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## “CAPTAIN SWING” IN THE WEST MIDLANDS

“Captain Swing” had small success in the West Midlands. As Hobsbawm and Rudé correctly point out, Staffordshire and Shropshire were among those “counties only marginally affected by the labourers’ movement”.<sup>1</sup> There were few cases of incendiarism and the whole episode in this area was somewhat anticlimactic in character. Nevertheless the threat of “Captain Swing” in the last months of 1830 and into 1831 did not leave the West Midlands unmoved. It had the incidental effect of uncovering some of the otherwise subterranean rifts and divisions in rural society. In the fragments of evidence that survive, one can see that “Swing” induced a number of responses from the various sections of rural life in Staffordshire and Salop – attitudes were exposed and recriminations voiced. In effect, the fear of conflict rendered explicit social and economic circumstances which otherwise one can only guess at.

### I

It is generally accepted that the origins of “Captain Swing” are to be found in the depressed and demoralised circumstances of under-employed agricultural labourers, a condition which reached its nadir in the years 1828-30. An increasingly inflammatory situation was developing to which any spark would create a conflagration.<sup>2</sup> But these conditions were geographically specific, and the further away from the South-East of England the less likely was incendiarism.

In general terms, Staffordshire and Salop were among those regions which weathered the post-Napoleonic War agricultural depression without the extreme difficulties suffered in the southern counties. Both counties were beyond the Spenshamland region, wage levels were

<sup>1</sup> E. J. Hobsbawm and George Rudé, *Captain Swing* (1969), p. 305.

<sup>2</sup> E. J. Hobsbawm and George Rudé, *op. cit.*, p. 91. The causes of these circumstances, of course, are more problematical. See the alternative view of G. E. Mingay in *The English Historical Review*, October 1970, p. 814.

relatively buoyant and agricultural investment, while much reduced, remained substantial.<sup>1</sup> Commitment to wheat production was less pronounced and the possibilities of diversified agricultural production were greater. The proximity of growing industrial and urban markets of consumption allowed a far better balance of production for those farmers able to respond to differential price trends. Improving transport further assisted this process. At the same time the rapid expansion of employment in the Potteries and in the West Midland coal and iron industries provided an alternative range of employment to agricultural labourers. It is virtually certain that disguised unemployment was far less important here than in the southern counties.<sup>2</sup>

Some of these economic pressures reinforced the drive towards the “improvement” on landed estates in the West Midlands. The rationalisation of agricultural methods – which inevitably undermined the bases of the existing local agrarian social structure – was promoted with considerable zeal by landlords, and, less willingly, their tenantry. Partly it was a response to the depression itself – it was an attempt to counteract low prices by raising productivity. Partly also it was an attempt by landlords to reconcile the roles of agrarian entrepreneurs and landed gentlemen. For the agricultural labourer “improvement” in the 1820’s often meant two things. Investment in improvement projects – for example in drainage schemes, rebuilding farmhouses, roads construction, etc., – maintained the level of employment on the land in opposition to the impact of the depression. On the other hand the rationalisation of agriculture realigned relationships in rural society increasingly towards the commercial ideal. That is to say classes came to be more clearly defined and, for better or for worse, the nexuses associated with the older paternalist and deferential society were lost. “Captain Swing” exposed some of the misgivings that these changes eventually induced.

<sup>1</sup> See for instance G. E. Fussell and M. Compton, “Agricultural Adjustments after the Napoleonic Wars”, in: *Economic History*, III (1939), pp. 197-8; J. H. Clapham, *An Economic History of Modern Britain* (3 vols, Cambridge, 1926-38), I, Ch. XI; Select Committee on Agriculture, 1833 [House of Commons Sessional Papers, 1833, V, Commons Paper No 612], qq. 473, 539, 552, 553; Second Report from the Committee appointed to inquire into the State of Agriculture [House of Commons Sessional Papers, 1836, VII, Pt 1, Commons Paper No 189], evidence of Samuel Bickerton.

<sup>2</sup> It is significant that, in the West Midlands, the greatest fear of local forces of law and order was a conjunction of high bread prices and heavy unemployment in both agriculture and industries. Indeed unemployment was assumed to be the root cause of disaffection in whatever form it took.

## II

Some landowners were intelligently aware of a changing atmosphere in which the “lower orders” were, in some way, considerably more prone to active disaffection. The contiguity of a swelling industrial populace was certainly regarded as a predominant element in the situation – as also was the emerging political dimension in working class agitation.<sup>1</sup> But observers also sensed the intangible breakdown of social cohesion, even in the most rural areas. Landlords were prepared to believe that their substantial tenant farmers – the favoured élite (so long as they produced their rents) in the new improved agriculture – were insensitive to the needs of the agricultural poor. The gradations of rural society had been reduced to a three-tiered structure – between which tiers there was little exchange beyond the commercial relationship. Each class performed its task as a factor of production, but any semblance of social unity had dissolved. Thus a landlord’s agent in 1820 in Staffordshire denounced the tenant farmers for failing to consider the welfare of the labourers; they simply distrusted them and failed completely to cultivate any kind of harmony of interest – “they really are great tyrants”, said the agent. His fear – which related to the lower orders throughout the West Midlands – was that there were

<sup>1</sup> Cf. the picture drawn by William Howitt in 1838. Referring to the agricultural villages of “the sleepy hollows” of the champaign regions he wrote: “Universally they may seem old-fashioned, and full of a sweet tranquillity; but their inhabitants differ widely in character in different parts of the country – widely often in a short space, and in a manner that can only be accounted for by their less or greater communion with towns, less or greater degree of education extended to them – and the kind extended. Where they are far from towns, and hold little intercourse with them, and have no manufactory in them, they may be dull, but they are seldom very vicious. If they have had little education, they lead a very mechanical sort of life; are often very boorish, and have very confined notions and contracted wishes; are rude in manner, but not bad in heart.” Howitt then offered the contrast: “It is in those rural districts into which manufactories have spread – that are partly manufacturing and partly agricultural – that the population assumes its worst shape. The state of morals and manners amongst the working population of our great towns is terrible – far more than casual observers are aware of. After all that has been done to reform and educate the working class, the torrent of corruption rolls on [. . .] and where the rural population, in its simplicity, comes into contact with this spirit, it receives the contagion in its most exaggerated form – a desolating moral pestilence, and suffers in person and in mind. There spreads all the vice and baseness of the lowest grade of the town, made hideous by still greater vulgarity and ignorance, and unawed by the higher authorities, unchecked by the better influences which there prevail, in the example and exertions of a higher caste of society.” William Howitt, *The Rural Life of England*, 3rd ed. (London, 1844), pp. 199 and 201.

emerging from the working people many who had “no knowledge or feeling for the older Establishments of England and indeed feel towards them a spirit of rivalry and hostility”. The irony was that landlord policy itself was a prime mover in the breakdown of such older attitudes.<sup>1</sup>

Few landowners tried harder and more consciously to convert their estates to models of commercial best-practice than did the Leveson-Gowers. Lord Stafford, head of the family from 1803 to 1833, owned very substantial estates in both Shropshire and Staffordshire – at Lilleshall and Trentham. Aided by a huge family fortune, and by imported Scotch agents and tenant-farmers, Stafford spent thirty years remodelling his estates. In the process the highest premium was put on efficiency and the return on investment. The unwonted consequence was the reduction of the social role of the Leveson-Gowers in the West Midlands. At one extreme it caused the family to abdicate its political hegemony of the county of Stafford – which, by 1816, was deemed to be incompatible with a straightforward economic return on property. At the opposite extreme the policy called for the termination of the traditional beer allowances to estate labourers at harvest and the extermination of cottagers’ bulldogs – a policy which produced a disproportionately adverse social response. In between was the general landlord pressure exerted on the tenant farmers to follow efficiency with the maximum effort. Such a policy was intolerant of small holdings and even of relatively insignificant rights associated with waste land.<sup>2</sup> Pressure from above – from the landlord – gradually

<sup>1</sup> Loch to Reynolds, and Loch to Lord Stafford, 16 December 1820, Stafford Record Office, Sutherland Collection, Estate Correspondence, D593/K. (All subsequent references to letters are taken from this series of correspondence.) On repeated occasions the landlord was prepared to think the worst of the tenant farmers. In February 1834, for instance, the Duke of Sutherland said of his Shropshire estate: “There is no doubt that the Farmers make a wrong use of the advantage they have in respect of the labourers.” Sutherland to Lewis, 22 February 1834. The agent commented that “The wages I consider too low for a family to exist on, but I am sure, indeed I am positive, it will never do for his Grace or his Agents to interfere in the adjustment of such matters between master and men.” Lewis to Loch, 27 February 1834.

<sup>2</sup> A fuller discussion of these agricultural policies is provided in Eric Richards, “Leviathan of Wealth in West Midland Agriculture, 1800-1850”, forthcoming in *Agricultural History Review*, 1974. It may be noted here that the improvements put considerable emphasis on the consolidation of farms, the use of threshing machines and the encouragement of labour-saving innovation. New tenants were brought in – men with “that spirit of enterprise [. . .] which must prove so beneficial to the country, by the additional surplus produce which will be brought to market”. James Loch, *An Account of the Improvements on the Estates of the Marquess of Stafford* (London, 1820), pp. 180-1, 187-8, 193.

reshaped the whole framework of rural life.<sup>1</sup> It was particularly the case on the Leveson-Gower estates. It is a paradox of these years that Lord Stafford and his agents were usually responsive to currents of popular discontent – they were leaders of Whig reform – and took great pains to ameliorate the hardship of the poor on their estates. Yet there was little recognition of the part played by landlord commercialism in the deterioration in social cohesion. The impact of “Captain Swing” was to further persuade the family that the maintenance of its paternal role in society was increasingly incompatible with the management of the estates as economic units. The tacit assumption that, in the last resort, poverty, unemployment and social conflict were the responsibilities of the landowner, was weakened still further.<sup>2</sup>

### III

James Loch, commissioner to Lord Stafford, was one of the most widely connected men of his day. He was knowledgeable in many fields and had been involved closely with the makers of policy in Westminster. At the same time he was in daily touch with the problems of aristocratic estate management. He possessed a remarkable network of communication with many parts of Britain. He was responsible for the management of five estates – including those of Lord Dudley in Staffordshire. During the “Swing” crisis he kept himself (and his local managers) closely informed of developments.

On Lord Stafford’s estates the landlord had, in the early 1820’s, introduced corn rents as a method of ameliorating the position of the tenant-farmers. Rents were made proportional to the local cereal prices: it was one concession which, together with the trend towards diversified production, helped the farmers through the period of depressed prices. The landlord, impatient for improved rents, continuously sought methods of increasing his increment from rising productivity. In May 1830 the landlord’s attitude hardened. Loch observed that the rent abatements had been ample and that the tenants should repay the landlord by way of increased expenditure on im-

<sup>1</sup> For some not entirely impartial comments on this policy see Thomas Bakewell, *Remarks on a Publication by James Loch Esq.* (London, 1820). This is a long catalogue of criticisms of the Leveson-Gower estates. Its main theme was that a managerial hierarchy had been imposed upon the estates which destroyed all communication between the elements of society. Bakewell blamed the landlord rather than the farmers for the alleged social malaise. James Loch acknowledged that the policies had been unpopular (Loch to Lady Gower, 6 July 1823).

<sup>2</sup> Some of these points are discussed more fully in Eric Richards, “The Social and Electoral Influence of the Trentham Interest, 1800-1860”, forthcoming in *Midland History*, 1974.

provements to their farms. Rents were "such as to entitle the landlord to expect the continuance of every improvement". A stringent plan was devised to force the tenants to expand their own capital. By way of response one of the most respected tenants on the Trentham estate resigned. Farmer Ford asserted that he had been forced to bear too much of the brunt of depressed prices. He concluded his letter of resignation thus: "I shall be proud to remain a faithful adherent to the interests of the Noble House under which I and my ancestors have for three generations been tenants, a connexion, I assure you, which nothing but the most powerful reasons could have induced me to dissolve."<sup>1</sup> It was part of a recurrent pattern by which the landlord sought to maximise the efficiency of the estate.

The estate managers did not consider such a policy at all at odds with the view that the aristocratic estate was a very particular type of institution. In November 1830 Loch expounded, in tones strikingly ambivalent, some of the rationale of estate policy. He claimed that great landed estates in general were lower rented than other property. Lord Stafford's rents, he said, were fixed "at rather under the general average of the district. This rule has been adhered to. I mean, that his tenants should feel that they hold their lands on rather easier terms than their neighbours. It is fit and proper that those who hold of a great man should do so. It is one sacrifice that large estates must pay and it is that which reconciled the Public to their existence [. . .] In England his [Lord Stafford's] rents are put at from 1/- to 2/- an Acre below the common average of the Country [. . .] and as the attachment of mankind is secured more through their interest than in any other way, it is an object to be attended to."<sup>2</sup> Such was a preface to the approach of incendiarism. Loch's thoughts were concentrating.

#### IV

In the last week of November 1830 Loch began to co-ordinate the various estate agents under his command in readiness for a possible spread of "Captain Swing" into the West Midlands. William Lewis,

<sup>1</sup> Ford to Loch, 11 August 1830. Ten years previously Ford was described by Loch as one of the best of Lord Stafford's tenants: "Mr. Ford, is an example to the whole county, for his liberal, enterprising, yet judicious conduct." Loch, *Account*, op. cit., p. 194, Appendix, p. 74. The survival of the fittest, and the policy of consolidation, produced a class of very substantial tenant farmers living in "large and expensive farm houses more like the seats of independent proprietors, than the houses of industrious and frugal farmers, with extravagantly expensive farm buildings". Bakewell, op. cit., p. 129. Bakewell claimed that this process generated a great deal of discontent in the agricultural community.

<sup>2</sup> Loch to Horsburgh, 17 November 1830.

the agent at Trentham was told to stay close to Trentham Hall and to “consider well what is the best thing to preserve [. . .] property entire, and to resist these lawless proceedings”. Four days later Lewis was asked: “Pray what wages do the Farmers pay their labourers? [. . .] it is desirable to learn that the indulgence shown by the landlord to the Tenantry [i.e. in the form of Corn Rents] is extended by them to their labourers – it ought to be seen that this is so”.<sup>1</sup>

Reporting from Staffordshire, Lewis pointed out that the situation there was complicated by existence of unemployment in the iron trade in the neighbourhood of Wolverhampton. He was concerned about Lord Stafford’s popularity in the area. There had been a request for some land upon which to build a school – and he recommended “that Lord Stafford should actually give the land required. It will be very much thought of, I know, by the neighbourhood. Lord Stafford stands very high in the estimation of all ranks and I feel very certain that no attempt will ever be made to injure his or his tenants’ property.”<sup>2</sup>

On the first day of December Loch reported that anonymous “Swing” letters had been received in the two counties. “You will perceive”, he had told an agent, “That the mischievous disposition in destroying machinery spreads. Have you considered in what manner you would meet a body of fellows, coming from a neighbouring parish, with this intent? Precaution is not fear.” He told William Lewis to show outward confidence in the local labourers – and to find a reason to throw a dance and a supper for them. This was a well tried pacifier in the tradition of the Leveson-Gower family.<sup>3</sup> At Lilleshall, also at the beginning of December, there was an air of optimism among local tenantry and landowners. Thomas Jones maintained that the greatest fear was fear itself: “There is not the smallest grounds for dread or suspicion of such characters coming amongst us.” It was, he insisted, best not even to discuss the matter – for talk itself “would be the first thing to give the alarum”. Lord Talbot was reported to be quite unconcerned: there had been no actual incident, and the respectable tenantry had been consulted.<sup>4</sup>

Meanwhile, however, rumours poured in concerning letters threatening machine-breaking and rick-burning both in Shropshire and Staffordshire. William Lewis was certainly wary of taking premature measures: “it would be an improper step to use or make any arrangements for the suppression of any riot from the peaceable state the

<sup>1</sup> Loch to Lewis, 23 and 27 November 1830.

<sup>2</sup> Lewis to Loch, 24 November 1830.

<sup>3</sup> Loch to Lewis, 1 December 1830.

<sup>4</sup> Jones to Loch, 1 and 5 December 1830.

County is now in". He continued: "I apprehend no danger from any disturbance or rioting of the labourers in this neighbourhood, they have all been nearly full employed and in a general way fairly paid." Lewis, temperamentally a pessimist, remained confident that "Swing" would not extend into the Midlands. He diagnosed the cause to be "the barbarous treatment which the poor labourers have received" which drove them to such acts of violence. He was, he said, "only surprised that they have remained so long in quiet subjection, their suffering has been very great".<sup>1</sup> On December 11th it was reported that Mr Skitt of Longwood (Salop) had received one of the "abominable" letters signed by "Swing" threatening to break "his machine", and to burn his rickyard. It had been sent via Wellington Post Office, in "a disguised hand" it was thought. The local authorities hoped it was a hoax; nonetheless special constables had been sworn in and a watch was set up; daily reports flowed.<sup>2</sup>

In both counties the mixed industrial/agricultural context rather complicated the situation so far as the operations of "Swing" were concerned. At Lilleshall the local iron works had been reducing wages, and, as Lewis remarked, this action had "caused some discontent amongst them and may be the pretext for riot". On both the Leveson-Gower estates precautions were well forward in the first week of December. "We shall be ready to do our duty", reported Lewis, "It is most gratifying to me to know that the whole public seems to fully appreciate my Lordship's goodness [i.e. Lord Stafford's], this is a good shield over our heads, but still we know not what an infuriated mob may do."<sup>3</sup> He carried memories of the ferocious conflicts on the Salopian coalfields in 1820-21 (known as the Cinderloo Riots).

William Lewis was, indeed, most alert, and surveyed his territory for signs of working-class dissidence and united action. He spent the 6th of December perambulating the Potteries. There he found a widespread and very hostile feeling against the truck system as practised by some of the Potters. Colliers in the northern part of Staffordshire were dissatisfied with their wages, and some believed that a bout of rioting was about to begin. On the agricultural side Peake, the agent of the Sneyd estate, had received a threatening letter – Lewis noted that Peake was "rather unpopular amongst the working classes". A night watch on the hayricks in the Trentham district was ordered.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Lewis to Loch, 5 December 1830.

<sup>2</sup> Jones to Loch, 11, 12 and 14 December 1830.

<sup>3</sup> Lewis to Loch, 6 December 1830.

<sup>4</sup> Idem.

Despite the rumblings in the mining districts, Lewis continued sanguine. But he took what he considered appropriate precautions. He thought it best to employ idle hands rather than leave labourers open to the “Swing” infection. On December 10th he reported: “I have employed a few extra hands that were out of work, to trench on the Common intended to be planted.”<sup>1</sup> The next day Lewis conferred with his Lilleshall and Newport (Salop) contacts, and with farmers and tenants who had received threatening letters. He received the report that “a very suspicious character had been taken up at Stone [Staffs, 10 December 1830] with [. . .] a phosphorous box upon him and that there were many suspicious circumstances attending, and that he had been committed to jail”.<sup>2</sup>

Each day without incident was celebrated. Nerves were not calmed, however, by the reported accidental burning down of a silk factory at Leek in North Staffs on 12/13th December.<sup>3</sup> The following day Lord Talbot expressed his alarm at the number of threatening letters received by his tenantry. Lewis however remained sceptical. Full employment, he reasoned, was a guarantee against “Swing”: “there is plenty of work both in this [the Trentham area] and Shropshire, or at least work is found to keep all hands employed, which must help all quiet.”<sup>4</sup>

This form of landed estate insurance policy was taken a degree further at both Lilleshall and Trentham. Lewis arranged a dance and a supper for the local labourers – an event which, he remarked, “is attended with good consequences [for the] poor creatures [. . .] it is the only treat they have during the year”. The implication was that their employers – the tenant farmers – had failed in their social duty, and had generally misused the people – and that only the landed gentry and their agents were capable of sustaining the welfare of the rural community. “I have always through life been a strong advocate for showing kindness to the poor folk around me”, he concluded. “They”, he added, “have feelings as well as the great.”<sup>5</sup> One of James Loch’s contacts – William Young, a north of Scotland agricultural improver – put the matter in its most mundane light; from his Highland fastness, he crowed over the various English diseases: “tell me now if the Sutherland rental [of Lord Stafford] is not worth 20 per cent more purchase money – no *Tythes*, poor *rates*, or *Incendiaries* to

<sup>1</sup> Lewis to Loch, 10 December 1830.

<sup>2</sup> Lewis to Loch, 11 December 1830.

<sup>3</sup> Lewis to Loch, 13 December 1830. Note that Hobsbawm and Rudé (op. cit., p. 348) date the incident at 7th December and classify it under “Arson”.

<sup>4</sup> Lewis to Loch, 14 December 1830.

<sup>5</sup> Lewis to Loch, 15 December 1830.

contend with; the storms will not reach us." The landed interest knew well to calculate the economic costs of "Captain Swing".<sup>1</sup>

James Loch saw the matter in the wider context of the Reform movement with which he had been connected, on the Whig side, for a decade. He could not agree with George Dempster, another Scottish correspondent, that "the dreadful spirit of anarchy and insubordination" prevalent in December 1830, rendered "the time [...] ill-chosen for the indiscriminate cry for Reform. Reform in its true sense I fear we shall not have, but in its stead *violent* reform."<sup>2</sup> Loch counted himself in the ranks of the "Moderate Reformers" – he was undoubtedly alarmed by working class militancy, but saw parliamentary reform as the basic solution, and, in any case, quite unavoidable.<sup>3</sup> Uncompromising opposition to reform, he insisted, was worse than futile. In Loch's mind, the incendiarism of the last days of 1830 was by no means a separate issue; it was a symptom of the "change in the times", of the relative decline of aristocratic institutions. He nevertheless believed that "private wrongs and spite" had been the cause of much of the "Swing" activity in the south and that it might spread.<sup>4</sup>

His fears were reinforced by the story he had heard from a Mr Wing, the Duke of Bedford's agent. A tenant's rickyard in Northamptonshire had received a visit from incendiaries. Wing had himself sought out "a suspicious looking female who was accompanied by a genteel looking man".<sup>5</sup> Though possessing no warrant Wing had tried to seize the pair of them. The man escaped across country; "the peasants giving no assistance whatever, he escaped", complained Wing. On examining "the supposed female it appeared that he was a man in women's clothes".<sup>6</sup> This, as well as reports of burnings in Durham and Cumberland, brought Loch directly to supervise Lord Stafford's affairs in the West Midlands.

<sup>1</sup> Young to Loch, 5 December 1830.

<sup>2</sup> Dempster to Loch, 13 December 1830.

<sup>3</sup> Loch to Mackenzie, 10 November 1830. "The question is so decidedly desired by a large and increasing portion of the Middle and Upper classes, that the sooner it is granted the less will be required [...] and as it is delayed, more will be demanded."

<sup>4</sup> Loch to Dempster, 25 December 1830. Here Loch re-iterated his views on Reform: "I assure you it is impossible to avoid it – it has made a progress among the middle and *upper* classes of the County since last year, no one who is not a daily witness to it can imagine. It may be guided, it cannot be stopped and the sooner that it is conceded the less will be required. It was by his uncompromising declaration against ever entertaining the subject that put an end to the Duke of Wellington's Government."

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Hobsbawm and Rudé, pp. 198-9.

<sup>6</sup> Loch to Lewis, 2 and 4 December 1830.

## V

The mild optimism of New Year was undermined in the third week of January. Five miles south-west of Wolverhampton – near Himley Hall, Swindon – incendiarism emerged at last. Loch reported to Lord Gower (heir to Lord Stafford) on January 16, 1831: “You will have heard that the Fires have reached us – but I hope by vigour stopt. I think three Welsh colliers appear to be the men; they have escaped.” A rick had been burned. Vigilance throughout the West Midlands was redoubled.<sup>1</sup> Loch reported also to Lord Stafford the intense alarm and uncertainty that had developed. “The spirit of the country was excellent and the Yeomanry turned out in the most zealous manner. Having often blamed the Kent Magistrates for want of activity and resolution, I only felt myself bound to try that I could to assist the Magistrates.” Despite the most detailed and serious investigation spread over two days, he observed, “we are further than ever from the truth”. He commented darkly: “there is something most seriously remarkable in the secrecy with which it has been accomplished”. The local vigilantes had, however, elucidated some of the circumstances of the Himley affair, notably that “The fires were preceded by some anonymous letters – threatening the Gentlemen farmers – and both who have suffered are such, and not tenants.”<sup>2</sup>

Loch’s own diagnosis was somewhat cryptic. “I am convinced”, he wrote, “that there is a sort of inexplicable desire among that class of people coupled in some instances with private revenge to commit such crimes, and that it is at home chiefly the perpetrators are to be looked for.” There was no further mention of “the three Welsh colliers”; but it was pointed out that the incendiarism had occurred on small rather than large estates. He comforted Lord Gower that his estate (Lilleshall) had “no redundant or unemployed poor, and the very necessity that you are under to learn their condition, appears to me to be a decided proof of the fact”.<sup>3</sup> Loch speculated that the Himley incidents were likely to have been “a family affair”, without any general significance for the region. “The whole Village are the most illiterate, ill-educated, ale-drinking profligate set of people I ever came in contact with.” Loch, in his capacity as representative of Lord Dudley, had involved himself personally in the matter. At one point he reported: “I have been here commanding the Yeomanry – acting as Magistrate, reporting to the Lord Lieutenant.” “I would rather dance at Country Dances”, he remarked ruefully. The efforts were worthwhile: “It was a laborious

<sup>1</sup> Loch to Gower, 16 January 1831; Lewis to Loch, 27 January 1831.

<sup>2</sup> Loch to Lord Stafford, 18 January 1831.

<sup>3</sup> Loch to Gower, 19 January 1831.

task at Himley, but I am certain that the exertion that was made has checked the system. It has eventually been of great use to me in the management of Lord Dudley's affairs, as it made me sooner known especially to the gentlemen, and in a most advantageous manner."<sup>1</sup>

By early in February it was already held that "The feverish state lately felt [. . .] with respect to recent incendiarism has in some measure subsided." Vigilance was high and fire engines kept at the ready.<sup>2</sup> But at the end of February Loch was able to inform the Bishop of Lichfield: "When I was at Himley I was very instrumental in sending to Jail four men for Rick burning belonging to this place, and in assisting the Magistrates during the very labourious investigations that they had to go through." In confirmation of his earlier suspicions, he added, "It was particularly striking the total want of education and the extreme ignorance that prevails in that place, with their total inattention to Religious duties."<sup>3</sup>

The causes of "Swing", in Loch's analysis, were threefold. Underemployment rendered men susceptible to revolt; they had been cut off from the civilising influences of the church and gentlemen landlords; and they lacked education.<sup>4</sup> The stern hand of the law, and the comprehensive might of established order were indispensable in checking the virulence of "Swing". But the cure was more problematical. Loch, voicing the predicament of the class he represented, saw one solution in the direction of involving the labouring classes in "improvement": prizes for the neatest cottages, plots of land for the deserving poor. They might thus be absorbed into the incentives of commercial agriculture. At the same time he saw the unexpired role of the landed aristocrat standing as social arbiter, keeping a balance in the competitive world on the new rural England.

<sup>1</sup> Loch to Lewis, 20 and 28 January 1831.

<sup>2</sup> Kirkby to Loch, 2 February 1831.

<sup>3</sup> Loch to Bishop of Lichfield, 26 February 1831.

<sup>4</sup> Both Staffordshire and Shropshire had above average levels of literacy in 1840 (see E. J. Hobsbawm, *Industry and Empire* (1969 edition), Diagram 20). But it is not difficult to believe that there existed pockets of very high levels of illiteracy in the 1820s. Loch was actively involved in the promotion of working class education in the 1820s and believed that education had a civilising and pacifying mission to perform. In 1821, for instance, he believed that the working classes might be kept occupied in schools of art, mechanics and chemistry – attending lectures which excluded all religious and political discussion. "A library of elementary books only should be formed and lent out [. . .] it would keep the people from publick houses and politics [and also be] an excellent means of diffusing the benefits of education over a very intelligent and active portion of the community and give a sound direction to genius which is not lost or expends itself either in the miseries of dissipation or of crime." Loch to Brougham, 25 December 1821.

## VI

In any kind of perspective the impact of "Captain Swing" in the West Midlands had been slight, and the few incidents of early 1831 were quickly dwarfed by the more concerted and sustained industrial turbulence in the Potteries and the coal/iron areas. But between the two outbreaks of social disturbance in the region – in the agricultural and the industrial areas – there appears to have been no continuity and no connexion.

"Captain Swing" had, nevertheless, focussed attention, however briefly, on the problems of rural society even in such a comparatively prosperous agriculture as that of the West Midlands. In particular it revealed the polarisation of classes on the land, and the vulnerability of the agricultural labourer, not merely to price fluctuations, but also to the institutional pressures from above, from the rationalising process of "Improvement". One of the ironies of the time was the willingness of landlords to lay blame upon their tenant farmers for the mistreatment of their labourers. Yet these very farmers had been encouraged and trained to maximise output and minimise costs, and had been restricted by little more than "rotation clauses" in their rental agreements. The social repercussions of Improvement were complex: "Swing" illuminated a small corner.

More immediately "Captain Swing" coloured the thinking of men like Loch and the Leveson-Gowers. It reinforced their notions of moderate reform. Loch's advice to Lord Gower in early 1831 was laden with assumptions derived from the current fears. Lord Gower was considering how best to organise his Lilleshall estate. Loch pressed for a wider spectrum of farm sizes to promote a smoother gradation of classes: "It is I believe better parcelled out into occupations of all sizes varying with an adapted to the different nature of the land [. . .] That something might be done to hold out on encouragement to more deserving Cottagers" was a subject of immense importance. At the same time, he was "alarmed beyond measure" at the idea of a great increase in a poor population. Malthusian and authoritarian elements in his character competed with his old-fashioned paternalism. In the aftermath of the Himley affair he was more likely to err on the side of authority:

"Long experience has taught me this melancholy fact, that while you are kind and considerate towards the poor, you must keep them strictly in their position, they are cunning and not sincere, they are selfish and ungrateful and their apparent deference towards their superiors is much more frequently the result of a

sincere and heartfelt thankfulness, for the benefits that are bestowed upon them [. . .] That which makes the strongest impression upon them [. . .] is strict and impartial justice.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Loch to Gower, 19 January 1831.