



PETER DEWEY, UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

PAPER TITLE: *JAMES MASON AND THE EYNHAM HALL ESTATE: BUSINESS AND LANDOWNERSHIP IN ENGLAND IN THE LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY*

ABSTRACT:

BACKGROUND: James Mason (1824-1903) made an early fortune in Portuguese copper mining, from the Mina de Sao Domingos, near Mertola, Baixa Alemtejo (in the Iberian Pyrites Belt), and bought the Eynsham Hall estate, near Oxford, England, for £54,000, in 1866.

Mason's story may be set in the context of a long-running discussion concerning the relations of businessmen and their wealth to landownership. This stretches back to controversies about the 'new men' of the Tudor period and the work of Lawrence Stone, and forward to that of Martin Wiener and Michael Thompson. The Wiener thesis is that successful Victorian businessmen were attracted by the social prestige of landownership, and, once installed as gentry squires, they (or their sons) were seduced into a 'gentrified' lifestyle, whose main features were an addiction to country sports and an embarrassed disavowal of money-making, which they (or their sons) increasingly saw as a sordid preoccupation. This interpretation has been disputed by Michael Thompson, who has pointed to the many businessmen who remained committed to business after becoming landowners.

QUESTIONS: The main question which arises in this paper is: Did landownership affect Mason's entrepreneurial attitudes? A subsidiary question is whether, once installed as a gentleman landowner, he was merely content to take the rents of his tenants, or preferred to play an active role in estate management, bringing his business skills to the land.

The answer to the main question is that Mason remained an entrepreneur to the end. He was fully cognisant of the social advantages attached to landownership, and enjoyed the company of his landed peers in country pursuits, but remained committed to business. He continued to oversee the affairs of his mining company [*Mason and Barry*] from a distance, by correspondence, became a substantial investor on the London and New York Stock Exchanges, and purchased a prestigious London residence. At his death his estate was valued at £869,000.

His career also sheds light on the contribution a scientifically-minded businessman could make to estate management, and suggests that the age of the improving landlord was not yet over, even in the 'Great Depression' of English agriculture in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. He invested heavily in land drainage as soon as he bought the Eynsham estate. Although at first content to be merely a rent-receiver, after the mid-1870s, as his tenants ran into financial difficulties, he took their land in hand and farmed it directly himself. In the process, he made important contributions to the science and practice of farming, and to farm accountancy.

SOURCES AND METHODS:

The sources for this paper are the estate papers deposited at the University of Reading in 1969. They are voluminous and very detailed, with meticulously kept financial accounts.

CONCLUSIONS: In this case, the Wiener 'gentrification' thesis' fails. Mason had no difficulty in integrating his business life with his newly-acquired role as substantial landowner, and neither he nor his son recoiled from making money. His son was to leave even more money at his death than did his father. The family still owns the estate. Entrepreneurial energies – the 'animal spirits' noted by Keynes – can survive the experience of becoming a landed gentleman.

KEY WORDS: ENTREPRENEURSHIP. LANDOWNERS. GENTRIFICATION. AGRICULTURAL SCIENCE