Reviews in History

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

A Lost Frontier Revealed: Regional Separation in the East Midlands

Review Number:
879
Publish date:
Monday, 1 March, 2010
Author:
Alan Fox
ISBN:
9781902806976
Date of Publication:
2009
Price:
£18.99
Pages:
224pp.
Publisher:
University of Hertfordshire Press
Place of Publication:
Hatfield
Reviewer:
John Beckett

The ?holy grail? for academic local historians over the past 50 or so years has been the search for regions, a search conducted partly out of genuine interest, partly as a parallel to regional geography, and partly from motives of self-preservation resulting from fears that ?local history? conveyed the impression of being parochial and antiquarian. W. G. Hoskins, for whom the Department of English Local History at Leicester University was set up after the Second World War, was unashamedly a parish historian, notably demonstrated through his important study of Wigston Magna, Leicestershire, *The Midland Peasant* (reprinted in 2009 by Carnegie), but he was not an antiquarian. Hoskins believed in seeing the study of the individual parish as throwing light on wider patterns of change in communities well beyond the borders of his chosen village. In his wake came a number of Leicester-based scholars, most recently Charles Phythian-Adams, who has been Alan Fox?s mentor and guide in preparing this study of a region spanning the Leicestershire-Lincolnshire border near Grantham.

The regional debate is a problem in England because the state is a thousand years old, and if we omit Wales, Scotland and Ireland, it has contained no separate forms of government or administration since the Norman Conquest. The county and parochial structure largely dates from before the Conquest, and affinities and loyalties have often been associated with these boundaries. The work of Joan Thirsk on agricultural regions, of Alan Everitt on *pays*, and of Harold Fox on Wolds communities, has provided interesting Leicester-based

insights into different types of communities being common to particular forms of agricultural practice, but establishing anything much more concrete than this has proved elusive. Cultural distinctions such as language and local pride suggest that the peripheries (Cornwall, north-east England for example) have a sense of their own independence. Yet when in 2004 a referendum was held with a view to establishing a north-east regional assembly, which would have some of the powers won by Scotland and Wales in recent years, it collapsed in the face of almost universal apathy.

None of this has prevented efforts from being made to identify regional distinctiveness, either through what is now the Centre for English Local History at Leicester, or the regional centres around the country including, perhaps not surprisingly, Cornwall and north-east England. Indeed, it would be true to say that the debate has been stirred up rather than calmed down by the difficulty of actually finding the distinctiveness which historians have sought with such enthusiasm. Partly this is because the search for regions has been strongly associated with the desire to theorize the subject of local history, perhaps in an effort to provide it with academic justification to meet the demands of research assessment exercises and other target-setting exercises to which professional historians now have no option other than to sign up. In his editor?s preface, Professor Nigel Goose is explicit on the point, noting that the book provides ?a searching theoretical analysis?, and in what follows Fox is equally explicit in seeking to address some of the issues raised by Phythian-Adams? argument that England consisted of a patchwork of ?regional societies? which coincided with major drainage basins, and that as a result watersheds acted as frontier zones from the Anglo-Saxon period to recent times. These regions, essentially economic regions were centred on what Phythian-Adams has referred to as ?primate towns?. These regions, Fox maintains, contained some viability into the early modern period and even into the 18th century.

Fox admits to having been a late convert to the model; indeed he freely acknowledges that he was ?several years into the research before being persuaded that there was quite a strong case for a frontier zone?. This delay in adopting the model may explain why throughout the book he is less than gushing about his findings. At times he is so modest that one suspects he was squirming when putting fingers to word processor to state the case, and he was particularly vexed (especially in part four) by the possibility that most of the trends he locates could simply be a consequence of the location of the county boundary rather than the watershed for which he is searching. If so, was the county boundary drawn to reflect the existing economic regions, rather than the regions existing separately from the county boundary? It is an awkward issue that has been explored in some of Phythian-Adams?s other work, and Fox never quite makes up his mind, despite (especially in part four) offering a liberal sprinkling of place and surnames, transport routes and so forth. The proposed frontier may, he concludes, have waxed and waned through the centuries, but ?it would seem that the feature which was arguably there in the eighteenth century possibly had its origins well before the Norman Conquest and that certain aspects of it may still be with us today?(p. 182). This is hardly a ringing endorsement of Phythian-Adams?s hypothesis.

Fox sets out the hypothesis in the first part of the book. Chapter one includes an assessment of the characteristics of regional societies and their frontiers. Chapter two introduces the ?Test Area? straddling the Lincolnshire-Leicestershire border between Melton Mowbray, Oakham and Grantham, which is to be subjected to theoretical investigation. Within the area he identifies seven separate landscapes in terms of geology and geomorphology. Part two of the book concentrates on the measures indicating the human divisions of the countryside, and provides a great deal of useful information about the study area, including population and enclosure in chapter three, wealth and poverty in chapter four, and cultural expressions (folk traditions, vernacular buildings, dialect and word usage) in chapter five. The section contains some interesting material, but Fox is unable to convince himself that this detailed assessment has told him much of value (p. 95). Apart from mud and stud buildings, which are almost peculiar to Lincolnshire, there was not much else distinctive about the test area, and the dominant sheep economy was probably more of a unifying factor than one which divided people.

In part three, Fox turns to the experiences of individuals and families, although the ugly title of ?Mechanisms of segregation? is not very appealing, and chapter titles such as ?Personal spatial loyalties? rather complicate what is a discussion of how individuals related to their home parish and surrounding areas.

The ?general level? of part two is now supplemented by what Fox refers to as the differences expressed at a more personal level with chapter six on the individual, chapter seven on the family and clan (an unusual concept in England) and chapter eight on the infrastructure by which people from separate parishes made contact with each other and the experience of the people in gaining access to local markets. Chapter six is largely based on 50 marriage register sets for 1754?1810: 24 in Leicestershire and 26 in Kesteven. After a long discussion which includes evidence from parish registers and probate documents, Fox concludes that extra-parochial marriages in his 50 parishes have added ?some support to the assertion that there was a frontier zone? in the 18th century, (p. 137) and that most people showed a reluctance to cross county boundaries in the search for marriage partners. That this hardly comes as a surprise, given what we know from geographers? studies of market patterns, goes more or less without saying, although Fox has at least provided a wealth of data in support of a point which is more often asserted than demonstrated by historians. Chapter seven looks at dynastic families which are, in effect, those families which stayed put in a community, as opposed to those which were more transitory, and concludes rather unsurprisingly that such families did not move around much.

Fox shows in chapters six and seven how parish register analysis reveals the links between families in the test area, and particularly in a group of 14 parishes astride the county boundary, but in chapter eight he changes tack a little to look at how easily or not people would have found it to get around the area: what were the transport links? This chapter includes an assessment of road and carrier networks. The road system cannot be blamed if the cross border links were weak because it included the A1 and a number of other roads which are A-classified today. Fox also looks at urban fields of influence and the role of ?primate towns?. The chapter also includes a study of hiring fairs. But the overall conclusion is simply that the people of Leicestershire and Lincolnshire ?were reluctant to make contact?(p. 166).

Part four revisits the case for the proposed frontier and its contexts, hence the title ?Overall judgement and findings?. Fox argues that ?the major theme running through this book is the hypothesis that the area around the Lincolnshire-Leicestershire border was a frontier between regional societies in the eighteenth century?. He admits that he thought ?the study area appeared in theory to represent a frontier zone between economic regions since the county boundary, following the route of a prehistoric track, is almost entirely co-incident with the watershed between the Trent and Witham drainage basins?(p. 169). But he concedes that having started from this position, he found it difficult to find the appropriate evidence, and that when he did find indicators like marriage patterns which appeared to support the general case, he was then concerned as to whether he had found a frontier, or just the influence of the county boundary? That in turn led him to ask whether county boundaries were deliberately created in frontier areas between societies, or did they, once established, produce a frontier affect, or at least help to accentuate it? Fox goes on to look at place name and surname evidence, and other distribution links such as newspapers to conclude that ?even in the 21st century certain aspects of a frontier perhaps endure in the zone astride the Lincolnshire-Leicestershire border.

In 1952 W. G. Hoskins argued that academic local history should be about questions, and not simply offer a series of narratives. That is not unreasonable, but what are the questions? Alan Fox has written a book which is concerned with testing a hypothesis through the use of place-based data (marriages and so forth), but in which the places themselves are of no particular interest. In other words, is the subject at an academic level now divorced from the subject at grass roots level? Has it gone the same way as demographic history, which made the village of Colyton in Devon famous in the 1960s as a testing ground for new methods of family reconstitution without any local people being aware of this importance, or of urban history in which the study of place is seemingly discouraged as being not a significant academic pursuit? Does this type of theoretical approach do more than provide grist for an academic mill more concerned with ticking government ?target? boxes than it is with understanding and unwrapping the history of individual places, be they villages, parishes, counties or any other local units?

And where does this take us? As someone who has held a chair in an English university with the title of English Regional History, and who has also worked for the Victoria County History, I should declare an interest and it is this: Hoskins wrote of Wigston as an exemplar of ?place? as a way of opening up wider questions. My main concern having read Alan Fox?s book is that if we spend so much time trying to justify,

or find evidence in support of, a theoretical construct, are we in danger of losing sight of the essence of local history which is the study of the place? And, if we are, do we run the risk of academic local historians losing touch with their communities outside of the universities, just as historians more generally have tended to do when they have become obsessed by postmodern and structural issues without remembering that the majority of their community are simply interested in ?what happened?? Once we divorce the academic from the wider community, in a subject like History, which does not suffer from the problems of understanding that are often associated, for example, with the pure sciences, are we in danger of creating a university-based history which bears no relation to the subject as it is enjoyed by the majority of society? Above all, is there a danger of professional historians searching for theoretical constructs which do not really work when applied on the ground? Alan Fox?s doubts about the regional model he is seeking to test make this a book which is, in the end, less than convincing. We know more about the study area he has chosen to target, but whether frontiers or watersheds were of greater or lesser importance than good old county boundaries remains unproven.

Other reviews:
[2]

Source URL: http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/879

Links:
[1] http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/4600
[2] http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews