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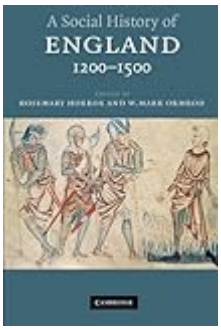

Rosemary Horrox, W Mark Ormrod, eds. *A Social History of England, 1200-1500.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. v + 514 pp. $95.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-78345-3; $41.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-78954-7.

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Published on H-Albion (July, 2007)

Rosemary Horrox and Mark Ormrod have assembled a useful collection of nineteen essays that assess the current state of research on late medieval English social history. Five long essays by leading scholars in the field on "Deference," "Town Life," "The Land," "Religious Belief," and "Identities," and a lengthy introduction on "Social Structure and Economic Change in Late Medieval England" form the core of the book. They are supplemented by thirteen shorter essays on a range of new and traditional topics, such as "Work and Leisure," "Moving Around," "Identities," "Renunciation," and "The Enterprise of War." Although most of the authors recognize that the years 1200 to 1500 are somewhat arbitrary, they nonetheless form a coherent time period that encompass the question of the impact of the Black Death and subsequent visitations of the plague over the course of the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. As S. H. Rigby's introductory essay makes clear, scholars have long debated the significance and dynamics of the dramatic population decline. Previous debates argued over whether demography or class conflict was the engine of social change. This collection on the whole tends to focus on the economic and physical consequences of the plague. Rising wages and falling prices influenced everything from war to gender roles. While these articles by in large do not present new material, as an exploration of the current state of the field they tend to emphasize the material conditions of late medieval society.

There is a nice progression to these nineteen articles, which fall into roughly four sections. The first five articles address social organization, including the military, law, and social mobility. The second five essays take up the conditions and contexts of medieval society, particularly urban and rural life, physical mobility, and work. The next four articles deal with more abstract issues of religious beliefs and practices. In the final section, four articles deal with aspects of social identity, which inform social organization, such as life cycle, nationality, and language. Finally, Rosemary Horrox concludes with a brief essay on the nature of historical change in this period. In it, she argues that traditional beliefs about the plague as the "agent of modernity" (p. 474) rest on the assumption that medieval society was so entrenched that it was incapable of change on its own. Only an externally imposed catastrophe could serve as a catalyst for change. For medievalists, then, the challenge is either to identify the changes already inherent in medieval society or those brought on as a consequence of the plague.

Given the large number of topics it is impossible in a review of this length to do justice to each essay. Taken together, however, they provide much food for thought and raise interesting historical debates when considered together. For example Peter Coss's article "Deference"

looks at the tightening of social boundaries, and the problem of violence as a result. Philippa Maddern, in her article on social mobility, further explores the implications of these social changes, arguing that the late Middle Ages have perhaps been inappropriately named an "age of ambition." Social mobility remained difficult to achieve, despite new economic and administrative opportunities. Maddern is careful to point out, however, that wealth alone did not determines status, but that by the late fifteenth century, behavior and lifestyle could determine status as well (p. 115). This is an important insight given Maryanne Kowaleski's article "A Consumer Economy." In it, she argues that the late medieval economy had all the components of a consumer revolution. People at the lower levels of society purchased luxury items at an unprecedented rate and overall people in England enjoyed a rise in their standards of living. Taken together, these three articles, and others as well, highlight the elusive nature of social structure and the problems of identifying social change and what it signified. There is no doubt that medieval people perceived their society to be changing, but how they recognized and understood these changes and how they attempted to forestall them also raises questions for historians about what were the threads of continuity before and after the plague.

As these articles also make clear, social changes include far more than class or economics. Eamon Duffy's article discusses the permutations of an increasingly informed laity. Yet, even in an article on religion, there is an implicit understanding of the ways in which the expanding consumer culture informed religious practice. Similarly at the end of the collection, Paul Strohm explores the social and political negotiations that underlie the switch from Latin and French to English as a language of literature and administration. Whereas earlier English had been a low status language, that was no longer the case by 1500, and the spread of literacy and the affordability of books, whether printed or manuscript, fed religious practice, social opportunities, and the shifting meaning of status.

I think the editors are to be commended for not including a separate article on women. As a social history of England, we should expect women's experiences to be integrated into most articles, and indeed they are. Jeremy Goldberg's article "Life and Death: The Ages of Man" explores the different ways that gender and class influenced the life cycle, arguing that the medieval concept of the "Ages of Man" did not mean the same thing for men and women. Mavis Mate looks at how gender informed work roles and leisure activities. What is perhaps surprising in a collection of such wide-ranging interests is the lack of an article on sexuality and gender, especially given some of the new research on the standards and enforcement of masculine and feminine behavior following the plague. Nonetheless, this is a deep and wide-ranging collection of essays that focuses on the latest research questions to organize itself, yet draws on more than a century of research on late medieval England. There is a suggested readings bibliography in the back of the book and selective footnotes to more specialized work throughout. It will be especially valuable for graduate students preparing for qualifying exams, and new professors setting up courses.