

Sir F. M. Eden on Enclosure and the Cottagers, 1797

Sir Frederick Morton Eden, *The State of the Poor*, I, 1797, Preface, pp. xviii-xx in A. Aspinall and E. Anthony Smith, eds., *English Historical Documents, XI, 1783-1832*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1959, pp. 477. F. M. Eden's three volume study of poor law administration in England and Wales is one of the most important contemporary sources for the rural pauperization thesis that was widely held during the period.)

The advantages which cottagers and poor people derive from commons and wastes, are rather apparent than real: instead of sticking regularly to any such labour, as might enable them to purchase good fuel, they waste their time, either like the old woman in Otway's Orphan, in picking up a few dry sticks, or in grubbing tip, On some bleak moor, a little furze, or heath. Their starved pig or two, together with a few wandering goslings, besides involving them in perpetual altercations with their neighbours, and almost driving and compelling them to become trespassers, are dearly paid for, by the care and time, and bought food, which are necessary to rear them. Add to this, that as commons, and wastes, however small their value may be in their present state, are undoubtedly the property, not of cottagers, but of the land- owners; these latter, by the present wretched system, are thus made to maintain their poor, in a way the most costly to themselves, and the least beneficial to the poor. There are thousands and thousands of acres in the kingdom, now the sorry pastures of geese, hogs, asses, half-grown horses, and half-starved cattle, which want but to be enclosed and taken care of, to be as rich, and as valuable, as any lands now in tillage. In whatever way, then, it may seem fit to the legislature, to make those cottagers some amends for the loss, or supposed loss, they may sustain, by the reclaiming of wastes, it must necessarily be better for them, than their present precarious, disputable, and expensive advantages, obtained, if at all, by an ill-judged connivance, or indulgence, of the owners of land; and, by an heedless sacrifice of property, of which no one takes any account, and for which, of course, no one thanks them....