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Town and Countryside in the Age of the Black Death: Essays in Honour of John Hatcher

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Alex Brown

This collection of essays forms an excellent Festschrift for Professor John Hatcher, whose eclectic range of research is displayed by the volume's division into three parts: the first explores the medieval demographic system; the second charts the changing relationship between lords and peasants; and the third highlights the fortunes of trade and industry after the Black Death. As Mark Bailey notes in his introduction, the Black Death 'stands unchallenged as the greatest disaster in documented human history' (p. xx). This Festschrift showcases the pioneering work John Hatcher has conducted over his distinguished career, revisiting the significance of his empirical studies of monastic mortality, his early work on the Duchy of Cornwall, and his comprehensive study of the coal industry. As such, this volume brings together a range of important, influential and innovative essays and is particularly aided by a generous word length which allows many of the contributors to provide a critical literature review of previous work making this an invaluable volume for students and academics alike. This is further aided by short bibliographies of cited works provided at the end of each chapter. However, given the overall length of the volume and the diverse range of subjects explored, the volume would have benefited from a unifying subject index.

In the first of three chapters focusing upon demography, Ole Benedictow explores the historical controversy surrounding the concept of a 'high pressure' medieval demographic system, which was qualitatively different from the 'low pressure' early modern equivalent. In the former, mortality was the key determinant of population size at around four or five per cent and a life expectancy of between 20 and 25 years, with a high marriage rate resulting in high levels of fertility. In the latter, mortality rates were around three to three and a half per cent, life expectancy was between 30 and 35 years, and the usual age at first marriage was between 24 and 26 years. Benedictow argues that a 'key factor in this transition was the great change in the understanding of infectious diseases which began at the end of the fifteenth century?', which saw the introduction of preventive measures to combat the spread of diseases and the gradual reduction in mortality levels, paving the way for the gradual transition to the early modern demographic system (p. 33).

In a particularly insightful survey of medieval demographic history, Richard M. Smith discusses Postan's original suggestions of population decline; Gottfried, Glennie and Goldberg's work on wills; and the pioneering work conducted by John Hatcher concerning the death rates and life expectancies of monks. From this discussion Smith shows that there is a consensus developing which emphasises a decrease in the life expectancies of monks from the 1450s until the 1520s. He then uses a sample of Inquisitions Post Mortem from the 14th century to show that Russell may have under-estimated life expectancy by as much as 25 per cent. This further reinforces the idea of a drop in life expectancies in the second half of the 15th century and Smith concludes that there is increasing evidence for the presence of a mortality cycle from the 1450s which saw life expectancy decline and instability in death rates worsen. This presents an intriguing conundrum: if England was experiencing increased mortality in the second half of the 15th century, how are we to explain the improvement in rents and the collection of arrears experienced by many landowners in this same period which are suggestive of renewed pressure on landed resources?

Maryanne Kowaleski focuses upon the demography of maritime communities in late medieval England, exploring the many similarities between such communities and their early-modern counterparts. Although the medieval evidence is often lacking, she is able to suggest that there was a high amount of maritime occupations such as fishing, shipping and piracy and that there is evidence for high male mortality and male absences, with a high percentage of single people and large numbers of households headed by women. She concludes that there were a number of 'striking similarities' in the demographic features of medieval and later coastal communities and that the nature of maritime communities produced continuity rather than contrast between the late medieval and early modern periods (p. 112).

In a collection of chapters focusing upon the changing relationship between landlords and peasants, Bruce M. S. Campbell considers the causes and consequences of changes in grain yields, exploring changes in tree-ring data, global temperatures, and sea level pressure. He suggests that there were six distinctive sub-periods in the chronology of yields: disastrous harvests of 1349-51/2; persistently poor harvests until 1369-75; dramatic improvement from 1376 until the mid-1390s; worsening harvests into the 1420s; heightened yield variability of the 1430s and 1440s; and following a respite in the 1450s, the return of dismal harvests in the final decades of the century. His chapter contains invaluable figures and tables concerning much of the scientific evidence for the beginning of a cooler and stormier Little Ice Age, including an indexed appendix showing grain yields per seed. Ultimately, Campbell argues that 'many of the most abiding economic and social features' of the years following the Black Death 'sprang in part from the low, varying, and uncertain yield of grain' (p. 162).

Martin Stephenson explores the capital formation, investment and risk awareness of medieval landowners. He shows that the authors of agricultural treatises were aware of risks, ranging from the human risk of embezzlement by untrustworthy officials to the natural vagaries of the weather, and suggested ways to counteract them. Stephenson argues that Postan and Hilton underestimated capital investment, which he finds was more in the region of 17 per cent than the five per cent they suggested. This was a figure nearly double that of 'improving' 18th-century landlords, although at least part of this discrepancy is because these later landowners were purely rentiers and thus their only capital investment took the form of the repair and construction of buildings. As Stephenson acknowledges, alongside buildings, purchasing livestock was

?perhaps the main outlet for the expansion of capital stock in medieval society? (p. 188). Thus his only post-Black Death case study of Downton manor shows that investment levels dropped to 9.2 per cent from 1431 when the land was leased out in its entirety; a figure remarkably similar to the 9.3 per cent for Norfolk and Suffolk estates in the late 18th century. His essay does, however, call for a reassessment of the investment levels of landowners as well as a renewed appreciation of their risk awareness with his suggestion that risk-taking increased during ?difficult economic circumstances? compared to relatively buoyant periods (p. 208).

In a particularly interesting and detailed chapter, David Stone questions the orthodoxy that there was more continuity than change in the aftermath of the Black Death by focusing upon the immediate and short-term consequences of the pestilence. Thus, we see how communities prepared for the impending arrival of the Black Death, purchasing extra locks to secure the bake-house doors and restricting movement around the estate between autumn 1348 and spring 1349. He argues that the Black Death had significant ?economic reverberations? which saw the opening of ?Pandora?s Box?: patterns of consumption had begun to change; wage-arrangements were riddled with subterfuge; and the expectations of labourers and landowners were changing (p. 241). It seems likely that if pestilence had not returned and the population recovered to its previous levels then medieval lords could have fashioned a makeshift lid for ?Pandora?s Box?, but ultimately Stone?s essay succeeds in showing that the immediate consequences of the Black Death should not be underestimated and that ?continuity in administration should not be mistaken for a return to normality? (p. 229).

Erin McGibbon Smith explores the various methodological problems of using manorial court rolls, criticising past work which has either focused upon the analysis of a narrow range of themes from the total business of the court, or has sought out multiple series of good court rolls without ensuring it is examining records from the same time. This has numerous disadvantages, not least the fact that the lords' officials focused on some offences and not others, and thus as Smith argues, the ??window? provided by rolls changed in size, shape and opacity over time? (p. 252). She uses seven categories of court business to illustrate changes across the Black Death: the lord?s rights; inter-peasant litigation; community nuisance; officials and court function; crime and misbehaviour; land; and the market. One of the most significant changes in her categories concerns that of ?crime and misbehaviour? which shows a distinct peak in violent crime in 1335-45, bringing into question Ambrose Raftis' widely accepted argument that a decline in the ?village community? took place after the onset of the Black Death.

Phillipp Schofield revisits Hatcher?s early work on the Duchy of Cornwall using the archives of the Earls of Arundell to explore regional trends in Cornwall. He argues that a combination of economic factors better explain the general success and stability of the Arundell estates in the second half of the 15th century rather than the sub-regional patterns which Hatcher emphasised, and that ?explanations for robustness must also be detected in the local economy beyond the estate itself? (p. 293). Schofield?s chapter is particularly important in exploring the inter-relationship between late medieval seigneurial economies and the non-manorial sector. He also discusses the relative lack of innovation on the Arundell estate, and states that where there was change it was largely ?consistent with past practice? (p. 291). Despite this, the Earls were willing to ?let holdings both for differing terms, at lower rents, and to permit accumulation?, thus emphasising that they may well have been rentiers but this ?did not mean that they were inert as landlords? (p. 292).

John Munro's chapter focuses upon the period from 1370 until 1420 which saw the widespread leasing of demesne land across medieval England. Unlike many of the other contributors, Munro focuses upon the role of monetary and fiscal factors in producing the momentous changes in the economy of this period rather than relying upon demographic explanations of change. His chapter provides a lucid summary of the various elements of this argument, ranging from the problem of the 'time-lag' between the Black Death and changes in socio-economic trends in the 1370s, and the problem of 'wage-stickiness'. He argues that a combination of price-scissors, problems of capital and personal indebtedness led lords 'to convert villein tenancies into leaseholds, with fewer or no servile obligations' as the enforcement costs of serfdom became too expensive (p. 337). This reliance on broad fiscal and monetary factors to explain change has numerous advantages and highlights some of the pitfalls of demographic determinism, but also runs the risk of reducing the events at Smithfield and Mile End to little more than a footnote in the history of medieval England.

The final three chapters explore trade and industry after the Black Death. James Davis explores the trade in food and drink in one small town (Clare, Suffolk) in order to examine the immediate and longer-term impact of the Black Death. He considers the wide range of factors influencing trade in market towns, ranging from demography and inter-related aspects of supply and demand, to standards of living, seigneurial reactions and lower-class aspirations. Davis concludes that the enforcement of the assizes of ale was as 'much the product of social and political interests as of economic factors', and that the arrival of a new lord brought with it a change in direction with the townsfolk gaining 'de facto control of the market and court' (p. 370). Overall, Davis shows how there was a sharp expansion in opportunities and regulation soon after the Black Death lasting into the 1370s; changes between the 1380s and 1410s as the level of amercements fell away; and by the 15th century, there were low levels of amercements and 'seemingly less interference in everyday market life' (p. 395).

John S. Lee highlights the current lack of knowledge concerning fairs between the mid 14th and mid 16th centuries compared to either the preceding or succeeding periods. He shows that the number of grants for new fairs did not decline as much as for new markets in the 15th century, although unfortunately, as Lee discusses, the sources often do not indicate the success or longevity of many of these fairs. In particular, Lee highlights the wide range of goods traded at fairs, from wool and cloth, to livestock and fish, to household and consumer goods, as well as emphasising the role fairs played as gatherings for entertainment, social activities and gathering news. He also emphasises the way in which fairs were important in meeting the growing consumer demands of everyday people after the Black Death, who were increasingly experiencing a rise in living standards. His essay highlights the importance of fairs, suggesting that 'their continuing prominence at least merits consideration in any reassessment of the debate over late medieval 'urban decline'' (p. 428).

In a fitting final chapter of the volume, Richard H. Britnell explores the coal industry of the Bishops of Durham. He pays considerable attention to the people engaged in the coal trade, showing that this entrepreneurship was 'broadly based, involving Newcastle merchants, episcopal administrators, ecclesiastical bodies of all sizes, gentry families, other lay landowners of varied status, and skilled local tenants' (p. 467). His chapter shows the fundamental differences between inland and coastal coal mines, with the inland mines at Railey showing surprising buoyancy during the entirety of the 15th century. Of particular interest is his suggestion that these sales were dependent 'upon the local household demand' of tenants even in the depth of the mid 15th-century recession, which by the early 16th century could account for as much as 17,500 tons being sold to 'various people coming to the said mine' across just two years (p. 449). Britnell's essay thus provides a platform for future research into the consumption patterns of Durham tenants in the 15th century: how and why did local tenants incorporate coal into their everyday lives during the depth of the mid-century recession?

As Mark Bailey concluded his introduction: 'debate will continue to rage over the exact consequences of the Black Death' (p. xxxvi). This collection of essays is a noteworthy and welcome contribution to this debate and forms a fitting Festschrift for such a pioneering figure in the study of the economic and social history of medieval England.

The editors were happy to read the positive review and do not wish to reply.

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