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Rural History of Medieval European Societies: Trends and Perspectives (review)

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Reviews

Alfonso, Isabel, ed., *Rural History of Medieval European Societies: Trends and Perspectives* (The Medieval Countryside 1), Turnhout, Brepols, 2007; hardback; pp. viii, 310; R.R.P. €60.00; ISBN 9782503520698.

Even if a dedicated scholar were to speed read for 168 hours a week, 52 weeks of the year, it would still be impossible to master the research done Europe-wide in a subject as fundamental as rural history. Moreover, as Piotr Górecki notes in his discussion of Poland, '[a]n accurate representation of current thought requires more – tracing the long resonance of those major subjects that have long constituted that scholarship, right into its current authoritative state' (p. 255). And, as several other contributors point out, the individual proponents of key theories and ideas have been able to direct understanding and research towards their own positions, not only by their writing, but also by their control of appointments and journals.

Gathering together several distinguished scholars from a number of European countries to analyse and present the significant developments in rural history of the last twenty years – or as it turns out, the last 60 or more – is a valuable way of allowing others to fit their own understanding into a wider framework. Those brought together in this volume consider how historical studies of rural life have changed in their particular country. They also show how national ideologies in those countries have shaped the direction of research and how certain topics are selected as important at the expense of others.

Some topics are still largely neglected, a state of affairs often blamed on a lack of material with which scholars might work. Importantly, José Angel García de Cortázar and Pascual Martínez Sopena have identified three 'most resounding silences' (p. 122) of Spanish medieval rural history: economic structure; technical equipment; and organization of work. Spain is not alone in having such silences. With the exception of Spain and England, there is little on the history of the environment and the effect cultivation had on the land, although landscape studies are fashionable in Italy.

Fortunately, archaeological work has provided new sources of information on material culture in the rural communities of most of the countries surveyed here as, to a lesser extent, has palaeo-environmental evidence. Such evidence has provided a means of accessing the countryside, vital for places where written documentation is late and limited. By uncovering artefacts that were

used by peasants and rural communities, archaeological work has shifted interest towards technology and farming practices, as well as agricultural innovation and a reconstruction of the countryside.

One difficulty that emerges from this collection of essays is how present national boundaries affect historical perspectives. Despite differences in medieval boundaries, local laws and structures that were specific to particular areas, and changing rights and responsibilities, those of the presently central area are often assumed to be the norm. The chapter on Britain, for instance, is wholly focussed on England with a single passing reference to Scotland and none to Wales or Ireland. Benoit Cursente, in considering France, tackles this problem head on, stressing the recent development of work on hitherto neglected provinces of France and the inspiration that a comparative European perspective has produced. In Italy too, as Luigi Provero shows, intense local studies have enabled major reassessments of regional specificity.

A problem with surveys of this sort undertaken by particular scholars is that they may marginalize or omit work by individuals with whom they are not in sympathy. The ‘converging’ account of agreement on fundamentals by what is deemed ‘the majority of researchers’ that is presented, may thus leave out alternative accounts and insights that the ‘other’ may possess. Two historians of English rural society whom I regard as providing stimulating insights – the late Herbert Hallam and Rosamund Faith – are dismissed as eccentric by Dyer and Schofield. Julien Demade, writing on Germany, is very conscious of the difficulty of providing an objective description. He describes as ‘illusory’ the idea that a single value can be placed on any one approach.

The utility of a collection such as this, however, is that it lays bare the holes in the research currently being undertaken, so that with good will from the mentors of up-and-coming scholars, new approaches and (forgive the pun) groundbreaking work can be undertaken. We are still ignorant, for instance, about the changes that may have occurred in the choices of particular species of grain, or livestock, made by generations of farmers. The occasional claim that farming practices were destructive needs to be revisited.

Perhaps, as several contributors hope, more people may turn to collective research enterprises that, in the computer era, may properly and fully be able to exploit difficult source material such as fiscal records. All the

contributors are anxious that future work is not moulded by the political exigencies of the ruling parties in the present day states of Europe. One may look forward to the updating of this survey in another ten years time.

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Andrew, Malcolm and Ronald **Waldron**, eds., *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript: Pearl, Cleanness, Patience, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Fully Revised Fifth Edition with New Introduction and Incorporating Prose Translation on CD-ROM*, Exeter, University of Exeter Press, 2007; paperback; pp. 380; R.R.P. £12.99; ISBN 9780859897914.

Since the mid-nineteenth century, when the *Gawain*-poet's works first appeared in print, readers have delighted in their inspired yet intricately crafted poetry. Evocations of civilisation's elaborate hoaxes and of nature's beauty and power contextualize the poet's subtle explorations of the inner life, ethics, and spirituality. The poems' West Midland dialect and expansive alliterating vocabulary account in part for their survival in only a single undistinguished manuscript, of the late fourteenth century. These same features have exacerbated difficulties faced by the poems' modern editors and translators. The publication of the present complete edition, following its first appearance in 1978, through revised versions in 1987, 1996, 2002 and now again in 2007, is a tribute to its editors' success in engaging with these difficulties. The editors' aim: 'to facilitate and enhance the reader's enjoyment of these splendid poems' has been achieved (p. 26).

Research into background has continued now for nearly two centuries, but the poems' manuscript, British Library MS Cotton Nero A. x, remains the most important external source for deductions about authorship and composition. The non-correspondence of the manuscript's gatherings with the beginnings and ends of the texts indicates that the scribe copied them as a collection. A congruence of themes, including an extended investigation of patience, *trawþe*, *cortaysye*, and *clannesse* as richly meaningful virtues; shared structural features; humour, excitement and high comedy; similarities of clerical and chivalric reading and experience; and above all a unique excellence further support common authorship.

Despite many hours spent discussing *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* with colleagues and students, I found that reading the poems in manuscript