The ruin of rural England: an interpretation of late nineteenth century agricultural depression, 1879-1914
Title: 'The ruin of rural England': an interpretation of late nineteenth century agricultural depression, 1879-1914

Authors: Roberts, Jason Lewis

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Abstract: This thesis attempts a re-interpretation of late nineteenth-century agricultural depression, specifically in England, by complementing economic histories to suggest a hitherto neglected cultural component equally defined Victorian comprehension of both the phenomenon's geographic distribution and symbolic form. Adopting recent theoretical shifts in historical geography that validate the use of literary evidence in combination with economic data sources, the thesis claims depression was constructed from an accretion of mythologised layers of meaning deposited unconsciously or otherwise. These symbolic forms influenced spatial outcomes both in material and imaginary realms, and the nature of debate at varying levels from fanning debates to intellectual discourses. The thesis examines three distinct examples of the accumulation and distribution of depression symbolism and how each signification was acted upon by different discursive communities. Firstly, attention will be directed towards farming behaviour and the consumption of depression myth. Critically the thesis suggests within farming, depression emerged as a state of mind that inhibited the production of indigenous solutions, thus further propagating depression. Secondly, the thesis moves on to examine how the technicalities of agrarian debate were seized by wider national debates, thus further codifying the depression with numerous social anxieties such as fin de siecle fears, national destabilisation and racial degeneration. Interestingly, icons of failure conferred upon depression within this higher level of discursive interaction are returned to the parochial level, further influencing farming behaviour. An additional implication suggests the geography of depression is heavily skewed towards a perceived threat to an invented homeland at a time of emergent national identities. Finally, the thesis considers an agrarian-led response to farm failure, the introduction of small holdings and the philosophy of la petite culture, as a potential solution. The theoretical basis of land reform campaigns envisaged a major overhaul of the failed rural order of patrician sponsored agriculture, yet were influenced by the accumulated mythology of depression. Thus farm failure as conceived within imaginary geographies proved as persuasive in interpreting depression as physical expressions of distress in real space.

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The agricultural depression of the late 1880s and 1890s was widespread and crippling. It reflected the decline of agriculture’s share of national income from one-fifth in 1850 to one-twelfth by the 1980s. The achievements of British farming from the 1830s to the mid-1870s were impressive. Attempts to mechanise harvesting date from the late eighteenth century but modern reapers came after 1848 with the large-scale production of the American McCormick reaper. Many developments awaited improvements in motive power. Responses to agricultural change. The landscape and economy of rural Britain were substantially reshaped after 1830. Despite substantial advances in ‘new farming’, many parts of Britain were still backward in the 1890s and 1840s.