

Laying Foundations: The Agrarian History of England and Wales 1042-1350*

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THE ambitious project to publish a scholarly and authoritative *Agrarian History of England and Wales* from earliest times to the eve of the Second World War launched over thirty years ago comes significantly closer to completion with the publication in close succession of Volumes II and VI, dealing respectively with the periods 1042-1350 and 1750-1850.¹ This leaves only Volumes III (1350-1500) and VII (1850-1914) outstanding, both of which are now in an advanced stage of preparation. That this great endeavour has come so far owes much to the vision of the late Professor H P R Finberg who first conceived it, together with Dr Joan Thirsk, his successor as General Editor, who has been responsible for seeing Volumes I, II, VI and VII, VI, and VIII through the press.² As Professor Hallam, editor of Volume II, acknowledges, Dr Thirsk's 'patient persistence and tact, coupled with distinguished scholarship' (p xxviii) have been major assets in seeing this complex collaborative exercise through the problems which have inevitably beset it and of which, to date, Volume II is the most conspicuous victim.

This volume more than any other has suffered from delays, from the withdrawal of contributors, and from an inability to realize chapters on key topics such as landlordship, marketing and commonfields (the counterpart of enclosure) which occupy a prominent position in subsequent volumes of the series. It also labours under the deficiency of idiosyncratic and self-indulgent editorship, which makes it intractable and inconsistent and causes it to fall short of the high standard set by others in the same series. Part of the problem derives from the sheer passage of time. First planned in the late 1960s, the volume is methodologically and historiographically rooted in the early 1970s.

A substantial proportion had been written by 1974, and although all contributors were subsequently given the opportunity to make final revisions in 1983, the thoroughness with which this was undertaken plainly varied, and in the case of Hallam's chapter on population movements merely resulted in the curious appendage of a 'Postscript' dated 1983. Since then it has taken no less than five years to see the manuscript through the press. The result is a book which in theme and approach is decidedly old-fashioned as well as bibliographically dated with, in one instance, a monograph published in 1966 referred to as a 'recent book' (p 621). In several places, including the editor's preface, more recent work is cited of which the authors have been unable to take cognizance but, tantalizingly, such works fail to appear in the consolidated bibliography, which contains few works published since 1980.³ Yet, in the interim since the volume's effective completion, important new work has been published by J L Langdon on horses; J Holt on mills; R H Britnell on markets; M Mate and this reviewer on productivity and technology; H S A Fox, D McCloskey, and S Fenoaltea on field systems; R M Smith, B Hanawalt, J Bennett and others on demography and rural social structure; R R Davies on Wales; D Keene on the size and importance of London; and, most recently of all, C Dyer on living standards; whilst major works have just appeared from M Bailey on marginal regions and K Biddick on livestock husbandry and production for consumption versus exchange.⁴ Many traditional

¹ As on pp xxvii and 260.

² J L Langdon, *Horses, Oxen and Technological Innovation: The Use of Draught Animals in English Farming from 1066-1500*, Cambridge, 1986; R Holt, *The Mills of Medieval England*, Oxford, 1988; R H Britnell, 'The Proliferation of Markets in England, 1200-1349', *Econ Hist Rev*, 2nd ser, XXXIV, 1981, pp 209-221; M Mate, 'Medieval Agrarian Practices: The Determining Factors', *Ag Hist Rev*, XXXIII, 1985, pp 22-31; B M S Campbell, 'Agricultural Progress in Medieval England: Some Evidence from Eastern Norfolk', *Econ Hist Rev*, 2nd ser, XXXVI, 1983, pp 26-46; H S A Fox, 'The Alleged Transformation from Two-field to Three-field systems in Medieval England', *Econ Hist Rev*, 2nd ser, XXXIX, 1986, pp 526-48; D N McCloskey, 'English Open Fields as Behavior Toward Risk', pp 124-71 in P Uselding (ed), *Research in Economic History*, I, Greenwich, Conn., 1976; S Fenoaltea, 'Transaction Costs, Whig History, and the Common Fields', *Pol & Soc*, 16, 1988, pp 171-240; R M Smith (ed), *Land, Kinship and Life-cycle*, Cambridge, 1984; B A Hanawalt, *The Ties that Bind: Peasant Families in Medieval England*, Oxford, 1986; J M Bennett,

* A review article of H E Hallam, ed, *The Agrarian History of England and Wales, Volume II, 1042-1350*, CUP, 1988. xxxix + 1086, £90.

¹ H P R Finberg, 'An Agrarian History of England', *Ag Hist Rev*, IV, 1956, pp 2-3; G Mingay (ed), *The Agrarian History of England and Wales, VI, 1750-1850*, Cambridge, 1989.

² The publication dates of the completed volumes are as follows: I, 1981; III, 1972; II, 1988; IV, 1967; VI, 1984; VII, 1985; VI, 1989; and VIII, 1978.

assumptions have thereby been challenged and new approaches have been adopted to traditional sources which are transforming the way in which historians view this long and formative period.

Nevertheless, if Volume II ultimately fails to do justice to the complexity and importance of the period 1042-1350, it is not for want of a distinguished band of contributors. The eleven authors represented – H E Hallam (who besides editing the volume is responsible for roughly 40 per cent of the text), Sally Harvey, Peter Brandon, J A Raftis, Christopher Dyer, John Hatcher, Edward Miller, Ian Jack, David Farmer, J G Hurst, and L A S Butler – are all recognized authorities in their respective fields and many have done a splendid job with the remit which they were given and the resources at their disposal. But the period, it must be admitted, is a difficult one, chronologically, geographically, and institutionally uneven in its extant archival resources. For the late eleventh century, there is Domesday Book, one of the greatest and most systematic compendia of agrarian information ever compiled. The twelfth century, by contrast, represents something of a documentary void, with a substantial body of charter material and a series of manorial extents of the estates of major religious houses its most important sources. Then, in the thirteenth century, the range, quantity, and quality of available documentation increases enormously, constituting a body of archival material whose potential has yet to be fully realized. All the contributors to this volume have consequently done much fresh burrowing in the archives and have done so largely without the benefit of the kind of research assistance which was put to such good effect by the contributors to Volume V. For Hallam and Jack in Australia, and Raftis and Farmer in Canada this was no mean feat, given their physical remoteness from the sources; and for their contributions we are indebted to generous grant aid from the Australian Research Grants Committee and Canada Council. Under these circumstances it is to everyone's credit that so much original material has been included in the volume and if for no other reason this will ensure that it becomes an essential work of reference for future generations of historians.

Extraordinarily for a multi-authored work of this scale, there is no introductory chapter to set the scene and prepare the way for the ensuing 1000

pages of often densely written and highly detailed text. Instead, the unsuspecting reader is plunged headlong into what is probably the most intractable chapter in the whole book, Hallam's idiosyncratic essay on England on the eve of the Norman Conquest. Here Hallam indulges his taste for esoteric detail and grand conjecture to the utmost, relishing the frequently fine distinctions between the various classes of free and unfree Anglo-Saxon tenant whilst at the same time proposing a connection between the regional social structures of fourth- and eleventh-century Britain. Thus, 'whereas seigneurial England was the land of villa owners' (p 14) the regions which in 1066 and 1086 had the greatest abundance of free tenants were those which in Romano-British times had been largely given over to peasant agriculture. Later in the same chapter place name elements are used to infer the geography of crop and livestock husbandry in Anglo-Saxon England. This is an imaginative but historically dubious exercise since it is by no means clear whether a name such as Wheatacre indicates that wheat cultivation was typical or atypical of the locality concerned. Hallam, however, is in no doubt as to which inference to draw and thus introduces the first of many inconsistencies within this volume:

The author of Chapter 2 in this volume favours the view that such elements in place-names denote the rarity of the item so named in that particular landscape. I hold to the view that they signify their common occurrence, and in the following pages I analyse the place-name evidence on that assumption (p 23).

And this view is clung to even though it leads to the improbable conclusion that 'barley, with thirty-eight pre-Conquest place-names, was almost twice as important as wheat' whereas 'oats was little known and used before the Norman Conquest' (p 34-7): a situation which, if true, implies a radical change in cropping practices during the interval between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries, by which time demesne accounts reveal almost exactly the opposite state of affairs.⁵

Such an inauspicious start is redeemed in Chapter Two by Sally Harvey's fine essay on Domesday England. With its emphasis upon those who held and worked the land and its insights into just how reliable and comprehensive Domesday is as a source, it is a welcome addition to the growing body of literature on England's most famous public record. The author makes a convincing case for a significant degree of under-enumeration of particular social groups and thus argues for an estimate of Domesday

Women in the Medieval English Countryside: Gender and Household in Brigstock before the Plague, Oxford, 1987; R R Davies, *Conquest, Coexistence, and Change: Wales 1063-1415*, Oxford, 1987; D Keene, *Cheapside before the Great Fire*, 1985; C Dyer, *Standards of Living in the Later Middle Ages: Social Change in England c1200-1520*, Cambridge, 1989; M M Bailey, *A Marginal Economy? East Anglian Breckland in the Later Middle Ages*, Cambridge, 1989; K Biddick, *The Other Economy: Pastoral Husbandry on a Medieval Estate*, Los Angeles, 1989.

⁵ On the evidence of a national sample of demesne accounts drawn from the period 1250-1299 cereal crops were sown in the following per acreage proportions: wheat 34.29%, rye 5.85%, maslin 0.99%, barley 15.00%, oats 40.66%, dredge 2.58%.

population which 'would approach two million, and should not exclude a somewhat higher figure' (p 49), thus favouring those who would place medieval population estimates higher rather than lower. In the space of a single chapter she is obviously unable to do justice to the full range of agrarian information provided by Domesday and, given the regional emphasis adopted elsewhere in the volume, it is disappointing that she does not avail herself more of the opportunity to investigate regional variations in agrarian conditions; for these the interested reader would do well to refer to H C Darby's seven-volume series of Domesday geographies which, by some extraordinary oversight, fail to appear in the bibliography.⁶ Harvey demonstrates how Domesday may be utilized to study the varying relations between man and lord along with the geography of individual estates but it would have been interesting and useful if she had taken her analysis a stage further and examined just how the myriad of estates enumerated by Domesday intermeshed to produce an overall geography of manorialism. In a feudalized society, as E A Kosminsky long ago demonstrated using the fragmentary returns of the 1279 Hundred Rolls, the extent to which manors varied in size and number from place to place had considerable implications for the conduct of agriculture and the evolution of associated agrarian institutions and was a major source of local and regional variation.⁷ As with so much else, Domesday Book affords both the earliest and best opportunity to reconstruct such an institutional geography for the greater part of the country at a single point in time, and although the exercise is far from straightforward it would well repay the effort.

Thereafter the core of the volume comprises four major chapters organized regionally and dealing respectively with 'New Settlement', 'Farming Techniques' (with a sub-section on drainage techniques contributed by Hallam), 'Population Movements in England, 1086-1350', and 'Social Structure'. All but the chapter on population movements, for which Hallam is solely responsible, are collaborative exercises, responsibility for the eight separate sub-regional sections within each being entrusted to historians with, for the most part, an intimate knowledge of the regions concerned and their sources. Thus we have Brandon on south-eastern England (although Hallam contributes the relevant

section on social structure), Raftis on the east midlands, Dyer on the west midlands, Hatcher on south-western England, Miller on northern England, Jack on Wales and the Marches, and Hallam on both eastern and southern England, the latter, presumably, in default of the original contributor. These chapters are the closest counterpart to the descriptions of farming regions which are such a celebrated feature of Volumes IV and V and reflect the avowed aim of the series to explore the 'unique character of localities and local communities' (p xxvi), an objective of particular relevance to 'an economy and society split into many and various sub-economies and sub-societies, all very different from one another but closely knit and interdependent' (flyleaf). Unfortunately, this entirely laudable objective is compromised by the methodology employed to realize it.

For a regional analysis to hold valid at national, local and intermediate scales it is essential that it is conducted systematically and according to a consistent set of criteria so that, ideally, local and regional variations emerge from the data rather than from the framework of analysis imposed upon it.⁸ This is especially the case when, as here, the aggregate picture has to be pieced together from a number of separate regional studies. Some common guidelines certainly appear to have been given, since field systems, inheritance custom, holding size, fertilizing methods, crops, yields, and so forth, are commented upon by all, but otherwise authors have been left to treat their allotted regions in their own particular way. The result is some exemplary individual essays – Brandon on colonization and settlement in the south-east, Dyer on farming techniques in the west midlands, and Raftis on social structure in the east midlands – but much inconsistency and no very coherent or objective overall picture.⁹ This applies especially to the chapter on farming techniques: some authors tabulate certain types of data, others do not; some use percentages when discussing crop combinations, others the absolute acreages; livestock receive inadequate and very unequal attention; and for all the eminently quantifiable information contained in accounts and extents, there is little attempt to measure the similarities or differences between farming systems. Comparison is frustrated at every turn. Nor is there any editorial attempt to draw the separate regional threads together and consider what they all add up to; so that an inevitable impression

⁶ H C Darby, *The Domesday Geography of England*, 7 vols, Cambridge, 1952-77.

⁷ E A Kosminsky, *Studies in the Agrarian History of England in the Thirteenth Century*, Oxford, 1956; B M S Campbell, 'The Complexity of Manorial Structure in Medieval Norfolk: A Case Study', *Norfolk Arch*, XXXIX, 1986, pp 225-61; R A Dodgshon, *The European Past: Social Evolution and Spatial Order*, 1987, pp 269-86.

⁸ M Overton, *Agricultural Regions in Early Modern England: An Example from East Anglia*, University of Newcastle upon Tyne, Department of Geography Seminar Paper 42, 1985.

⁹ In Volume IV of *The Agrarian History* Joan Thirsk constructs a map of 'Farming Regions in England' from the individual regional studies, although the accuracy of this exercise is compromised by the fact that 'authors on either side of a county boundary have not always agreed in their identification of the dominant local farming type' (p xxi).

is conveyed of an agrarian economy fragmented along broad regional lines.¹⁰ This is a pity given the unrivalled richness and intrinsically quantifiable nature of the information contained in manorial accounts which, for the better documented parts of the country, survive in sufficient numbers to be used in much the same way as the probate inventories which are employed to such telling effect in Volumes IV and VI.¹¹ There will always be problems coping with the sparsely-documented counties of the north and the south-west – although Miller and Hatcher respectively do a valiant job with the sources at their disposal – but for the more densely populated and economically differentiated counties towards the south and east medievalists can certainly do better and it is likely that future research will do much to refine and qualify the picture presented here.¹²

Reconstructing regional farming systems and their associated agrarian attributes is one thing; interpreting them is another. Environmental, institutional, and economic factors all played a part in determining which crops and livestock were produced in what quantities, but how did they operate and which was most important? It is often assumed that at this early date environmental (climate, terrain, soils etc) and institutional (field systems, manorial structure, etc) factors were paramount but several recent studies have suggested that by the second half of the thirteenth century the market was already exercising a considerable influence upon the type and intensity of production.¹³ Yet marketing, its scale, organization, and impact, is the great neglected theme of this volume.¹⁴ Several authors clearly sense its importance. Harvey, for instance, observes that as early as 1086 'some considerable trade in oxen is implicit in the variation from manor to manor and region to region of the relationship between non-ploughing and ploughing animals' (p 123). Farmer, too, in a fine essay on 'Prices and Wages', which is a model

of cautious but perceptive scholarship, is impressed at a later date by the scale on which agricultural products were traded: 'one cannot doubt that a well-organized and sophisticated system of grain marketing was operating by the beginning of the thirteenth century' (p 742) and by the close of that century the distances over which goods were transported were considerable 'making into one marketing area all parts of Britain accessible to cheap water transport' (p 743). By the latter date a wide area was supplying London with grain (p 780) and a long-distance cattle trade had probably been established between Wales and the north on one hand and southern and eastern England on the other (p 747).¹⁵ Such developments, coupled with evidence of an acceleration in the circulation of money (p 725), denote significant changes in the structure of the economy and are consonant with a moderate rate of economic growth.¹⁶ How adequate that growth was, given the contemporaneous increase in population, is, however, a moot point and one upon which contributors to this volume are clearly divided.

It was the late Professor Postan's great thesis that by the late thirteenth century the population had basically outgrown the means available for its subsistence; and it is his ghost which haunts this volume and which Hallam for one is at pains to try and exorcise.¹⁷ Towards this end he attempts to reconstruct regional and national trends in population over the period 1086-1350 by comparing tenant numbers as enumerated in Domesday with those subsequently listed in 353 separate manorial extents (the data are summarized in Tables 5, 3-5, 6 occupying pages 537-93). This is a brave exercise but one beset with pitfalls.¹⁸ As Hatcher points out, 'sub-tenants and landless are usually neglected, some tenants share the same name or possess more than one holding, new settlements tend to escape analysis, and manors were frequently divided or amalgamated

¹⁰ For an alternative analysis of farming types see B M S Campbell and J P Power, 'Mapping the Agricultural geography of Medieval England', *Jnl Hist Geog*, 15, 1989, pp 24-39.

¹¹ For examples of regional analyses which use probate inventories to measure differences in enterprises between farms see: Overton, *op cit*; P Glennie, 'Continuity and Change in Hertfordshire Agriculture 1550-1700: I – Patterns of Agricultural Production', *Ag Hist Rev*, XXXVI, 1988, pp 55-75.

¹² For Norfolk alone there are at least 125 demesnes with extant pre-1350 grange accounts: B M S Campbell, 'Towards an Agricultural Geography of Medieval England', *Ag Hist Rev*, XXXVI, 1988, pp 87-98.

¹³ K Bidick, 'English Medieval Peasants and Market Involvement', *Jnl Econ Hist*, XLV, 1985, pp 823-31; Campbell and Power, *op cit*, pp 37-8.

¹⁴ This is acknowledged by Hallam in his 'Preface', p xxvii. To help remedy this deficiency a chapter by D L Farmer on the marketing of agricultural produce 1200-1500 is promised for Volume III of *The Agrarian History*. See also, D L Farmer, 'Two Wiltshire Manors and their Markets', *Ag Hist Rev*, XXXVII, 1989, pp 1-11.

¹⁵ The food supply of medieval London is currently the subject of a research project funded by the Leverhulme Trust and based at the Centre for Metropolitan History, University of London. Preliminary results for 89 demesnes in the ten immediately adjacent counties indicate that in the decade 1300-09 on average 37.8% of total wheat receipts, 30.6% of rye, 28.8% of barley, 19.0% of oats, and 35.8% of peas were sold.

¹⁶ G Persson and P Skott, *Growth and Stagnation in the European Medieval Economy*, London School of Economics and Political Science, STICERD Economics Discussion Paper, 1987; G Persson, *Pre-industrial Economic Growth: Social Organization and Technological Progress in Europe*, Oxford, 1988.

¹⁷ M M Postan, 'Medieval Agrarian Society in its Prime: England', pp 548-632 in *idem* (ed), *The Cambridge Economic History of Europe*, I, Cambridge, 1966; H E Hallam, 'The Postan Thesis', *Historical Studies*, XV, 1972, pp 203-22.

¹⁸ The method was first expounded in H E Hallam, *Rural England 1066-1348*, London, 1981, and drew almost instant criticism: for example H S A Fox, 'Review of *Rural England*' in *Jnl Hist Geog*, 9, 1983, pp 315-17.

with other manors in the centuries from DB to the Black Death' (p 236). Moreover, it yields results which are demographically implausible. Thus, of eastern and south-eastern England and the east midlands Hallam observes 'down to 1250 the annual rate of increase was 1.8; down to 1300 it was 1.7; and down to 1350 1.1' (p 1004). These are astonishingly high rates by pre-industrial English standards – a rate of 1.8 per cent was not again attained until the early nineteenth century and even then was maintained for no more than a single decade – and to have been sustained over such a remarkable length of time would have required exceptionally high levels of fertility. Yet in so far as any attention is paid to the prevailing demographic regime, it is Hallam's paradoxical claim 'that the peasantry were controlling the size of their families by marrying late' (p 537).¹⁹ Nor is he consistent in his interpretation of his own figures. On page 511 – written, on his own admission, in 1974 – we are told that 'in most parts of England expansion was still the rule right down to 1350' whereas on pages 536–37 of the 1983 'Postscript' he states 'in five out of the eight regions stagnation or decline took place in the half-century before the Black Death, but there are insufficient figures for 1325–50 and for the highland zone to be quite sure of this'. Such caution is uncharacteristic and by page 1005 of the conclusion the original verdict that 'as a whole England was probably still increasing its numbers down to the eve of the Black Death' is reiterated.²⁰ Moreover, he is more willing to trust his own dubious statistics than the considered verdict of one of his own most able contributors, claiming a significant rise in the population of the west midlands during the generation immediately prior to the Black Death (p 1005) notwithstanding the substantial evidence of settlement retreat and economic recession painstakingly assembled by Dyer for the same period (pp 232–34).

It is only fair to dwell, in conclusion, on two contrasting strongpoints of the book which have not so far been mentioned. The first is Hallam's short but lively chapter on 'The Life of the People', which shows that, given the right subject, his robust style of exposition can be highly effective. For once, author, subject, and approach are in harmony and in his accounts of the, at times, violent opposition of the men of Darnell and Over to the authority of the Abbot of Vale Royal between 1326 and 1340, and the 1327 rising in Bury St Edmunds which culminated in the abduction of the abbot and his removal to Diest in Brabant where he was held hostage 'in mean conditions, without access to books' (p 851), early fourteenth-century England comes briefly and irresistibly to life. These are colourful events and the 1320s were disturbed times: by contrast, it takes much patience to reconstruct the more mundane aspects of early medieval agrarian life. This is especially true, as Hurst and Butler demonstrate in their useful chapter on 'Rural Buildings in England and Wales', of the dwellings and farm buildings in which the majority of the population in this predominantly agrarian society passed their mostly humdrum lives. Indeed, it comes as something of a surprise to discover that there has been little systematic research into this important topic, with the result that 'any national argument about medieval peasant house types is fraught with difficulties, and it is too early to make any wide generalizations' (p 915). Accordingly, this pioneering chapter takes stock of current knowledge and lays the foundations for future research into the subject. It is in this light that *Volume Two* as a whole is best regarded for here, too, the research has barely been initiated, let alone completed, which will allow a reasonably definitive agrarian history to be written of the period 1042–1350. As Joan Thirsk observes at the outset, 'historians' perspectives on the period between 1042 and 1350 have changed as we have watched the course of economic and social development in the last thirty years' (p xxvi). The publication of this volume does not mark the end of the process.

¹⁹ For the most up-to-date and reliable discussion of medieval demographic trends see R M Smith, 'Human Resources', pp 188–212 in G Astill and A Grant (eds), *The Countryside of Medieval England*, Oxford, 1988.

²⁰ For well-documented evidence of a contrary trend see L R Poos, 'The Rural Population of Essex in the Later Middle Ages', *Econ Hist Rev*, 2nd ser, XXXVIII, 1985, pp 515–30; see also R M Smith 'Demographic Development in Rural England 1300–1348', in B M S Campbell (ed), *Before the Black Death: Studies in the Crisis of the Early Fourteenth Century*, Manchester, forthcoming.