

Making a Living in the Middle Ages: The People of Britain 850-1520

Review Number:

294

Publish date:

Tuesday, 1 October, 2002

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ISBN:

9780300090604

Date of Publication:

2002

Price:

£25.00

Pages:

443pp.

Publisher:

Yale University Press

Publisher url:

<http://www.yalebooks.co.uk/yale/display.asp?K=9780300101911>

Place of Publication:

New Haven & London

Reviewer:

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This volume is the second published in the Yale University Press series, *The New Economic History of Britain*. The *New Economic History* will eventually provide a continuum of scholarly surveys of the British economy from early times to the present, but in a more accessible form: that is, without the usual impedimenta of footnotes or endnotes and with an eye to a less specialist reading market. Arguably the timing for such volumes could not be better, and this is particularly the case for the period of this book. Thanks to the recent celebration of the start of the third millennium, interest in the world at the beginning of the *second* millennium has been correspondingly heightened. It resulted in a series of publications investigating the world around 1000, the most wellknown for Britain being Robert Lacey's and Danny Danziger's *The Year 1000* (Little, Brown; Boston & London, 1999).

Laudable as these publications were to renewing interest in the middle ages, they have tended to paint the middle ages as a quaint and very distant world. One of the values of the *New Economic History* series is to rescue these past worlds from the excesses of popular imagination and to provide a clearly interested lay population with both the benefits of the current state of affairs in terms of research, but also to put a more representative and richly textured picture of the human condition in Britain in times past. The titles of the two books published so far in the series (the other being Keith Wrightson's *Earthly Necessities: Economic Lives in Early Modern Britain* [Yale University Press; New Haven & London, 2000] [\(1\)](#)) clearly indicate the authors' intentions of highlighting the ordinary lives of people in their respective periods. Both titles also imply a commonality with the lives of people at other ages, even our own. Leading happy and productive lives was certainly as much a concern of those in the past as it is for us today, and this connection perhaps

allows us to comprehend the actions of those in earlier ages more intelligibly. As Dyer writes in his preface: 'Changes in the society and economy came about because men and women, as individuals or in groups, made decisions and acted accordingly. We can therefore appreciate why they behaved and acted as they did if we can reconstruct their thinking in the light of their circumstances' (p. ix). Although this may sound old-fashioned, it is perhaps in the realm of basic economic decisions that such an approach works best.

So, how effectively does *Making a Living* reconstruct a medieval economic past? For the most part (and from the perspective of this reader) it succeeds admirably. From the start, the erudition of the book is extremely impressive. As an expert in English medieval local history, Professor Dyer has an unparalleled command of the minutiae of his subject, and he puts together this wealth of material in a very smooth and well-organized fashion. Starting in the middle of the ninth century, the book takes us through the period of late Anglo-Saxon growth, through the turmoil of the Conquest and subsequent Norman consolidation, through the period of exceptional growth in the thirteenth century, and through the period of slowdown and eventual demographic collapse from the early fourteenth to the early sixteenth century.

His handling of the myriad of issues involved is very surefooted throughout. Even when he is making statements of some controversy - of which there are several, as discussed below - one has an implicit trust that they are being made in the most judicious way. Perhaps as a result of this deliberate approach, the tone of the book is often cool and measured, but Dyer is clearly sympathetic to the society he portrays. Indeed, one of the great strengths of the book is the parade of characters which continually run through the narrative. Some were scoundrels, like John, son of Adam Bray, who stole grain from his own father, admittedly in a time of famine in 1316 (pp. 231-2). Some were incompetents, like Stephen de Fretwell, who in 1219 was forced to surrender his substantial landholding of hundreds of acres to pay creditors and in return for a very modest pension for him and his wife (pp. 148-9). Some were unlucky, like Joan Edwaker, who died of a fall while doing the 'man's work' of carting in 1389 (p. 280). Some were successful, like the thegn, Haehstan, who came to Worcestershire from eastern England in the late tenth century and was able to trade on his kinship with the Bishop of Worcester to lease two small estates in the county (p. 32). Throughout Dyer provides a very rich portrayal of the medieval economy and society, particularly of England.

The last phrase indicates the most obvious shortcoming in the book. Certain readers will claim, with some justification, that Wales and Scotland get short shrift in the book, and that, with a few exceptions (such as the description of the early fourteenth-century crisis in Scotland, discussed on pp. 251-3), the bits on Scotland and Wales are rather tacked on to the story of England. Part of this is unavoidable, due to the relative lack of sources for the rest of Britain apart from England, but one senses that had the book been written from the perspective of someone with expertise in Scotland and Wales the overall treatment would have been rather more balanced, although inevitably much of the complexity of the story about England would have been lost.

The other potential area of criticism is that the book may seem rather descriptive in nature. This, however, is a result of a conscious decision on the part of the author. Dyer clearly does not tie his account to any grand theory, but prefers to engage theoretical issues as they come up at various times throughout the book. These moments are invariably well handled, the discussion of the debate around the theories of Michael Postan being one good example (pp. 246-51), or his comments on the Brenner debate (pp. 349-51), but they are done with a very light touch. This may mean nothing more than that Dyer is not a generalist and prefers to retain the complexities of the issues rather than oversimplify them.

Certainly he is not averse to making bold statements regarding a whole host of issues. One of these concerns his estimate of the urban component of the total population in Britain as being around 20 per cent rather than the 10 per cent that was long the traditional figure. Dyer has been the first to argue this in the literature and he continues this line of argument strongly in this book. He feels that England's urban population rose from 2 to 10 per cent from the 850s to 1086 and then again to 20 per cent by 1300, a level which it maintained until the early eighteenth century (pp. 62, 200, 303). As Dyer makes clear, this was a trend that survived even the calamity of the plague: 'the commercial outlook which had been established before the Black Death did not revert to a more primitive economy based on self-sufficiency' (p. 304). Many implications flow from

this, primarily that medieval society was much more commercially active and capable of supporting a non-agricultural population than formerly thought.

Even more controversial is Dyer's feeling about the profile of demography over the period as shown in his Figure 2 on p. 235. The sudden rise of population he shows from the beginning of the thirteenth century (rather than the more usual view of a gradual rise from Domesday to 1300) and the equally sharp decline of population after 1348, in which the preponderance of the drop is seen as occurring in the first attack of the plague with following attacks playing a virtually non-existent role, are bound to raise many eyebrows.

To these can be added many sage statements made about various other issues, such as his perceptive comment on commoditisation of wheat prices as indicated by the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle in the early eleventh century (p. 42), peasants as consumers (pp. 171-4), the economic attitudes of lords generally (pp. 106 ff), the 'shopping mall' discussion on pp. 217-18, all dispelling the idea of the middle ages as a primitive, primarily subsistence-oriented time. Humour, in a very dry fashion, often breaks through the narrative, as in the description of celebrations of the Holy Trinity Guild at Wisbech in Cambridgeshire: 'At the splendid annual dinner venison and veal were served, and minstrels provided the entertainment. By a rule announced in 1506, the poor were allowed to eat the leftovers' (p. 317).

Indeed, the view of society from the perspective of the poor is one of the areas where a medieval voice is left silent. Dyer's sources, generated by those in authority, mostly see the poor as a nuisance, and the misery in which most of these people lived perhaps gets lost in the story. Another area, of course, concerned women. Dyer is as specific as he can be about their position in society, and makes some very interesting points about their increased presence in the workforce, particularly after the Black Death (for instance, the case of Joan Edwater above), but some readers might again find this thinly covered. Aliens, of which there were always some number in Britain, whether Jews, Italians, Flemings or others, are also lightly sketched in - the Jews, perhaps because of their often brutal treatment at the hands of government and populace alike, getting the most attention here. Finally, the issue of children - for example, their presence in the workforce - is left out almost completely. Again, this is largely due to the scarcity - almost non-existence - of specific sources about the lives of children and the conditions in which they lived; certainly it is true that they scarcely figure in the available literature and, perhaps understandably, this book does not add much to this particular issue.

A couple of other small points might be mentioned here as well. Readers who prefer scholarly citations will find many references to them in the 'Further Readings' section at the end of the book, but may be frustrated in not having the sources for many of the juicy examples which Dyer provides. A potential source of frustration for some readers may be the rather specialised terminology that is sprinkled throughout the text. These include words like 'assart', 'bladers', 'farmers' (a particularly problematic word in studies of the medieval economy) and the like. It is true that he tries very hard to provide definitions of these upon their first appearance of the text, but all too often the reader who happens to miss the first reference is left to scramble back through the text to find a term's meaning. In the event of a second edition of the book, a glossary giving these terms might be a good idea.

But it is unfair to dwell on these issues of omission or to expect this book to cover absolutely everything. It does admirably encompass a great swathe of issues, particularly those around which research has concentrated since 1945. Those who want to know what scholars have been doing in the field will get a very sure and up-to-date sense of it here. Moreover, as a view of the economic aspirations and achievements of medieval people over nearly 700 years, this tells a very seductive and convincing story. Eventually, though, Dyer does perhaps succumb to the popular preconceptions about the medieval period and its end, by talking about the 'new world' that ushered in the early modern period.

But was it a 'new world' really? We have perhaps been too seduced by the development of gunpowder and printing, the phenomena of the Renaissance and Reformation, and the discovery of the Americas to notice that, in terms of the basic necessity of making a living, things remained pretty much the same in Britain (and indeed much of Europe) from the late medieval to the early modern period. Indeed, one could argue, and certainly Dyer gives plenty of evidence for it in this book, that - economically - his 'new world' was in fact

ushered in during the thirteenth century. It was at this time that - proportionally - urban population reached its peak at around 20 percent and held there for four centuries; that a moneyed market economy also reached an apogee which it would hold for centuries; that also agrarian production, as shown by the work of Bruce Campbell and Mark Overton in particular, reached a level which it would also hold for four centuries; and that the level of monumental and other building reached a peak which would also not be bettered for many centuries.

That these developments reached such a high peak relative to later periods was not solely because the advent of the plague arrested development for a prolonged period of time, but also because the medieval economy and society was so profoundly transformed during the thirteenth century. Indeed, one could easily argue that, structurally speaking, the renewed economic growth of the sixteenth century was simply a resurfacing of the late thirteenth century economy rather than a newly reconfigured one. Certainly, the scale of the early modern economy may have increased with the addition of American silver in particular, but fundamentally its essentials were about the same.

That one can actually make this sort of conjecture is testimony to the suggestive powers of Dyer's book. It is a work of substantial interest and value for general and academic readers alike. Its appeal may well depend upon the perspective of the reader, however. As a survey of medieval English economic history with comparative looks at Scotland and Wales, this book is superb. As a comprehensive view of the economy of the *whole* of Britain at the time, it functions less satisfactorily, but even here readers should find much of value in it. Altogether, it is clearly an important addition to the literature and admirably justifies the decision by Yale to create the series in the first place.

Notes

1. For a review of this book by Nigel Goose on this site, please click [here](#) [2]. [Back to \(1\)](#)

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