

Earthly Necessities. Economic Lives in Early Modern Britain

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Some historians only write big books and Keith Wrightson is among them, but he does so repeatedly, and in two sorts: pathbreaking, detailed, empirical local studies on the one hand, and magisterial, interpretative overviews on the other. The title of this latest book leaves no room for doubt as to the category to which it belongs, although its scarcely speaks its own name, for its subject is nothing more and nothing less than the rise of capitalism.

Earthly Necessities is prefaced by an introductory historiographical chapter that discusses approaches to and interpretations of early modern Britain. Contemporaries such as Smith, Harrison, Wilson, Bacon and Harrington recognised their era as a period of change, and while much of such work was lightly sketched what was important, Wrightson argues, was their *recognition* of major changes in the structure of economic life. This was taken up and elaborated by the writers of the Scottish Enlightenment in the third quarter of the 18th century, including Hume, Steuart, Millar and of course Smith, to be amplified once again - though with a very different tone - by Karl Marx. The historical economists of the late 19th century, notably Ashley and Cunningham, produced the first thoroughly documented surveys of the period, firmly founded upon economic history but with a greater appreciation of the complexity and uneven nature of change and a determination to study the evolution of social organisation and ideas alongside the growth of wealth, a tradition within which the great Ephraim Lipson also sits. All of this was to change after World War Two, in which period Wrightson identifies a veritable 'dissociation of sensibility' of a similar order to that identified by T.S. Eliot in relation to English poetry after the demise of the metaphysicals, with J.H. Clapham at centre stage. Clapham's work possessed a dispassionate tone, removed human agency and economic ideas from the equation, prioritised the influence of 'blind' economic forces and hence produced a narrower sphere for the economic historian, almost devoid of an interpretative framework. In the post-war era of 'growthmanship' this trend was continued, and while the expansion of the profession ensured that there was enormous progress in terms of more detailed and quantitatively precise understanding of the development of the

various economic sectors between the 16th and 18th centuries, there was a determined refusal to embrace broader analytical frameworks, a refusal no doubt fuelled by the political climate of the Cold War era. The economic history of the early modern period had "abdicated its role as the champion of a larger vision of the past" (p. 20), and was losing both momentum and audience - a development which was reinforced by the "methodological fad" (p. 22) of cliometrics. Perhaps Wrightson is a little guilty here of giving insufficient recognition to those who did, to varying degrees, attempt to offer a broader analytical framework: amongst the various names that immediately spring to mind are Dobb, Tawney, Stone, Hill, Macpherson, North and Thomas, and - on a broader canvas still - Brenner, Hobsbawm and Wallerstein. But, with this qualification, this is very familiar territory indeed to one who was a student of economic history in the early 1970s, when broad theoretical overviews were very much out of favour. Fortunately, Wrightson argues, a humanistic conception of the discipline has not been entirely lost, and the rise of the 'new social history' in the 1970s offers considerable potential for restoring a sense of the relatedness of economic, social, political and cultural change.

This introductory survey has been described in some detail, not merely because of its inherent interest but because it underpins the considerable task that Wrightson has set himself. That task is to re-emphasise the significance of the early modern period as a turning point in British economic life, drawing freely upon the legacy of economic history but reintegrating this with the insights and approaches that have developed from the 'new social history', paying more particular attention to the changing economic culture than is commonly found, and counting the gains and the costs associated with "the creation of a capitalist market economy and society" (p. 26). What is more, if this were not already a daunting enough agenda, the canvas is Britain rather than England. The book is divided into three parts. Part One introduces the structures of life prevailing in the late-fifteenth and early-sixteenth centuries, Part Two examines the dynamics of change across the early modern period and Part Three explores the structures of economic life in the later seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries, elaborating upon the outcomes of the changes described in Part Two. From the very outset we are left in no doubt where we will arrive, despite the qualifications contained in such phrases as "the *fuller emergence of* a 'market society'" (p. 22) or "*increasingly* a capitalist economy" (p. 23) (my emphases). But before we get there, we have a fascinating journey before us.

Part One sets the scene, describing a society centred upon the nuclear family (plus servants, of course), essentially patriarchal without excluding women from a wide range of gainful employments, largely rural though with an agrarian social structure that was already highly differentiated, substantial if variable rural industrial employment and a small but "very significant" (p. 37) urban sector within which specialisation was limited and which (textiles apart) served only localised markets. Complete dependence upon wages, it is suggested, was still rare in most areas and the majority of the population still had access to land. While towns were generally market dependent, in the countryside the economies of most households remained subsistence-oriented, producing primarily if not wholly for their own household needs, with only perhaps 20 per cent of English farming operating on a truly commercial basis, though again with significant regional variation. Margins were small in both countryside and town, and harvest failure, trade slumps and plague could devastate family economies, causing temporary or permanent loss of livelihood and even life itself through starvation or disease-induced malnutrition. For the majority, therefore, this society offered only a precarious viability, and expectation of life was low, "above all in the urban environment where congestion and squalor fostered disease and facilitated its transmission" (p. 55). This in turn engendered a mentality which valued security over growth or change, and induced a preference for diversification over specialisation. Such perspectives served to profoundly influence the provision of opportunity and dispersal of wealth between family members, for example with regard to inheritance, without ever negating the natural love between partners and between parents and their children, which in turn served to temper patriarchal authority in the interests of the family as a social and economic unit.

Wider networks were significant too, in the form of tenurial relationships, neighbourliness, citizenship and kinship. Mutual obligation stood at centre stage in a hierarchy of belonging that could exclude as well as include, but in the relatively stable conditions of the early sixteenth century economic activity remained firmly bound by moral ends, and subordinate to them. Much economic intercourse remained local, even if

some few towns - and notably the two capital cities of London and Edinburgh - exhibited wider networks, and it was these established patterns of economic and social interaction that moulded the distinctive features of early modern 'countries' as much as the realities of local and regional geography. But even in the early sixteenth century change was afoot, the four key elements of which were the emergence of the yeomanry, the enclosure of land and conversion to pasture farming, the spread of industry in the countryside and the restructuring of the urban system. In discussing each of these in turn, Wrightson offers the now accepted qualifications in terms of extent and implications. Hence the accumulation of land could reflect family collectivism as much as economic individualism; almost half of the cultivable area of England was already enclosed in 1500 and the extent and impact of 'depopulating' enclosure has been exaggerated; towns generally suffered, particularly due to rural competition, but the notion of an urban crisis is an exaggeration. Finally, employing some heroic calculations based upon the weekly demand for wheat in Coventry in 1520 allied to the estimated marketable surplus produced by a farmer of 100 acres in a 'normal' year, he concludes that it remains unlikely that more than a third of the English population were 'market-oriented' producers and consumers - far less in Wales and Scotland - a situation largely determined by inadequate demand, both within Britain and from overseas.

Far from merely setting the scene, in many ways Part One is the most important section of this book. For unless it can be securely established that Britain was indeed such a subsistence-oriented, commercially limited, 'traditional' economy and society with essentially local horizons and a mentality which militated against growth and development in the interests of stability, subordinating economic considerations to moral ends, then the extent of the transition that is about to be unveiled loses at least some of its force. This is not to argue that Wrightson has got it wrong, or has overdrawn the picture merely to establish contrast, but simply to emphasise the fact that the early sixteenth century is a period that is desperately under-researched and for which the sources are both thin and intractable. Estimates of the proportion of the population who were 'market-oriented' are clearly highly speculative, and one must also question whether a 'national average' has much meaning in the context of an economy and society as diverse as Britain at this date. How solid is the evidence for the ready access to land that Wrightson posits, and how can his view that relatively small numbers were dependent on wages be squared with the evidence of the Exchequer Lay Subsidies of the 1520s? Of course, the subsidies are themselves very difficult to interpret, but few historians have considered them more closely than J.C.K. Cornwall, who argues that in Hambleton in Rutland - not renowned for being at the cutting edge of commercialisation - some 20-25 per cent were virtually landless by the third decade of the sixteenth century (J.C.K. Cornwall, *Wealth and society in early sixteenth century England*, London 1988, p. 210). Furthermore, in parts of Suffolk there was clearly very heavy dependence on waged industrial employment even at this early date, reflecting a more general tendency towards concentration of industrial production that had proceeded over the course of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. And is it appropriate to characterise this as an essentially subsistence economy in a situation where probably four-fifths of tenants might need recourse to the market in order to pay their rents? Has not the commercialisation of English society as early as the 13th century already been established, involving regular access to the market place even for the peasantry? (R.H. Britnell, *The commercialisation of English society*, Cambridge 1993, pp. 102-15). The extent to which economic appetites were subordinated to moral ends is also unclear. Wolsey, of course, was moved to intervene on the issue of enclosure in 1517 and dearth in 1527, but such paternalism also indicates that there were some men who, it was felt, needed protection from other men, whether they be forestallers and engrossers, enclosing landlords or vagrants and beggars. While this was clearly a strategy designed to promote stability, it leaves one to wonder how selectively the subordination of economic activity to moral ends was internalised by the populace, or how theory squared with practice, and this is a topic that deserves further exploration at village level. Indeed, it raises once again the thorny issue of the origins of English individualism.

Even on less central issues there is reason to at least suspend judgement in the current state of research. Is there, for example, any clear evidence of starvation on any scale? How has this been established for the pre-parish register era, and how does this sit with a low density population, real wages (for those who received them) at levels higher than they were to be again for some centuries, and such ready access to land? And what about towns? Most were small in the early sixteenth century, and probably smaller than most historians

believe, but they were neither squalid nor congested at this date: if they were particularly vulnerable to plague - the frequency of serious outbreaks of which should not be overstated - this was due to their central place functions. Those functions involved them, in Britain, in a symbiotic relationship with their rural hinterlands, and often also with both urban and rural centres further afield. The evidence of a general 'flight' of the wealthy from towns is precarious, the argument for a general population decline extending into the sixteenth century unsustainable, the evidence of market tolls is contradictory and the notion of a loss of employment in textiles to the countryside - to which this reviewer has contributed - is based upon a very small sample of case studies which remains to be generalised. Wrightson is clearly correct to reject the notion of an extended urban 'crisis', but perhaps the word readjustment might be preferred to restructuring within the context of an urban hierarchy - at the upper end at least - that was remarkably stable. With regard both to detail and the 'big picture', therefore, only further research will bear out or contradict the characterisation that Wrightson offers so energetically in this section of his book.

In Part Two Wrightson moves on to consider "Transitions". Here, conventionally, he begins by charting the quickening pace of population growth and inflation in the second quarter of the sixteenth century, offering an excellent discussion of the springs of demographic expansion that situates this growth in both the national and European context. The discussion of the rise in prices nicely balances real and monetary factors, with greatest emphasis upon the former. The novel element here is the weight placed, with regard to the early stages of inflation, upon the shifting balance between households that were self-provisioning and those that were more wholly market dependent, an argument that would appear to depend upon a considerable and widespread growth of rural industry largely divorced from agriculture. Demographic growth and inflation "were the principal underlying causes of economic change in sixteenth-century Britain", but - avoiding crude determinism - the outcome "was far from predictable", and depended upon the various responses of different individuals and social groups (p. 132). The ensuing rise in rents and demand for land are judiciously charted, as is the profitability of market-oriented tenant farming into the third quarter of the century, though one would have thought that this was well-known rather than a "relatively neglected" dimension of English agriculture (p. 139). What is refreshing, however, is the clear appreciation that through the operation of multiplier effects increasing wealth could be widely shared (even in towns), a feature of the period that might possibly help to explain the recently established growth in the number of will-makers relative to total population, as well as the considerable increase in the number of surviving Prerogative Court of Canterbury wills from the 1530s (N. Goose and N. Evans, 'Wills as an historical source', in T. Arkell, N. Evans and N. Goose eds, *When death do us part: understanding and interpreting the probate records of early modern England*, Leopard's Head Press, 2000, pp. 39-42). The disendowment of the church powerfully reinforced prevailing tendencies to accumulate land, causing a spectacular increase in both the numbers and wealth of the English gentry, while in Scotland the 'feuing' movement had similar effects, even if here the beneficiaries were more broadly based. Wage earners, despite all the qualifications expertly rehearsed here, fared far worse, poverty escalated, and if 'crisis poverty' was exceptional and if most usually scraped by, their exclusion from the generally improving living standards "was a standing reproach" (p. 149). But it was not only the poor who were beginning to feel the effects of this quickening pace of economic change, for customary rights were defended in numerous local challenges from the 1530s, while the Commonwealthmen, through a powerful literature of moral complaint, "sought to recall gentlemen to their Christian duties" (p. 153). If the ensuing legislation (only patchily described here) lacked a clear coherence, and if many of the new laws were inadequately enforced, this represented a significant development of the economic and social responsibilities of the state, seeking "to reconcile the competing claims of commodity and commonwealth" (p. 158). This really is compelling stuff, a quite brilliant characterisation of the period, the only criticism of which could be its failure to explore the relative impact of long-term change and short-term crises.

The first three-quarters of the sixteenth century thus set the scene for the more profound changes that were to come, confidently characterised in the heading to Chapter Seven in terms of "Economic Expansion, c. 1580 - c. 1650". Expanding production and productivity in agriculture resulted from extension of the cultivated area, more intensive cultivation, specialisation, the spread of techniques such as manuring and convertible husbandry and a renewed wave of enclosure. Towns expanded significantly too, demographically and

economically, and Wrightson gives one of the most optimistic interpretations of their fortunes to be found outside of the writings of the present reviewer, if one that would not be wholly accepted by all of the contributors to the recently published *Cambridge Urban History of Britain Vol. II*. The key was again the multiplier, and now the fundamental reciprocal relationship between town and countryside is fully emphasised, with the larger towns benefiting most, providing centres for more tightly integrated regional markets. This reciprocal relationship also extended to rural industrial districts, producing innovation and diversification across a wide range, among which the New Draperies are only the most striking example. All of this initiated a "recasting of the regional geography of economic activity in England and Wales within a more integrated whole" (p. 171), and by 1670 produced a considerable shift in the balance of population between towns, the rural non-agricultural population and those engaged wholly in agriculture. Internal trade expanded faster than population and was a key element of the gradual transformation. And while overseas trade diversified and extended its geographical horizons, the fact that much of this was import led only serves to re-emphasise the crucial importance of growing domestic demand for goods and services as the mainspring of change. This was a "gradually commercialising society" (p. 175), in England and Wales if not in Scotland.

The benefits were clear but, returning to territory more familiar from Wrightson's earlier work, they were far from equally shared. In both town and countryside those in control of the means of production waxed richer while those towards the bottom of the social scale, increasing in numbers as population grew, saw their living standards eroded and their vulnerability exaggerated, particularly during periodic trade slumps which themselves highlighted continued weaknesses in the economy. Dependent wage earners, it is suggested, formed possibly half of the population by 1650, and "struggled to feed and clothe themselves and shivered in cottages" (p. 200). But if social polarisation is the key feature of the period, it also witnessed the emergence of 'the middle sort of people', increasingly recognised as a distinct grouping in society. Their growing presence, Wrightson argues, "was a matter of the first importance", for their entrepreneurial initiative "underlay the economic dynamism of the period", and "collectively they constituted the core of the enlarged market for an elaborating range of goods" (p. 201).

Shifts in economic and social structures were accompanied by adjustments of attitudes and values, with a new emphasis upon improvement, national productivity and the sociability of commerce. Changing attitudes to both usury and enclosure epitomised the change of emphasis, which "cumulatively effected a significant moral repositioning" (p. 212). Of course, all of this produced tensions, resolved through negotiation, the exercise of power or authoritative adjudication. The most positive outcome, for Wrightson, was the implementation of a national poor relief system - supplemented by the Books of Orders - albeit a system that was not widely enforced outside of the larger towns until the third quarter of the seventeenth century. It was inherently paradoxical, operating at one and the same time as an instrument of social responsibility and inclusion and as an instrument of coercion and exclusion. The wealth of the nation that it implies is brought home by the clear contrast with Scotland, where there were no compulsory rates, but the need for it also reveals "the perennial fragility of the household economies of the labouring poor", of which "only a small proportion were actually dependent on the parish at that moment, but most of the rest might reasonably have been termed 'at risk'" (p. 217). This was reflected in demographic changes. While the Scottish experience comes close to a classic Malthusian situation, in England and Wales rising infant and child mortality had a relatively small part to play in the cessation of population growth. This was effected largely through declining fertility, particularly due to a rising age at marriage and an extraordinary decline in marriage rates. Rejecting the simple characterisation of this process as one of 'homeostatic readjustment', Wrightson again shows his determination to keep the human actors in this process in view, writing of "a brutal deterioration in the opportunity to marry" (p. 223), and suggesting that the great majority of those so affected must have been drawn from the labouring class.

Wrightson's discussion of the period 1580-1650 thus ends by epitomising the great strength of this section, and indeed of the book as a whole: the determination to integrate economic, social, intellectual and cultural developments. Much of the economic history to be found here is quite conventional and well-known, falling within what might be described as the London-Cambridge tradition, but the interpretation is very different in

its emphasis. Thus, despite all of the numerous qualifications that (appropriately) litter the text, there is a clear and thoroughgoing recognition of the progress that the English economy (though not the Scottish) had made by the mid-seventeenth century, mirrored in a social structure that had been transformed and a set of ideas and values that showed increasing acceptance of new modes of economic behaviour. Progress may have been regionally uneven, insecure and punctuated by difficulties, but it was real nonetheless. The issue of regional disparity, by no means ignored, is one that Wrightson might have amplified. By the early seventeenth century famine, as revealed by research to date, appears to have largely disappeared from the south, but crises of subsistence were still known in the north-west. Urban growth and development was indeed rapid across most of the south, and it is refreshing to see such a clear appreciation of it here, but in the four most northerly counties of England and in Wales there were few large towns in the sixteenth century, market towns were more thinly scattered and urban development before the mid-seventeenth century was patchy, underlining the importance of symbiotic urban-rural development. Similar points might be made about regional variations in agricultural development, and it is by no means clear that even the relatively modest rises in cereal yields cited for five counties in southern and eastern England in the later sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries (p. 163) provide much of a basis for generalisation, particularly as the most authoritative recent statement suggests that labour productivity may well have fallen across these years whilst total factor productivity is unlikely to have risen (M. Overton, *Agricultural Revolution in England*, Cambridge 1996, p. 131).

Another area that might have been more fully explored is the structure of demand. One conventional interpretation, focusing upon relative trends in prices and wages, argues that demand for products other than the basic necessities of life was limited by the immiseration of a large proportion of the population, the labouring poor struggling to feed themselves and shivering in their cottages that Wrightson describes, and hence the changing terms of trade between agriculture and industry. If this argument is accepted, and the primacy of the home market is asserted as strongly as it is here, we are left with a problem: from whence the increased demand? Is this why, within the compass of just two short paragraphs, Wrightson chooses to place the 'middle sort of people' at centre stage (pp. 200-1)? Were they really of sufficient weight at so early a date as to constitute the "core" of the enlarged domestic market? It may well be the case that, as beneficiaries of economic growth along with their social superiors, they were more numerous and collectively more wealthy in 1650 than they had been seventy years before, but was this not effect as much as cause? Much might depend upon how one defines 'middling', but an alternative solution to the problem of demand might be to recognise that the great bulk of the produce of the English economy, agricultural and industrial, was itself made up of 'the basic necessities of life', and despite the adverse trends in real wages even the most humble labourer or textile worker needed a cottage within which to shiver, and a smock and bedding and a pot for firing to prevent these shivers turning to hypothermia. What this also requires is a fuller appreciation of the fact that the labouring poor in England, for all their vulnerability and increasing dependency, were better placed than their counterparts in many other parts of Europe, while the fall in their real wages must be set in the context of the very high levels prevailing at the start of the sixteenth century and in some areas at least it is possible that family incomes may have held up better than individual wages. If this was not the case, then it is difficult to explain the recession of famine in advance of a full articulation of the poor relief system outside of the major towns - yet another topic that deserves fuller consideration.

Wrightson's interpretation of the period 1650-1750 is more thoroughly conventional. Population stabilised as fertility continued to fall while mortality increased, the latter encouraged, he argues, by the fact that urbanisation exerted a stronger restraining influence, conjuring the usual unsatisfactory vision of towns as universal "devourers of mankind" (p. 230). Grain prices fell then stabilised, and the real incomes of wage earners rose substantially - by almost a quarter between the 1650s and 1680s. This enhancement of purchasing power (which surely could not have been significant had wage earners previously been in a wholly parlous state?), allied to the enhanced spending power of the middle ranks, created the conditions for the reinforcement of the processes of economic development set in motion in the preceding century. The result was "enhanced regional specialisation and intensified commercial integration within an emergent national economy which was increasingly influenced by participation in a nascent world economy" (p. 231). The details of this complex process are then described. The reorientation in agriculture, inspired by the need

to reduce costs, led to continued improvement, greater regional specialisation and increased productivity. Urbanisation continued, but industrial centres and those towns most deeply involved in the growth and transformation of English overseas trade grew fastest. Industry benefited from expanding demand overseas but the home market remained more significant, the combined effect creating the preconditions for the development of a larger industrial base centred upon production of bulk manufactured, standardised goods. While more highly specialised regional economies with strong industrial cultures emerged, internal traffic also grew, producing more inter-regional trade and an emergent national market, the appearance of permanent shops symbolising the commercial transition underway.

Simultaneously government policy continued to change in emphasis, again along the lines that had been emerging earlier in the seventeenth century, encouraging improvement in the interests of the 'public good' rather than stability to protect the Commonwealth. Successive governments may have been pragmatic and responsive in their policies rather than principled and coherent, but they were increasingly prepared to use their powers in the perceived national interest and to respond positively to local initiatives, and those powers expanded enormously as the 'fiscal-military state' emerged in the generation after 1688, itself providing yet a further boost to home demand. Even Scotland experienced patchy economic growth within the context of an economy that remained essentially a subsistence one, and if the Union of 1707 was pursued in England for political reasons it was accepted in Scotland for economic ones, producing real economic benefits for some sectors by 1750, by when much of England and Wales - if not yet Scotland - could be described as an advanced organic economy.

Part Three is entitled "Living with the market, c. 1660-1750", and now Wrightson returns to an examination of the structures of economic life in these fundamentally altered conditions, expanded upon the preceding discussion of the economic changes of the period. The spread of leasehold tenure, enclosing and engrossing that had operated over two centuries had transformed the agrarian structure to produce an essentially commercialised agriculture. The landed classes, rocked but not reconstituted by the Civil Wars, proved adaptable - or "culturally amphibious" as Wrightson puts it (p. 275) - protecting their estates through legal means and particularly by more careful and professional management, the consolidation of the estate system centred upon substantial tenancies completing the early modern transition in agrarian social relations. While again this conforms well to established orthodoxy, Wrightson suggests that - because the processes of change were slow and geographically uneven - this period is not conventionally thought of as one of significant change in rural Britain (pp. 287-8). What convention is being followed here is difficult to ascertain, for surely the great majority of historians who have written on this subject - often in response to the excessive claims of historians such as Eric Kerridge for an earlier 'agricultural revolution' - have clearly identified this as a crucial period in agricultural development, for all of the reasons that Wrightson identifies as well as for the technical advances made, most notably the spread of nitrogen fixing root crops and the extension of convertible husbandry. Indeed, it is only now that clear gains in terms of both labour and land productivity can be identified.

The following chapter returns to further examine the more conspicuous element of British economic development, the world of commerce and manufacturing. From Gregory King's tables Wrightson estimates that perhaps 12 per cent of English households in 1688 were situated in the middle ranks, a figure that must surely put into perspective their potential contribution to home demand in the later sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. By 1759-60, Joseph Massie's comparable calculation puts the figure at 22 per cent, and now Wrightson is surely on firmer ground in highlighting the significance of the 'middling sort of people', for all their heterogeneity. What follows is a delightful characterisation of the prospects, economic significance, culture, values and aspirations of this diverse group - a telling analysis of "the process of bourgeois self-definition" (p. 302). As for the labouring classes, they too constituted a diverse group, and geography, life-cycle stage and gender all exerted an influence upon their prospects, women being largely restricted to what were conventionally regarded as female roles. Employment for all but a minority, it is argued, was highly irregular, with widespread recourse to 'economies of makeshifts', while most people lacked a stable occupational identity. Much of this material, in the present state of knowledge, is a little contentious. Geography did exert an influence, but wage rates in some northern towns exceeded those found

in the south outside of London (D. Woodward, *Men at Work*, Cambridge 1995, pp. 176-80). Women, as far as we can tell, remained active in a wide range of employments in this period, playing a key part in the leading industries of agriculture and textile production, but also operating in what were later to become more wholly male-dominated trades, albeit often (though not invariably) within the context of a sexual division of labour (for example, R.B. Shoemaker, *Gender in English Society 1650-1850*, London 1998, pp. 150-65). Irregularity of employment for the majority is difficult to square with stabilisation of population, cries of the 'want of hands', contemporary complaints against 'leisure preference', the increasing resort to labour saving production techniques, the gradual imposition of time-discipline, the general expansion of industrial production, rising levels of remuneration, and the increasing ability of labouring people to "stand on their terms with their masters" (pp. 325ff) - many of which topics are discussed here. Less contentious is the argument that the wage-dependent population had expanded and diversified and that 'proletarianisation' was well underway, the product of economic forces operating across more than two centuries and by no means confined to the period under immediate discussion.

In this chapter Wrightson is not sanguine about the contribution of the labouring classes to home demand, employing wage data and estimated living expenses for Whickham in County Durham in the mid-eighteenth century to suggest that margins remained small even for skilled workers, and despite the possible contributions of women and children "such realities did not release significant purchasing power for goods other than the basic necessities of food, clothing, fuel and shelter" (p. 318). This may be too pessimistic, and appears to contradict his earlier remark that "For those who could find regular work, a new level of purchasing power was released for goods over and above those required for basic subsistence" (p. 231). Wage rates rose significantly in this period and family earnings may have risen faster; agricultural prices fell gently; industrial products also became cheaper, while the price of semi-luxury imported foods fell substantially; English industry was reorienting towards bulk, mass production of a wider range of goods; contemporaries worried about the poor getting above their station in terms of their consumption patterns; and even poor relief payments were substantially enhanced. One might also consider the implications of the reversal of trends in marriage and fertility: falling proportions never marrying, a decline in the age at marriage from the end of the second quarter of the eighteenth century and a slow rise in marital fertility. Much depends, of course, upon how destitute were the labouring poor in the mid-seventeenth century, as well as upon the extent of irregularity of employment in this period. But at the very least, in the present state of knowledge, the jury must surely remain out on this issue.

In his brief conclusion Wrightson reiterates the main themes of the book: the process of commercialisation and economic integration that, while retaining some traditional elements, produced a capitalist market economy; and its explanation in terms of a complex interaction of economic processes, human initiatives, and shifting social relations and cultural values. Of course ambiguities remained, to which Wrightson does full justice, and of course there were inconsistencies, not least of which was the disparity between much of England and part of Wales, and the rest of Wales and much of Scotland. And the crucial period of change? In Wrightson's own words, "It was in the later decades of the sixteenth and opening decades of the seventeenth centuries that the conception of a society of estates defended by the commonswealthsman truly decomposed in England, crumbling in a tide of economic expansion and commercial intensification. the later seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries brought a further acceleration of the process of change - this time in a context which meant that it rested on a broader base socially and geographically." (p. 333). Tawney's Century, it would appear, is to be reinstated to its full significance.

In many ways this is a remarkable book, particularly in the manner in which it weaves together aspects of economic, social, political and intellectual and cultural history, even if religion gets relatively short shrift and the processes of economic interchange between Britain and continental Europe - England's apprenticeship by foreign trade or other means - get far less attention than they deserve. It is elegantly written, measured and immensely stimulating. The complete absence of footnotes, however, allied to the failure to provide references for many of the quotations provided within the text, is unfortunate in the extreme, a feature that is not ameliorated by the select bibliography. There are many points of detail, some of them highlighted in this review, that might be regarded as contentious or - at the very least - still open to

debate, but it is often impossible to trace the sources that have been relied upon in such cases. Such a range of topics are tackled here, some necessarily only briefly, that this absence of the usual academic apparatus is particularly problematic. In consequence, this will be a dangerous book to recommend to undergraduates, even if the intellectual challenge that it offers, its scope, ambition and its essential humanity will ensure that many of us do just that.

If there are points of detail that remain open to discussion, what about the 'big picture'? In this respect too the book has both strengths and weaknesses. Its strength lies in the clear recognition that Britain (or at least England) was very different by the later seventeenth century (still more by the mid-eighteenth century) to what it had been at the start of the sixteenth century. It has escaped entirely from the 'debunking tradition' that has plagued English economic history for too long - a tradition that, in its determination to explode myth and overstatement, to cut purported 'revolutions' down to size and to counter simplistic Marxist interpretations, has consistently obscured the fact that England stood almost on the periphery of the European economy at the end of the Middle Ages but was the world's dominant industrial and commercial power by the mid-eighteenth century. The detailed chronology of this change, however, remains open to debate, and for this reviewer - despite the welcome appreciation of the contribution of the urban sector before the middle of the seventeenth century, of rural-urban symbiosis and the importance of multiplier effects - the degree of progress that had been made by 1650 is a little overstated, in terms both of economic development and social change. That said, it is difficult to dispute that enough had been achieved by this time to effect significant attitudinal changes - themselves given fuller reign in the climate of the Civil Wars and Interregnum - to allow the more concerted economic and social developments that emerged in the new economic context of the later seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Without this foundation, these later developments would be very hard indeed to understand.

Perhaps more problematic than the point of arrival is that of departure, for it is by no means clear that 1500 (or 1520) marked a clear turning point except in demographic terms. A case might more easily be made for the late fourteenth century for - following the Indian Summer of demesne farming that resulted from a healthier balance between population and resources produced by the cull of the Black Death - it was now that repeated visitations of plague effectively upset that balance once again to produce the fundamental alteration of social relations that demesne leasing and the commutation of labour dues and associated legal restrictions implied. In this respect it is significant that, in his discussion of early sixteenth century developments, Wrightson is repeatedly pulled back to this earlier period, when the groundwork for so many of the later changes was laid. If we are looking for fundamental discontinuities therefore, in both economic development and social relationships, one is tempted to posit an early modern period that stretches from perhaps 1400 to 1750, a more radical reinterpretation of conventional historiography. It may have taken the stimulus provided by renewed population growth fully to release the forces of change, and the demographic, social and political developments of the mid-seventeenth century to more securely underpin the process, but surely it was here that the origins of capitalism lay?

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