Published on *Reviews in History* (http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews)

Figures in the Landscape: Rural Society in England 1500-1700

Review Number:
237
Publish date:
Saturday, 1 December, 2001
Author:
Margaret Spufford
ISBN:
9780860788041
Date of Publication:
2000
Price:
£59.50
Pages:
376pp.
Publisher:
Ashgate
Publisher url:
http://www.ashgate.com/default.aspx?page=637&calcTitle=1&title_id=3156&edition_id=3651
Place of Publication:
Aldershot
Reviewer:
Jane Whittle

Figures in the Landscape brings together fifteen pieces of research by Margaret Spufford stretching across her distinguished career from 1962 to the present day.(1) As such, it reflects her broad range of interests, in the use of primary sources - particularly probate and taxation documents; the history of village communities; and popular consumption, literacy, culture and religion. The volume provides an excellent opportunity to review scope, development and methodology of Spufford's work. Before embarking on this, however, a few words about the presentation of the book. It must be said that the editing of Figures in the Landscape leaves something to be desired. There are a number of careless mistakes, for instance two incorrect chapter titles on the contents page - 'The Scribes of Villages' Wills' and 'A Cambridge Community' (p.v), and a mix up in the references to the illustrative plates in Chapter 1 (p.9). More confusingly, there seems to be no overall editorial policy. Some of the work has been revised, for instance, Chapter IX 'The Pedlar and the Historian'; and Chapter VII, 'Who made a will?'. The latter is an excerpt from 'Peasant inheritance customs and land distribution in Cambridgeshire', but no explanation is given as to why it appears here in a truncated form - the first footnote states the piece has not been updated, although lower down the page new references have been clearly been added (p.155). Other chapters remain untouched, to the extent that they are reproduced with their original type-face, page numbering, referencing conventions, and errors.(2) One early piece on the

history of Chippenham, Chapter V, is provided with a postscript in the form of the four page Chapter VI which takes into account new evidence. The value of the book as a whole would have been greatly enhanced if other chapters had been treated in a similar way, or at least provided with an extra footnote listing more recent work on topics or particular types of document. For example, the statement that 'Wills have been used by historians interested in life at the village level perhaps less than any other single class of document' at the start of Chapter II (p.27), may have been correct in 1971 but is hardly so now. While the innovative the plea for researchers to make more use of probate accounts in Chapter III could have been helpfully followed by on a note on the progress that has been made in cataloguing and analysing these neglected documents since this piece was published in 1990.

The page numbering is particularly confusing, as each piece has both its original page numbers from wherever it was first published, and new page numbers unique to this volume.(3)The contents page gives only the original page numbers, which are not a great deal of help if you want to find the location of a particular piece in this book. And while it is good to see that the book is indexed, some of the index entries refer to original page numbers and some to the new ones.(4) The categorisation of topics in the index also seems rather random: for instance details about the practice of making wills can be found under the entries 'will-making: 157-9, 169'; 'Willingham, will-making in: 167, 169'; 'wills, made by villagers: 155-9'; and 'wills, making of: 28-9' (pp.363-4). Nevertheless, the book is produced on high quality paper, and sturdily bound. The real issue is whether it is worth purchasing at a price of £59.50, when you could photocopy the original versions of many of the chapters for a fraction of the price.

The importance of the work included in *Figures in the Landscape* is reflected in the fact that much of it is already well known. Unfortunately Spufford's excellent 'Poverty Portrayed': a study of the parish of Eccleshall in Staffordshire, the development of social statistics and the art of van Heemskerk, is not included. (5) 'Poverty Portrayed' is not only original, vivid and thought-provoking but considerably more difficult to get hold of than many of the articles published here. Only two pieces in Figures in the Landscape are published for the first time. Chapter VI, as already noted, and the introductory Chapter I, titled 'The Scope of the Enquiry'. However, much of this chapter also appears as the introduction to the recent new edition of Spufford's classic book, Contrasting Communities.(6) Although it contains interesting reflections on her career, interests and methodology, it only undertakes a detailed critique of Contrasting Communities and does not provide an overview of the work published here, so in some ways serves rather poorly as an introduction to this volume.

The above are relatively minor issues, and should not be allowed to detract from the quality and importance of the work included in Figures in the Landscape. The great strength of Spufford's approach lies in the fact her social history has its roots firmly in the economic soil - in differences of wealth, contrasting agricultural systems and patterns of communication and marketing - while at the same time extending into the intellectual world of the ordinary villager. As stated in Chapter I, her interest is in 'those figures which people the landscape, trying to get at their beliefs, thoughts, education, reading-matter, opinions, even feelings', but combined with a conviction that 'rural people cannot be separated from their agricultural and economic situations and constraints' (p.3). In taking this approach, Spufford has often bucked the trend. *Contrasting Communities*, a pioneering work of comparative local history which combined economic, social and religious aspects of village life came out in 1974, at a time when the emphasis on production techniques and quantitative research methods meant that actual people were largely absent from agricultural history. *Small Books and Pleasant Histories* (1981) and *The Great Reclothing of Rural England* (1984) not only expanded our knowledge of popular culture, but also pioneered the history of popular consumption well before it became a fashionable topic of study. Likewise, her edited volume, *The World of Rural Dissenters* (1995), was original in bringing together the methods and findings of social, cultural, religious, and economic history.(7) As such, each of her books constitutes a minor classic. The same can be said of some of the essays in *Figures in the Landscape*, the majority of which are closely related to the themes of her books. Chapter II on 'The Scribes of Villagers Wills' for the first time warned historians to think more carefully about who exactly was expressing the religious sentiments recorded in wills, and demonstrated how the work of particular scribes could traced. Chapter X examining the 'First Steps in Literacy' used

spiritual autobiographies to illuminate vividly the educational experience and opportunities of labourers, husbandmen and yeomen, something other historians had largely neglected or declared impossible due to the lack of school records for this period. This is Spufford at her best, using the documents sensitively to reveal both the hidden contexts of life in early modern rural England, and the pitfalls awaiting an unsuspecting historian.

Although *Figures in the Landscape* is arranged thematically, bringing her separately printed essays together in this way, demonstrates the development and maturing of Spufford's work, while also suggesting she is not totally unaffected by current trends. Her early work from the 1960s in Chapters IV, V and XII is high quality, but straightforward, local history. Pieces written in the 1980s and early 1990s: Chapter XIII 'Puritanism and Social Control', Chapter XIV 'Can we count the "Godly"?', Chapter III 'The Limitations of the Probate Inventory', Chapter IX 'The Pedlar and the Historian' and Chapter VIII 'Families, Will Witnesses and Economic Structure', all reflect the more polemical social history of that period. Chapter XI 'Women teaching Reading' and 'The Importance of the Lord's Supper', both from the 1990s are perhaps influenced by the stronger concern for gender and careful text analysis that marked historical research in that decade; although Chapter X 'First Steps to Literacy', first published in 1979, employed much the same approach - emphasising its pioneering nature.

A less flattering consequence of placing Spufford's separately published work back-to-back is to reveal the degree of cross-over in the material used in these articles and her other books. There is no reason why historians should not use the same source material to explore different themes, and plagiarise their own work to present different arguments to different audiences. However, when such pieces are presented together, the reader can begin to feel a little short changed. For instance, Chapters VIII and IX use many of the same examples word for word (8), while Chapters X and XI reproduce quotations and remarks (9), and Chapter X is itself in a large part the same as Chapter 2 of *Small Books and Pleasant Histories.(10)*

More serious is direct contradiction between chapters. This is most obvious in the case of chapters III and IV; but a similar problem emerges with regard to the validity of single village studies, criticised in chapters XIII and XIV, and utilised in chapters VII and VIII, as is discussed in more detail below. Chapter III 'The Limitations of the Probate Inventory' is an important piece pointing out how misleading the wealth totals in probate inventories can be, as they not only exclude real property but also the debts owed by the deceased. It demonstrates that the latter problem can be corrected by examining probate accounts, where they survive. The piece concludes that 'the sum which appears at the foot of the probate inventory cannot be taken to indicate any individual's real net wealth, even in an approximate manner not only because it does not include, as we all know, real estate, but because it carries no clue to the extent of his indebtedness' (p.79). Immediately following, Chapter IV 'The Significance of the Cambridgeshire Hearth Tax', first published many years before, demonstrates that number of hearths assessed in that tax correlates with wealth as recorded in sum total in probate inventories. One of these arguments must be wrong: either the sum of wealth recorded in probate inventories does bear a relationship to real wealth, or the correlation between inventories and the Hearth Tax is spurious. It cannot be argued both ways. It seems likely that indebtedness is related to the value of moveable property recorded in the inventory, as the ability to borrow depended on a person's reputation and visible wealth. But this relationship, like that of size of house and number of hearths to real wealth, was a weak one, rather than direct and inevitable. Some editorial comment from Spufford on this matter would have been helpful, given her expertise on the study of both types of document.

Reading a single book or article by Margaret Spufford one if occasionally struck by a certain quirkiness or stubbornness of argument; but reading her collected work gathered together in this volume suggests that there is perhaps more of a pattern to this quirkiness. Her research is at its best when illuminating a neglected issue, or making sensible points that others have overlooked. Her work on the scribes of wills in Chapter II, on changing patterns of landholding between the 16th and early 18th centuries in Chapter V, on pedlars and their customers in Chapter IX, on learning and literacy among ordinary people in Chapters X and XI, and the broad social spread of particular religious beliefs in parts of Chapters XIII and XIV, all fall into this category. Her work is least effective when tackling or espousing more complex arguments: Chapter VIII 'Families, Will Witnesses, and Economic Structures' and Chapter XIII 'Puritanism and social control' are the

most acute examples of this problem. Chapter VIII presents an argument that social co-operation existed within the village despite economic differences in terms of wealth between labourers and yeomen - such people witnessed each others wills, and bequests were made from well off to poorer kin (e.g. pp.176-7); while Chapter XIII argues that the concern of village elites about social control, and especially for punishing those who had sex outside marriage, was not specific to the late 16th and early 17th century, but had also existed in early 14th century, and had little to do with religious beliefs (e.g. pp.310-11). Both arguments are important, and in my view, almost certainly correct. However, the way in which the argument is structured and the evidence laid out does not do a great deal to support these important ideas.

As noted in Chapter I, Spufford has 'omitted popular politics and crime' from her agenda (p.4). Nor has she, to my knowledge, examined the mechanisms of poor relief and the repercussions these had on village society. (11) Her work on landholding either plays down the conflicting interests between landlord and tenants or avoids the issue altogether.(12)Thus if there is a significant gap in Spufford's vision of village society, it is the failure to discuss the tension, disputes, and conflict that existed there. There is nothing wrong with historians restricting themselves to certain sets of topics, and Spufford's sphere of research is admirably wide. But it does become problematic when the topics one has excluded play an important part in the issues being examined. Chapter VIII's argument that seventeenth century village life was characterised by economic polarisation but social co-operation cannot be made effectively without also looking for evidence of social and economic conflict, or considering the possibility that such conflict might exist alongside co-operation and interaction. Nor is the meaning of the interaction between villagers of different status groups considered fully. For instance, what do bequests mean in social terms? To take an example not used by Spufford, just because an employer leaves a bequest to a servant (quite a common eventuality in 16th century wills), it surely does not mean they share all their interests and values, although it could be taken as an indication of a generally good working relationship. Similarly, when kin of different levels of wealth witnessed each other's wills, or leave each other bequests, it does not mean they had a wholly harmonious and supportive relationship. Nor does shared religious belief mean that other values are necessarily shared.

Some central points of the argument constructed in Chapter XIII 'Puritanism and Social Control' are also susceptible to straightforward criticisms. The statements that 14th century manorial jurors who reported fellow villagers for fornication and illegitimate births, 'were the exact equivalents of their 16th century counterparts' (p.303), who reported women to the church courts for the same offences; and that 'what can certainly be established is that there was no new social division in the villages of late 16th century England between officeholders and the poor they were willing to present' (p.310), are both highly questionable. To be sure, in both time periods village elites were showing concern about the sexual behaviour of poorer villagers. However, they were not 'exact equivalents': the different institutional contexts within which they operated need to be considered. In the medieval case, servile tenants sat on the manorial jury and presented the offences of fellow villagers. Sitting on the jury and presenting offences were both compulsory to their terms of tenure. Fines went to the manorial lord, and failure to present offences was regarded as withholding revenue from the lord. Thus, the fines tell us very little about the relationship between villagers. In the very late 16th and the early 17th century when wealthy villagers chose to present cases to the church courts, they did so partly because illegitimate children and single mothers were seen as likely to drain the village poor rates, which the wealthy villagers had to pay. So while the economic background of low wages and high land values, and type of social control enforced, may have been the same, but the cause and circumstances were very different.(13) Nor can we agree that the social divisions of the late 16th century were well established. The differences of wealth and status between jurors and poorer tenants in the early 14th century were not as great as between yeomen and the landless cottagers in many late 16th century villages. More importantly, in the intervening period, the 15th and early 16th centuries, differences of wealth and status had been less marked than in either of the periods chosen for examination in Chapter XIII: thus the degree to which wealth was polarised within village society was a relatively new situation in many late 16th century villages.

Chapters VIII and XIII, along with Chapter XIV 'Can we count the "Godly"?' are also marred by a confusing stance on the value of local studies to historical understanding. Local history is, of course, a method that

Spufford utilised to great effect in Contrasting Communities, and is well represented in this volume in Chapters II, IV, V, VI, VII, VIII and XII. Yet Spufford has a nagging concern for how the problem of typicality is handled. She has harsh words for the other great village study of 17th century England, Keith Wrightson and David Levine's Poverty and Piety in an English Village: Terling 1525-1700.(14) Chapter XIII cites Wrightson and Levine's description of how increased differences in wealth within the village of Terling, Essex, were accompanied by and correlated with, differences in religious belief and social attitudes. Spufford notes that 'The unwary student draws from it the implications, that were not necessarily in the protagonists' minds' that this was generally the case in English villages of this period (pp.296-7). Similarly, in Chapter XIV she worries that 'it is altogether to easy now for the student to cite Terling or Earl's Colne as "typical" examples of religious indifference by the laity, when due consideration shows they were probably highly abnormal' (p.317). If inclined to argue along these lines, however, we might equally point out that a student (or any other reader) might mistakenly think other villages, such as those studied by Spufford, were typical.

Chapter VII 'Who made a will' and Chapter VIII both rely heavily on documents, most particular wills, drawn from one village, Willingham.(15) Chapter VII seeks to overturn the common assumption that wealthier villagers were more likely to make wills than the landless or smallholders, arguing that the decision to make a will was primarily determined by the presence of minor children, and to a lesser extent by the possession of fragmented landholdings. It does indeed appear to be the case that in Willingham the relatively poor and landless left wills more often than those with significant arable landholdings - the half yardlanders. However, no attempt is made in the chapter to assess the typicality of the situation in Willingham. This is not a minor matter. Historians of 16th century rural England rely on wills as one of the richest sources for revealing inheritance patterns and family relationships: it is important to know what social biases surviving wills are subject to. My own work on patterns of will-making in six parishes in 16th century Norfolk, cross-referenced with the tax returns of the 1520s and manorial records, suggest that while the relatively poor and nearly landless did make wills, only a small proportion of this group did so: will-making was much more common among the more wealthy in village society - in other words, wealth was an important factor. It can also be observed that that patterns of will-making, in terms of frequency, inheritance patterns and treatment of land vary a great deal from village to village, and indeed from family to family. One cannot generalise about these issues from the wills of a single village.(16) It is certainly interesting that so many of the landless and smallholders made wills in Willingham: it would be pertinent to know whether this was because the extensive common resources available to the inhabitants of this fenland village meant they were not as poor as the landless in other types of villages.(17)

As already discussed, Chapter VIII examines the social interaction between different wealth groups within village society, and uses Willingham as the main example. Yet we must ask again, how typical is Willingham? It is acknowledged that Willingham 'egalitarian' compared to other villages of the same date such as Chippenham or Terling (p.166); and also that it had a distinctive pattern of land distribution - while other villages saw an increase in farm size and a decrease in the number of farms in the 17th century, Willingham experienced fragmentation with an increasing number of small landholdings (pp.173-4). But at the same time Spufford appears to want to use Willingham as an example to reform our picture of social ties in villages across England at this date. From what is known about landholding patterns in early modern England, engrossment, the enlargement of farms, was the norm: Willingham was unusual. Matters are confused by the fact that despite being 'egalitarian', the chapter also describes wealth in Willingham as 'polarised' (e.g. p.174). The evidence does suggests that their were significant differences of wealth between households in Willingham, but not polarisation - a word which means the division of society into two extremes, the poor and the wealthy, with few falling into middling categories. Again, Willingham is unusual in this respect.

The issue of typicality should not necessarily make local village studies problematic, and certainly does not render then worthless. On the contrary, local history can illuminate important economic and social changes with more accuracy and insight than many large-scale studies. But as Spufford herself points out, for instance in Chapter I, we have to be careful to set these villages in context. And while no village is typical,

we can generalise about types of villages. Her current research project, described in that chapter, to ensure that at least one Hearth Tax return for each county is in print, to map the returns, and to compare them with Joan Thirsk's agricultural regions (pp.18-9), will go a long way towards providing this context for the late 17th century.

Despite the reservations voiced in this review, it is beyond doubt that the work of Margaret Spufford has greatly furthered our understanding of life in rural early modern England. Whether you choose to go for the 'cheap print' option of photocopying her articles, or exercise 'conspicuous consumption' by splashing out £59.50 on this book, her work should be read. It is essential to any historian or student interested in the ordinary people in early modern England and the ordinary communities they inhabited and travelled between: the 'figures in the landscape', as she evocatively puts it.

Notes

1. The papers included in the volume are as follows: Chapter I 'The Scope of the Enquiry'; Chapter II 'The Scribes of Villagers' Wills in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries and Their Influence'; Chapter III 'The Limitations of the Probate Inventory'; Chapter IV 'The Significance of the Cambridgeshire Hearth Tax'; Chapter V 'A Cambridgeshire Community: Chippenham from Settlement to Enclosure'; Chapter VI 'Isaac Archer's Chippenham, and Chippenham Hall: a Postscript'; Chapter VII 'Who made a Will in Village Society'; Chapter VIII 'Families, Will Witnesses, and Economic Structure in the Fens and on the Chalk: Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Willingham and Chippenham'; Chapter IX 'The Pedlar and the Historian: Seventeenth-Century Communications'; Chapter X 'First Steps in Literacy: the Reading and Writing Experiences of the Humblest Seventeenth-Century Spiritual Autobiographers'; Chapter XI 'Women teaching Reading to Poor Children in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries'; Chapter XII 'The Dissenting Churches in Cambridgeshire from 1660-1700'; Chapter XIII 'Puritanism and Social Control'; Chapter XIV 'Can we count the "Godly" and the "Conformable" in the Seventeenth Century?'; and Chapter XV 'The Importance of the Lord's Supper to the Seventeenth-Century Dissenters'.Back to (1)
2. For instance the two men are assigned to the wrong village (p.40); the citation of Bruce M.S. Campbell as MS Campbell' (p.303).Back to (2)
3. References in this review article are to the new numbers in the book.Back to (3)
4. See for example the entry for James Fretwell, where references to Chapter X are a mixture of the old and new numbering.Back to (4)
5. Margaret Spufford, 'Poverty Portrayed: Gregory King and the Parish of Eccleshall' in Margaret Spufford and James Went, *Poverty Portrayed*, published by the Centre for Local History, Keele University, Keele, Staffordshire ST5 5BG as volume 7 Staffordshire Studies (1995) pp.1-70.Back to (5)
6. Margaret Spufford, *Contrasting Communities: English Villagers in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Sutton Publishing Ltd, Stroud, 2000) pp.xviii-xxix.Back to (6)
7. Margaret Spufford, *Small Books and Pleasant Histories: Popular Fiction and its Readership in Seventeenth-Century England* (University of Georgia Press; Athens, Georgia, 1981). Margaret Spufford, *The Great Reclothing of Rural England: Petty Chapmen and their Wares in the Seventeenth Century* (The Hambledon Press, London, 1984). Margaret Spufford ed. *The World of Rural Dissenters 1520-1725* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995).Back to (7)
8. Compare comments on Pepys p.165 and p.213, Frances Wolfreson p.166 and p.213-4, and Neville Butler p.165 and p.214.Back to (8)
9. For instance, compare pp.222-3 with pp.255-7, p.229 with 257, p.231 with p.260.Back to (9)
10. Compare pp.222-8 in this volume with pp.24-9 in *Small Books and Pleasant Histories*.*Back to (10)*
11. For an example of the importance of poor relief to 17th century village society see for example Steve Hindle 'Exclusion Crises: Poverty, Migration and Parochial Responsibility in English Rural Communities, c.1560-1660' , Rural History 7:2 (1996) pp.125-49 and Steve Hindle 'Power, Poor Relief, and Social Relations in Holland Fen, c.1600-1800' , The Historical Journal 41:1 (1998) pp.67-96.Back to (11)

12. There is limited recognition of conflict in Chapter V 'A Cambridgeshire Community', for example: p.131 (an unfree tenant dispossessed on a freeholding in 1526), pp.135-6 (demesne lessee overstocking the common in 1544), p.136 (manorial lord enclosing common fen in 1565), p.146 (the poor claiming rights of turbary in the fen in 1830). However, the causes and consequences of these disputes are not explored.Back to (12)
13. The chronology, geographical distribution, and types of courts used, with regard to the regulation of social and sexual behaviour have now been thoroughly examined in Marjorie McIntosh's *Controlling Misbehaviour in England, 1370-1600* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998).Back to (13)
14. Keith Wrightson and David Levine, *Poverty and Piety in an English Village: Terling, 1525-1700* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1995), first published 1979.Back to (14)
15. Chapter VIII also uses the example of Chippenham, although the documents from that village are not really adequate for the type of detailed analysis attempted (see pp.166-7 and pp.179-80).Back to (15)
16. Jane Whittle, *The Development of Agrarian Capitalism: Land and Labour in Norfolk 1440-1580* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000).Back to (16)
17. It is important to note that Spufford compares the 49 wills she studies with patterns of landholding, not records of moveable wealth.Back to (17)

Other reviews:
[2]

Source URL: http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/237

Links:
[1] http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/1946
[2] http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews