a less sum than it now costs us to keep Gibraltar, a barren rock of impregnable defence ... Comparing it with the expence we have been at for colonies, it is but a drop of water to the ocean.⁶⁹

Indeed, Young concluded, the scheme could be further extended and would take 'but a short period to improve the eight millions and upwards of waste acres in England'. This would be a 'much greater addition to our wealth, income, population, and strength, than we now receive from our brilliant oriental dominions of Bengal, Bahar, and Orixia, though an empire as large as France'.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Arthur Young, *A Tour in Ireland, 1776-1779*, ed. Henry Morley (1897), 124–6.

⁶⁷ Young, 'An Inquiry into the Situation', 54–5; T. Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798).

⁶⁸ Young, 'An Inquiry into the Situation', 54–7.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 60.

Young's attitude to the commoner was a complex and in some ways contradictory one. He believed that 'commoners *without property* are notorious rogues', but once property owners commoners became 'honest men'.⁷¹ In this qualification Young asserted that owning a cottage was not sufficient property, 'for the common is a very bad support':

A man with a cottage and a goose is a rogue, who would be honest with a cow and land to feed it. This is not theory, it is fact.: I inquired for the families of the worst character at Farnham, and others against whom nothing was suspected; the one had hovels and chickens, the others houses and cows.

Upon enclosure, commoners with property needed to be 'respected' otherwise the consequences were 'fatal'.⁷² In short, there were small farmers and petty producers and then there was the property-less poor. Herein the tension in Young's proposals becomes apparent. Wastes were at once empty and yet certain types of people were admitted to be usefully present, but in future the basis of their presence would need to yield to the logics of enclosure and the vicissitudes of agrarian capitalism. Indeed, it is telling that, in his calculations for settlement upon wastes, no allowance is made for existing peopling, whilst it is assumed in terms of cost that those who were to be settled had no property: the 'honest men' ignored and the 'notorious rogues' given title to make them 'honest'.⁷³ Indeed, as Jim Handy has artfully shown, Young's obsession with the decline of the 'cottage economy', this a byword for sturdy self-sufficiency and a dutiful deference and rooted in the disciplining effects of being a property owner, did not make him an advocate for the preservation of commons and the protection of the commoner. If his early pro-enclosure stance softened, even in his later writings Young's advocacy was for the reinvention of the peasant who got by through farming their plot, not for the commoner who got by through their use of common land. Property was all.⁷⁴

Young's scheme, as flawed and dystopic as it was – the idea that anybody could be a successful farmer ironically exposed as nonsense by Young's own failings to make his several farms a financial success – drew on a deeper history of the idea of settling the forests. In 1709, Daniel Defoe – that great hater of wastes and lover of improvement – proposed that the Palatine refugees

may be planted in small townships, like little colonies, in the several forests and wastes of England, where the lands being rich and good,

⁷¹ Arthur Young, *An Inquiry Into the Propriety of Applying Wastes to the Better Maintenance and Support of the Poor* (1801), 49.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 49, 50–1.

⁷³ Young, 'An Inquiry into the Situation', *passim*.

⁷⁴ Handy, "'The Enchantment of Property'"; J. Handy, *Apostles of Inequality: Rural Poverty, Political Economy, and the Economist, 1760–1860* (Toronto, 2022), esp. chs. 2–4.

will upon their application to husbandry and cultivation of the ground, soon not only subsist them but encourage them.⁷⁵

On further reflection, Defoe settled on the New Forest where a new town might be created, not so much a little colony but a large one. To Defoe, as Richard Hoyle puts it, ‘commons were empty spaces calling out for colonisation’, the poor gaining nothing from them and as such having no meaningful title.⁷⁶

General enclosure

If the scope of such schemes fell out of favour, the principles that fed them did not and nor did less ambitious schemes. Mavor in his 1813 *General View of the Agriculture of Berkshire* claimed that the 40,000 acres of waste – used dismissively as shorthand for all common land and wastes – ‘yields hardly anything to the community ... in no direct way returns one penny to the state’.⁷⁷ Rather than ‘throwing them to farms already too large’, ‘throwing them’ being a euphemism for enclosure, Mavor suggested that the land be divided into ‘new farms, of a moderate extent’ and let on long leases. From this, ‘smiling villages would rise where desolate heaths now tire the eye’.⁷⁸ There is a sense that the county reports, commissioned by the Board of Agriculture under Young’s secretaryship, and the *Annals of Agriculture*, edited by Young, simply replicated Young’s line on enclosure. The boosterish essay by Young published as part of volume 31 in 1798 – the same volume that notoriously included the paper ‘On the Uselessness of Commons to the Poor’⁷⁹ – collating anti-commons commentary from the county reports certainly attests to a doggedness to promote enclosure.⁸⁰

To read this exclusively as the belief and work of Young, however prolific, energetic and influential he was, is to deny the critical point that the promotion of ‘colonising’ English wastes assumed a broader platform. Sir John Sinclair, the founding president of the Board of Agriculture and commissioner of the county reports, wrote in 1795 that the only impediment to improvement in British agriculture was a want of capital, it being ‘diverted from its natural means of employment, *domestic improvement*, to remote and foreign speculations’.⁸¹ In this context it is particularly telling that Sinclair initially wanted to call what became the Board of Agriculture ‘The Board of Agriculture and Internal Improvement’.⁸² His thinking, his motivations, were

⁷⁵ A *Review of the State of the British Nation*, 2 July 1709, 154, cited in R. Hoyle, ‘Daniel Defoe, the Palatine Refugees and a Projected New Town in the New Forest, 1709’, *Southern History*, 38 (2016), 135.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 136.

⁷⁷ Mavor, *General View of Berkshire*, 329–30.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 327.

⁷⁹ J. Billingsley, ‘On the Uselessness of Commons to the Poor’, *Annals of Agriculture*, 31 (1798), 27–32.

⁸⁰ A. Young, ‘Of Enclosures’, *Annals of Agriculture*, 31 (1798), 529–54.

⁸¹ J. Sinclair, ‘Plan for Reprinting the Agricultural Surveys’, *Annals of Agriculture*, 24 (1795), 554. Emphasis in original.

⁸² John Sinclair, *Plan for Establishing a Board of Agriculture and Internal Improvement* (1793); R. Mitchison, ‘The Old Board of Agriculture (1793–1822)’, *English Historical Review*, 74 (1959), 42.

further spelt out in 1803 in commenting on Britain ending the Treaty of Amiens and declaring war on France that May:

We have begun another campaign against the foreign enemies of this country ... Why should we not attempt a campaign also against our great domestic foe, I mean the hitherto unconquered sterility of so large a proportion of the surface of the Kingdom? ... let us not be satisfied with the liberation of Egypt, or the subjugation of Malta, but less us subdue Finchley Common; let us conquer Hounslow Heath; let us compel Epping Forest to submit to the yoke of improvement.⁸³

Another aspect of many of the county reports was the claim that an extension of the cultivable area would not only act to reduce the poor rates dramatically but also increase the supply of grain and other foods – this a Lockean refrain that punctuated much pro-enclosure writing in the period – and help to prevent future famines.⁸⁴ So much is understandable in the context of the period. A particularly severe subsistence crisis in 1766, followed soon after by another crisis in 1772, meant that issues around the food supply assumed a particular political potency. When conditions again deteriorated to a point of near famine in 1795,⁸⁵ the Board of Agriculture and others were quick to suggest enclosure of wastes as a way of not only increasing agricultural production but also through settlement schemes reducing labouring dependency on the parish state. In the context of declining real wages for rural workers during the Napoleonic Wars as well as the horrific famine-like conditions of 1795 and 1800, and the problem of provisioning the huge military force both fighting on the continent and keeping order at home, the need to increase the production of food assumed critical levels of political importance. The timing of Sinclair's campaign in 1795 to persuade Parliament to pass a general enclosure Act was motivated precisely by the opportunity the specific crisis of 1795 presented as well as these other wartime contexts. The initial bill stipulated that on enclosure a certain proportion of the waste should be set aside in the form of rent-free allotments, these then being made available to all adult labourers on a fifty-year lease, thus increasing production and turning the labourer into a de facto peasant.⁸⁶

If the bill ultimately failed on Parliament being dissolved in May 1797, the debate generated significant publicity for the idea of internal colonisation, the committee report detailing that there were some 6,259,670 acres of 'waste' (this figure including all commons) in England and another 1,639,307 acres of waste in Wales, thereby highlighting the scope for settlement.⁸⁷

⁸³ John Sinclair, *Memoirs of Sir John Sinclair*, vol. II (1837), 111, cited in Neeson, *Commoners*, 31.

⁸⁴ Mavor, *General View of Berkshire*, 327.

⁸⁵ R. Wells, *Wretched Faces: Famine in Wartime England, 1793–1803* (Stroud, 1988), esp. ch. 8.

⁸⁶ Rosalind Mitchison, *Agricultural Sir John: The Life of Sir John Sinclair of Ulbster, 1754–1835* (1962), 154–8 and 163–4; Jeremy Burchardt, *The Allotment Movement in England, 1793–1873* (Woodbridge, 2002), 29.

⁸⁷ Arthur Young, *General Report on Enclosures Drawn up by Order of the Board of Agriculture* (1808), 2–3, 139–40.

Provincial agricultural societies were quick to support the line of the Board of Agriculture, and such endorsements often adopted a broadly 'internal colonisation' line. A petition in support of Sinclair's bill from the Bath and West of England Society, drafted in December 1795, asserted: 'the natural source of internal strength and happiness, is to be derived from such a plan of cultivating the soil of this country as may most fully and effectually employ, in its fruitful fields, the laborious industry of an active and persevering people'.⁸⁸ The Kent Agricultural Society went further, holding a meeting in February 1796 to 'propose the enclosure of all wastes' as a measure 'of the highest public utility'.⁸⁹

The failure of Sinclair's bill was followed by other proposals that sought to both 'improve' wastes and, as Jeremy Burchardt has put it, restore the fabled 'hardy peasantry'.⁹⁰ One high-profile scheme initially proposed by Young and then taken up by the Earl of Winchilsea – and duly given publicity by Sinclair's Board of Agriculture – was to enclose waste to provide the poor with cow pastures. Yet notwithstanding Winchilsea's assertion that 'except the haymaking, the rest of the business is done by his [the labourer's] wife and his labour is not interrupted', the scheme failed to secure any parliamentary backing.⁹¹ Likewise a proposal to establish a 'Society for the Cultivation of Waste Land', their preferred method involving extensive house-building, came to nought.⁹² Even a proposal by Prime Minister Pitt which would have allowed the poor to rent three acres on which to keep a cow was met with a wall of criticism – including from Jeremy Bentham who saw the 'cow money' as an assault on capital.⁹³ Whatever the energy devoted to such schemes, 'more acres of print were devoted to the issue', as Roger Wells has put it, 'than acres of land to farmworkers'.⁹⁴ Indeed, it is telling that when a General Enclosure Act was eventually passed in 1801⁹⁵ – following another desperate subsistence crisis in 1800, with food rioting inflaming the capital in midsummer, and further campaigning and lobbying by Young and

⁸⁸ *Bath Chronicle*, 7 Jan. 1796.

⁸⁹ Mitchison, *Agricultural Sir John*, 154–8 and 163–4; *Kentish Gazette*, 19 Feb. 1796; see also *Maidstone Journal*, 12 Jan. 1796 for an example of local portage.

⁹⁰ Burchardt, *Allotment Movement*, 12–13.

⁹¹ Lord Winchilsea, 'Letter from the Earl of Winchilsea, to the President of the Board of Agriculture, on the Advantages of Cottagers Renting Land', *Communications to the Board of Agriculture*, 1 (1797), 80. On schemes to promote cow-keeping by the poor see Jane Humphries, 'Enclosures, Common Rights, and Women: The Proletarianization of Families in the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries', *Journal of Economic History*, 50 (1990), 17–42.

⁹² Anon., 'Proposals for Establishing a Society for the Cultivation of Waste Land in Great Britain', *Annals of Agriculture*, 25 (1796), 131–5. A similar, if more fully fleshed-out, scheme was projected by Dorset MP William Morton Pitt with the backing of the Society for the Betterment of the Condition of the Poor: William Morton Pitt, 'Observations on the Situations of Cottages, with a Plan for Enabling Cottagers to Build Them. Extracted from "An Address to the Landed Interest"', *Reports of the Society for the Bettering the Condition and Increasing the Comforts of the Poor*, vol. 1 (1798), 239–43.

⁹³ G. Stedman-Jones, *An End to Poverty? A Historical Debate* (New York, 2005), 77–8.

⁹⁴ R. Wells, 'Historical Trajectories: English Welfare Systems, Rural Riots, Popular Politics, Agrarian Trade Unions, and Allotment Provision, 1793–1896', *Southern History*, 25 (2003), 90.

⁹⁵ 41 Geo. III c.109.

Sinclair – it contained no dedicated provisions to settle poor labourers on enclosed wastes.⁹⁶

Mingay has called the 1801 Act a ‘dismal half-measure’, a reflection of the fact that private Acts were still necessary for each enclosure and the overall enclosure process was little simplified.⁹⁷ Certainly, it is hard to discern what impact the Act had, given that high wartime farm-gate prices already provided a huge incentive to enclose uncultivated lands. Even Young’s *Annals* gave no explicit publicity to the provisions of the Act; instead the 1801 and 1802 volumes contained letters and reports – including one by Sinclair – on the worth of enclosing and settling wastes.⁹⁸ Indeed, this remained a constant refrain until the final volume of the *Annals* was published in 1808, a paucity of copy beyond that provided by Young ultimately proving to be the *Annals*’ undoing.⁹⁹ If the direct influence of Young waned – the same being true of Sinclair after he was displaced as chair of the Board of Agriculture in 1798 when the Board rebelled against his treating the organisation as his own personal fiefdom¹⁰⁰ – the legacy of their language of enclosure persisted. For instance, the recently established Royal Agricultural Society of England – founded with the intention of promoting the application of science to agriculture – gave a prize to an essay by farmer John Watson entitled ‘On Reclaiming Heath Land’, the award-winning article being published in the journal of the society in 1845. Watson’s essay drew on decidedly Youngian tropes. ‘[W]ealthy landowners’ were ‘squandering their time and capital on the Continent’ whilst a ‘great number of farmers and agricultural labourers’ were ‘driven through dire compulsion’ to emigrate to ‘foreign climes and far distant colonies’. What was needed, so Watson argued, was the ‘drainage and reclamation of extensive heaths’ which would enhance the value and produce of the country, at the same time ‘diffusing peace and plenty around the cottage hearth’, ergo capital should be used not overseas but in settling and making productive the wastes of Britain.¹⁰¹

Later schemes

The recurrent theme of settling British workers on British soil as opposed to supporting them to emigrate was also played out in wider debates about migration in the early nineteenth century. The 1827 House of Commons Select Committee on Emigration was charged with finding, in the words of Callington MP Alexander Baring, a ‘permanent’ solution ‘for the benefit of the country’ to the problem of ‘not only the manufacturing, but the agricultural, districts, particularly Sussex, which was overloaded with a

⁹⁶ Young, *An Inquiry Into the Propriety*; Mitchison, ‘The Old Board of Agriculture’, 57.

⁹⁷ G. E. Mingay, *Parliamentary Enclosure in England* (1997), 29.

⁹⁸ *Annals of Agriculture*, 37 (1801), esp. 32–46 and 231–49; *Annals of Agriculture*, 38 (1802), esp. 26–7.

⁹⁹ *Annals of Agriculture*, 45 (1808); John Gerow Gazley, *The Life of Arthur Young, 1741–1820* (Philadelphia, 1973), 464.

¹⁰⁰ Mitchison, ‘The Old Board of Agriculture’, 55–6.

¹⁰¹ John Watson, ‘On Reclaiming Heath Land’, *Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society of England*, 6 (1845), 101–2.

wretched population, living on charity and the poor-rates ... constituting, by their wretchedness, an enormous charge on the cultivators of the land'.¹⁰² Starting from this Malthusian position, one of the possible solutions the select committee explored was the enclosure, settlement and cultivation of waste lands as an alternative to emigration. This was given strong support in evidence provided by two founders of the recently formed General Association for the Purpose of Bettering the Condition of the Manufacturing and Agricultural Labourers who advocated the systematic enclosing of all waste lands that would yield to the application of labour through spade husbandry. The 3,454,000 acres in England that the association reckoned suitable would be divided up into four-acre plots on which a cottage would be built and a poor family 'located', with financial support given in the first year for equipment, seeds, animals and their food. In total, so the association estimated, the cost of settling one family, comprising two adults and three children, totalled £75, a sum that would either be paid out of the poor rates in lieu of monies that would otherwise have been spent on relieving the 'located' family or would be advanced by individual capital. The scheme betrayed a strong similarity to that advanced by Young four decades previously, although the context was rather different as it was proffered as a solution to the issues of 'surplus population' – to use the constant refrain of the committee – rather than the encouragement to population growth that Young had proposed in the 1780s.¹⁰³ As with Young's earlier scheme, the association's proposal came to nothing, the committee believing that emigration offered a cheaper alternative to enclosing wastes at home, the evidence – or rather opinion – of Revd Malthus being that settling waste land would 'greatly aggravate the evil intended to be remedied, and after a short time there would be a much greater redundancy of population than before'. Further, the committee was convinced that any capital outlay would be more profitably spent for the economy of the Empire on settling British émigrés on colonial wastes rather than on settling British wastes.¹⁰⁴

We also find the language of internal colonisation in later proposals – and in actual enacted schemes – to improve the lot of the poor by settling them on the land. Indeed, in Robert Owen's Home Colonization Society, the prospectus for which was launched by Owen and his friends in September 1840, we see the first explicit labelling of a settlement scheme as an act of internal colonialism.

¹⁰² Hansard, HC Debate, 21 May 1827, vol. 17, col. 930.

¹⁰³ General Association for the Purpose of Bettering the Condition of Manufacturing and Agricultural Labourers, *A Narrative and Exposition of the Origin, Progress, Principles, Objects, &c. &c. of the General Association Established in London, for the Purpose of Bettering the Condition of Manufacturing & Agricultural Labourers* (1827); Evidence of R. J. Wilmot Horton, 12 May 1827, and Benjamin Willis, 12 May 1827, and appendix 5 (copy of 'An appeal to the nation from the Directors and Central Committee of the General Association'), Third Report from House of Commons Select Committee on Emigration from U.K., c.13 (234) [herein Third Report], 358–68, 368–74 and 576–9. For an analysis of the operation of the General Association see Burchardt, *Allotment Movement*, 75–6.

¹⁰⁴ Select Committee report and evidence of Revd Malthus, 5 May 1827, Third Report, 10–11, 40 and 81.

It is important to note, though, that Owen's society – and his vision – was not concerned with the enclosure of wastes per se but rather an attempt to convert poor labouring men into independent small farmers on already enclosed land. The material manifestation of Owen's vision was the Harmony Hall estate settlement at East Tytherley, west Hampshire, the initial lease being taken out in April 1839, thus predating the Home Colonization Society. Leases were initially taken on three pre-existing farms totalling some 776 acres, before adding two extensions in the summer of 1842 totalling a further 360 acres. At the centre of the community was a huge mansion, the Harmony Hall – the building of which started in the summer of 1841 but was not completed until two years later – which acted as the centre of the community and a de facto hub for Owen's organisations. By September 1845 Harmony Hall had closed, the community having run up large debts and having 'settled' fewer than 100 people, the original intention having been to create a community of 500 souls.¹⁰⁵ If the Chartist Land Plan bore a family resemblance to the Owenite community in Hampshire, the language of the plan's proponents was not figured in terms of home colonisation – although occasionally the settlements were referred to as 'colonies', evidence of the wider influence of the languages of internal colonisation.¹⁰⁶

It was not until the late nineteenth century that radical interest in poverty alleviation schemes again turned explicitly to languages of internal colonisation, Unitarian minister and Poor Law reform campaigner Herbert Mills in 1887 founding a new Home Colonization Society. Mills's Poor Law critique and manifesto *Poverty and the State* (1886) detailed a scheme wherein 4,000 farm 'colonies' of 2,000 acres would each support 4,000 people who would otherwise be living in workhouses or urban slums and trapped in a cycle of under- and unemployment. Unlike Owen's earlier society, Mills *did* advocate the turning of wastes into productive land, drawing on the example of the 'beggar colonies' created on one-time waste land in the Netherlands, but as with Owen's Harmony Hall Community the solitary attempt to create a colony – the so-called Westmorland Commune, established at Starthwaite in 1892 – also ultimately folded, Mills abandoning the colony in 1901.¹⁰⁷ The Westmorland Commune was, as Jan Marsh has detailed, one of several turn-of-the-century attempts to settle the urban, industrial worker 'back' on

¹⁰⁵ Edward Royle, *Robert Owen and the Commencement of the Millennium: The Harmony Community at Queenwood Farm, Hampshire, 1839–1845* (Manchester, 1998). Also see Malcolm Chase, *The People's Farm: English Radical Agrarianism 1775–1840* (Oxford, 1988), ch. 6. An Owen-inspired, but not -backed, agrarian community was also set up at the same time at Manea Fen in Cambridgeshire. This was even shorter-lived, collapsing in 1841: J. Langdon, "'A Monument of Union": Social Change and Personal Experience at the Manea Fen Community, 1839–1841', *Utopian Studies*, 23 (2012), 504–31.

¹⁰⁶ For example, *Northern Star*, 13 Nov. 1847 and 3 Feb. 1849.

¹⁰⁷ Herbert V. Mills, *Poverty and the State, Or, Work for the Unemployed: An Enquiry Into the Causes and Extent of Enforced Idleness, Together with the Statement of a Remedy Practicable Here and Now* (1886), esp. ch. 10 ('The colonies in the Netherlands'); H. G. Willink, 'The Dutch Labour Colonies', *Charity Organisation Review*, 4 (1888), 241–59; L. Smith, 'A Failed Utopia: H.V. Mills and the Westmorland Commune', *Transactions of the Unitarian Historical Society*, 20 (1991), 297–303.

the land, such schemes united by the use of the term ‘colony’ in describing their intentions, but these were, including Mills’s schemes whatever his advocacy of using unenclosed waste land, neither concerned with enclosure nor based on a critique of the imperial system.¹⁰⁸ Still, their existence points to the persistence of Young’s ideal that the solution to social problems lay on the land, and with a deeper sense that the land, and access to working the land, should not be the exclusive preserve of the rich; that the land might be more effectively made to yield for the good of the country and meet issues of poverty.

Conclusions

The account given here has a critical legacy that goes beyond the internal colonial languages and logics of later ‘back to the land’ schemes. Debates surrounding the projection of internal colonialism had major effects in shifting both the tenor of the debate on enclosure and in altering practices of enclosure, including being instrumental in the passing of the 1801 General Enclosure Act. Indeed, notwithstanding Mingay’s critique of the effectiveness of the Sinclair-sponsored Act of 1801, it did help the projectors of enclosure ride roughshod over the opposition and to ignore the wishes of countless commoners in that it required a lower level of consent from landowners. Whilst it is beyond the scope of this paper to delineate the influence such thinking had on the projectors of actual enclosures, we can see that it had an influence on debates surrounding actual enclosures. The following two examples from 1817–18 are instructive. In the aforementioned case of the enclosure of Exmoor, John Knight, the purchaser of the forest from the Crown, created the new village of Simonsbath as the central settlement of the scheme, a literal ordering and (re)peopling of the one-time waste.¹⁰⁹ Elsewhere, plans to enclose Epping Forest provoked considerable public debate, both sides drawing on ideas of internal colonialism. One supporter argued that it

ought not to be continued in a state of waste, whilst millions of their fellow-subjects are placed upon a short allowance of its produce ... [It is] in the interest of the country and the capital, that nothing but gardens, grass, and corn fields should be within a hundred miles of its gates.

An opponent, conversely, drew upon the squatters’ ‘colonies’ at Stratford, then in Essex on the east London fringe, where ‘you will witness scenes at which humanity shudders’, to suggest that settling Epping with ‘36,000 ... idle paupers’ was unlikely to ‘improve the morals of the lower orders, residing within its boundaries’.¹¹⁰ Together, such enclosures meant that from 1800 to

¹⁰⁸ Jan Marsh, *Back to the Land: The Pastoral Impulse in England, from 1880 to 1914* (1982), esp. ch. 8.

¹⁰⁹ M. Williams, ‘The Enclosure of Waste Land in Somerset, 1700–1900’, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 57 (1972), 106–7.

¹¹⁰ *Morning Post*, 25 Dec. 1817; *Weekly Dispatch*, 18 Jan. 1818; Anon., *Enclosure of Waltham Forest* (1818), 23.

1873 the area of England and Wales covered in ‘wastes’ fell from 21.3 per cent to 6.4 per cent.¹¹¹

We do well to remember that the history of state-sponsored or state-encouraged acts of internal colonialism in other parts of Britain – notably in late thirteenth-century Wales, and in Scotland after the Act of Union – was bitter and brutal and leaves a toxic legacy that shapes the politics of today. Further, it is important to note that Young and Sinclair and their wider circle were not altogether anticolonial. Indeed, they make pretty poor heroes for post- and de-colonial politics. For instance, Charles Vancouver, author of the Board of Agriculture county reports for Cambridge (1794), Essex (1795), Devon (1808) and Hampshire (1813), having learnt agriculture in his native Norfolk was found a position working for Lord Shelburne at Rahan in King’s County (now County Offaly) in 1776 by no less a person than Arthur Young. From here Vancouver moved to Kentucky where as well as taking on a 57,000-acre farm he applied his expertise in land draining and improvement learnt in Ireland. Thereafter he flitted between Kentucky, Sussex, the Netherlands, Kentucky, back to England, and then finally Virginia where he died in 1815. Vancouver was a classic settler colonialist, and whilst Young may have preferred that he use his capital in acts of internal colonisation he was at least not using British public funds.¹¹²

Arguably what is more striking still is the way in which debates about the nature of enclosure and improvement were quick to draw upon the colonial experience overseas, both in terms of the languages used but also in terms of making direct comparisons. Enclosure was not simply something forged in the fields and wastes of England (and Wales and Scotland) and imposed on Britain’s colonies. Rather, enclosure became a two-way process, the languages of British settler colonialism used not only to describe the enclosure of wastes in the Metropole but also to inspire and justify it. The very practice – and cost – of dispossession and enclosure in Britain’s overseas colonies was also used by Young and others to argue that such speculations (and violences) were both unnecessary given the millions of acres of waste at home and a betrayal of the needs of the British people and economy. Moving beyond the confines of a solitary paper, the challenge, now, is to dig deeply into the archive and to explore every internal colonisation scheme in micro-historical detail.

Beyond this, the process of the inferiorisation of the commoner was not only vital in the project of internal colonialism but also part of the making of the rural poor – the poor commoner and pauperised wage labourer alike – as the internal subaltern. As I have shown elsewhere, by the 1830s this was used to justify the imposition of a variety of biopolitical acts of statecraft that rendered the dispossessed commoner not just subaltern – excluded,

¹¹¹ M. Williams, ‘The Enclosure and Reclamation of Waste Land in England and Wales in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries’, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 51 (1970), 61.

¹¹² H. Fox, ‘Vancouver, Charles (bap. 1756, d. 1815?), agricultural improver and writer’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, retrieved 15 Jul. 2022, from <https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-28061>.

denied – but reduced to a state of just bodily existing; to, after Giorgio Agamben, bare life.¹¹³ Internal colonisation schemes thereby created a hierarchy of not just land but of life itself: a hierarchy in which waste must be converted to improved farmed land and in which the property-less commoner must be eliminated and the pauperised labourer turned into a sturdy peasant. This account, then, matters well beyond the contexts of rural Britain and to an audience well beyond scholars of enclosure and the making of private property in land. Indeed, ultimately the narrative offered here speaks to a broader point about colonisation never being a one-way process, something just enacted in overseas colonies. Rather, it was to engage in a two-way flow of ideas and practices that challenged understandings of how the Metropole was governed (and who it was governed for). The Empire was not just ‘at home’ but it reimagined and refigured home: it made it the setting for experiments that drew on colonial learnings and turned it into a laboratory for new forms of colonial ideas, practices and spaces. Colonialism was, as this paper shows, to place all subjects and things, at home and abroad, on the same hierarchy of worth and value.

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¹¹³ Griffin, *The Politics of Hunger*, ch. 5. On bare life see G. Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford, 1998).

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