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Land and People in Late Medieval England, by Bruce M.S. Campbell

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BOOK REVIEWS

Land and People in Late Medieval England, by Bruce M.S. Campbell, Farnham, UK, Ashgate, 2009, xxvii +344 pp., US\$134.95 (cloth), ISBN 9780754659471

Coincidentally, a few months before being asked to write this review, I pulled from my shelves some books on medieval England and medieval English society that had been there for some time. They were representative of research before the essays contained within the work under review here were written. I was struck yet again, as I had been when I read them the first time, by a feeling that something was missing; a piece of missing reality regarding the economic status of the rural population.

Bruce Campbell's book in the Variorum Collected Studies Series is a collection of eight essays published between 1984 and 2006. There is also an introduction. The first essay is a 'Portrait of Britain' in 1300. It was originally published in *History Today* in June 2000. It acts as a scene setting piece. It is a portrait that leaves the reader conscious of the essay's role but eager for academic meat. The second essay, 'Population pressure, inheritance and the land market in a fourteenth-century peasant community' does not disappoint – here is a substantial piece of meat. Originally published in an edited work this essay immediately begins to address any perceptions of missing reality in previous research.

Here was dynamic and plenty of it. Here was a market in land. Here was a rural population which competed, one individual with another individual. Defined they might be by the collective terminology of villeinage or free status but they acted within the economic strictures and opportunities of the time as individuals. Here were individuals responding to good harvests and bad harvests, a market in land, where land was an asset to be traded and traded in enterprising ways. Here were individuals who naturally preceded their descendants of half a century and a century later. This essay gives a sense of the rural population who took advantage of opportunities and when confronted by economic threats they had the capacity and established market structures, formal and informal, within which to respond on a day to day basis. Published in 1984 this paper is obliged to nod in the direction of a 'Malthusian and Marxist interpretation of events' (p. 128) but it is moving on.

In a different way, but in an equally powerful way, the fourth essay 'the complexity of manorial structure in medieval Norfolk' again provides a perspective on the medieval manorial and village system. Using an individual case study approach the essay brings reality or life to economic and social relationships and in particular the complexity of relationships that existed in medieval rural England. Published originally in *Norfolk Archaeology* in 1986, the essay shows how the manorial structure of the period was complex and ultimately fluid as individuals competed for land, economic power and ultimately by implication status within a system of manors, sub-manors and interrelationships. Again this essay illustrates just how dynamic the environment was and the conditions that predate the well rehearsed

arguments surrounding economic and social change in the second half of the fourteenth century.

In the fifth essay 'a unique estate and a unique source' Campbell considers the Winchester pipe rolls, places them in perspective and warns against seeing them as representative of the complexity of rural life illustrated by the two essays noted above. This is a useful balance to the microcosm of rural existence brought into better focus by the detailed consideration of markets in land and the individual case study approach. In this, the reader is again confronted with the variety of economic and social arrangements across England considered in the third essay 'The agrarian problem in the early fourteenth century'.

The sixth and seventh essays return to the task of providing a bigger picture and in that task bringing together an understanding of the earlier research in its broader context. One essay considers the 'land and people' the other the 'land'. Both address their respective tasks admirably. In the final essay, perspective is also provided within a specific frame: the issue of 'North-South dichotomies' between 1066 and 1550. This is a particularly valuable concluding essay. Here for the first time in these essays, politics and warfare move centre stage; medieval England, its people and the land are given the opportunity to be seen in the context of this wider agenda.

Finally to the introduction, it describes the essays well and brings them together. In the introduction, within a historiographical frame, Campbell realistically observes: 'the revisionist thrust of these essays is unlikely to go unchallenged' (p. xviii). He notes 'older views about the coercive nature of feudal lordship, oppressiveness of serfdom, and innately antagonistic relationship between lords and tenants' (p. xviii) have already been reiterated and will no doubt continue to be so. Indeed, and good, who could object to balance and counter argument to strengthen understanding? However, what the essays clearly illustrate is that the theories and overarching interpretations that owe more to contemporary concerns than historical reality deserve to be pushed aside by painstaking detailed historical research.

The essays contained in this volume are worth reading because they are informative, well written and based on a clear awareness of the sources and the value of the sources. Most especially they are worth reading because they move an understanding of this period on to a level where reality not predisposition to theoretical constructs permeates their content and their message.

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Why America Lost the War on Poverty – And How to Win It, by Frank Stricker, Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 2007, xiii + 345 pp., US\$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-5804-2

As unemployment figures approach double digits and poverty rates top 13%, Americans would do well to consider why the richest nation in the world has yet to ensure all its residents a decent living. In *Why America Lost the War on Poverty – And How to Win It*, Frank Stricker, professor of history at California State