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Peasants and Landlords in Later Medieval England, c.1380?c.1525

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Professor Fryde's new study represents a substantive - and substantial - contribution to the history of land tenure, economic change and social development in later medieval England. The book is not, and does not purport to be, a general textbook: indeed, in its close engagement with material that is often highly technical and detailed, it makes few concessions to, and demands much of, its readers. Those who persevere will, however, uncover such richness that they will no doubt return many times over, guided by a good thematic index, to draw both on the detailed evidence and on the wise judgements contained therein.

The book is organised in a coherent, if slightly unusual and at first unsettling format, progressing through a range of general issues by means of focused case studies. Thus, the agrarian economy of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries is discussed in specific relation to the estates of the bishops of Worcester (chapters 4, 9, 1); the changes in pastoral farming are illuminated by studies of the Cotswolds and of central-southern England (chapters 6, 7); the phenomenon of deserted villages is explored through a discussion of depopulation and eviction in the midland counties (chapter 12); and so on. In developing these case studies, Fryde explicitly operates on two levels, by providing the fruits of his own research and summarising (often quite extensively) the work of other scholars in the field. His indebtedness to those who have trodden parallel research paths (above all, to Christopher Dyer and Barbara Harvey) is consistently and scrupulously acknowledged by frequent citation within the text which is as well, since here, as so often nowadays, bibliographical references have been relegated to the obscurity of endnotes. The stylistic consequences of this approach are not always happy: some of the direct quotation seems redundant, and there are occasional

abrupt changes of subject. On the other hand, the attribution of material is never in doubt. Some of Fryde's own contributions are, it should be noted, reworkings of material already published elsewhere: the sections on the background to the Peasants' Revolt (chapters 2, 3), for example, represent revisions of earlier publications that do not, incidentally, always engage thoroughly with other relevant work published in the interim.

Although it takes time for the general thrust of the argument to become evident, Fryde's line is both distinctive and forceful. A century and more of scholarship, very much reinforced by recent historiography, has tended to the view that the tensions evident in English society immediately before, and for at least a generation after, the Black Death were resolved in the fifteenth century as a result of a general redistribution of resources: while the population was low, and land and work were in abundant supply, there were ample opportunities for the peasantry to improve their lot, and particular opportunities for certain groups - substantial yeomen farmers, agricultural and industrial labourers, women - to enjoy a notable, if temporary, 'golden age'. Fryde's approach is very different, and in three particular respects. Firstly, he emphasises the reluctance of the landed elite - both lay and ecclesiastical to accept a decline in its own share of total wealth, and stresses the determination and persistence with which at least some elements within that elite fought to maintain their rights, and their income, as manorial lords. Although he is reluctant to argue in terms of a generalised 'feudal reaction', even in the period between the Black Death and the Peasants' Revolt (p. 32), he repeatedly portrays the great landholders of late medieval England as 'arrogant', 'proud' and 'contemptuous of the lower classes' (p. 242), generally heedless of the resentment generated by the often 'brutal' (chapter 2, *passim*) methods they deployed in their campaign to maximise and maintain income. Margaret Marshall, countess of Norfolk, comes in for particular comment in this respect: Fryde consistently portrays her as a 'mean, harsh and grasping' landowner (p. 26; see also pp. 42, 248-9).

The second of Fryde's distinctive contributions is to highlight the fragility of the new economic dispensation of the late Middle Ages. While acknowledging the new opportunities that were accorded to certain groups of peasants in the post-plague period, he also focuses attention both on the severe recession encountered in the middle decades of the fifteenth century and on the eagerness with which the landed classes re-asserted their rights and enhanced their income as soon as the population and economy began to grow again in the early sixteenth century. This leads on to his third particular line of argument: namely, that insofar as social norms were represented by the economic liabilities and legal disabilities contained in the terms of leases, what is most remarkable about the later Middle Ages is the degree to which servile tenures continued to represent potential and real constraints on substantial numbers of peasant families. In this respect, Fryde's detailed and careful study of the practice of copyhold in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries provides a particularly valuable and timely corrective to the rather cosier tradition that sees copyhold - and the acceptance by the royal courts of cases dealing with copyholds - as the effective end of servility, if not indeed of 'feudalism' itself. By emphasising the extraordinary variety of tenures that had developed in England by the late fifteenth century, Fryde resists either an easy explanation, or an early dating, for the decline of serfdom in England.

What are the wider implications of this important new study? Fryde is notably reluctant to place his work into a broader context by moving beyond the discussion of tenures, estate management and peasant farming. This is a pity: while the author may have felt that this is precisely the kind of study that should not attempt to harmonise the tremendous variety of experience evident in the agrarian economy of later medieval England (an attitude that presumably explains the absence even of brief concluding remarks at the ends of chapters), the reader might at least have expected a final chapter that attempted to hint at some synthesis between this and other recent work on legal, social and economic change after the Black Death. For this reviewer, three questions particularly emerged. First, how does this new picture of the fragility of the late medieval peasant economy inform our understanding of contemporary attitudes to poverty and the poor? If, as Miri Rubin has argued (1) the later Middle Ages witnessed a hardening of hearts on the issue of poverty and a sharper perception of the distinction between the deserving and the undeserving poor, it would surely be useful to ask whether such attitudes emerged not from a jealousy at the acquisitiveness and prosperity of the peasantry but from a concern, partly political, partly humanitarian, at the survival and (at times) the actual increase in the incidence of genuine poverty. Second, there are many suggestive parallels between Fryde's work and the

recent major study by Robert Palmer on English justice in the era after the Black Death. Palmer argues (2) that the elite came, after the plague, to make much more active use of the royal courts as a means of enforcing social obligations: in an age of uncertainty and flux, it was the law that came to provide a sense of stability and a test of normative behaviour. Fryde's emphasis on the survival of feudalism, and thus, by implication, on the survival of seigneurial justice, raises intriguing questions as to whether Palmer's thesis is supported by evidence from manorial courts. Third, there is the question of how Fryde's view of post-plague society as essentially conservative bears upon our understanding of social mobility in the later Middle Ages. Much of the work on this subject, by concentrating on the boundaries between the ranks of gentleman and yeoman, may have tended to exaggerate the opportunities open to the great majority of the peasantry in a period when not only social prejudice but also, as Fryde emphasises, economic status, militated so strongly against upward mobility. If the 'golden age' thesis about the fifteenth century has long been under threat, it rather looks as though the same century may also be about to lose its label as an age of 'ambition'.

Notes

1. J.M. Rubin, *Charity and community in medieval Cambridge* (Cambridge, 1987). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. J. R.C. Palmer, *English law in the age of the Black Death, 1348-1381. A transformation of governance and law* (Chapel Hill, 1993). [Back to \(2\)](#)

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