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Jane Whittle. *The Development of Agrarian Capitalism: Land and Labour in Norfolk 1440-1580.* Oxford Historical Monographs. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. xii + 361 pp. $74.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-820842-6.

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The principal demand of the English revolt in 1381 was the abolition of serfdom. Wat Tyler argued, moments before his murder, that "all men should be free and of one condition." The revolt failed and serfdom was never abolished. Nevertheless, it is axiomatic in most histories of later medieval England that serfdom simply faded away in the half-century which followed the revolt, either irrelevant or redundant in the new society which emerged after the demographic collapse of the fourteenth century. Contemporary social comment, both literary and parliamentary, aches for a lost world of social equilibrium. The precise nature of this new society has attracted historians and literary scholars of diverse tastes and approaches. But, amongst social *and* economic historians, as opposed to those mere social historians who can't or won't do sums, the lasting debate has been the place and dynamic of this new society in the transition from feudalism to capitalism. The demographic crisis was more or less universal in medieval Europe, but the consequent history of social and economic development was regionally diverse. For English medievalists this has always held out the tempting blessing of relevance to modern political and economic debates, for lurking offstage is the implicit assumption that there was a distinctive historical development path to the English economy. In such a context the answers to big questions like the origins of agrarian capitalism can indeed be sought in the experience of the English countryside, the whole world seen, as it were, from Miss Marple's St Mary Mead. The view is both possible and necessary, for many of the theoretical models, which have dominated discussion of the transition, remain untested against the evidence of detailed local and regional studies. Jane Whittle's book is a contribution to what is generally known as the "Brenner debate" based upon an intensive study of the Norfolk manor of Hevingham Bishops, containing within it the village of Marsham. She concludes that an economy generated by small peasant landholders, relatively free of state or lordly exactions, helped promote the development of capitalism.

The manor belonged to the bishops of Norwich until 1536, although the church, either as landlord or institution, scarcely appears in the study. The records of neighboring manors, mostly held by country gentry like Lord Morley and the Paston family, are used as a supplement and check. To these are added probate materials, the records of parish administration, petty sessions and taxation from south Erpingham hundred and the whole county of Norfolk. The immediate focus is thus a fifteen-mile stretch either side of the River Bure in north-east Norfolk ten miles or so to the north of Norwich. Source linkage, conclusions from manor court rolls moderated by the material in the 1522 muster rolls or other taxation lists, or by the run of testamentary materials, is an especial virtue. Aside from taxation returns, the records of central government, especially the royal courts, are not used. Nevertheless, the repertoire of sources is, as the author has argued in a recent article in the *Agricultural History Review* (2000), capable of sustaining both a view of a *pays reÃ©l* and a *pays lÃ©gal.* In light of Norfolk's later importance in agrarian history, and this territory's role in worsted weaving, the choice of Hevingham is entirely appropriate, although it is used to explore models of economic change rather than reconstructed as a particular place.

After a theoretical and historiographical first chapter, the main text begins with a review of the importance of

manorial legacies and concludes that forms of land tenure rather than lordly intervention were paramount. Thereafter, lords virtually disappear from the book, which remains focused on the actions of peasantry, mostly customary tenants of free status. Edmund Fryde's unsophisticated and no doubt old-fashioned study of land tenures, *Peasants and landlords in later medieval England, 1380-1525* (1996), does not rate a single citation. A comparison between the two books, one in which serfdom and lordly power remain remarkably resilient, and the other in which the focus shifts to the peasantry themselves, is an educative contrast for the unaligned reader. Engrossment, increasing insecurity of tenure, and rising landlessness are seen as the interconnected strands in potential capitalist development. Later chapters thus consider the patterns of the peasant land market, social differentiation, and the landless communities of servants, laborers, and rural craftsmen.

During the fifteenth century Hevingham had an active land market which displayed a marked shift from customary inheritance to self-planned routes of devolution. The majority of landholders appear to have set themselves up as householders by purchase rather than inheritance, confirming the decline of the family-land bond. Land prices rose markedly in the early sixteenth century. Whittle employs a number of techniques to follow these trends, including "reconstructed inheritance strategies" (p. 125) derived from her databases. Engrossment seems to have occurred, not by the actions of a proto-capitalist peasantry, but by rises in the parcel-size of land exchanges. A frequent criticism of such peasant-society studies as these is that they are bleached of humanity, individual experience being viewed as mere source-mined anecdote. But, there are several cameos here which entice and exemplify, including the inheritance experience of the Mollet family between the 1480s and the 1560s which demonstrates the process of engrossment, the fall of Edmund Bishop, the manor's principal mortgagee in the 1480s, later described as an overcommitted speculator, and the enterprising career of the four-times married and widowed Avice Pye. Some communities prove elusive. Between 20 per cent and 40 per cent of those who appear in the parish register of Marsham do not appear to have held land, but conventional sources on the poor such as taxation returns, when compared against reconstructed life cycles, reveal those listed to have often been young landless men rather than the lumpen poor. By statistical measure there were high levels of relative poverty within a dense population in south Erpingham hundred in the 1520s.

Pursuit of those communities which depended on non-landed incomes relies heavily on materials from a much wider range of Norfolk sources, often inventively deployed, but the author finds no evidence that the nature of the hired workforce had changed greatly between 1350 and 1580. Nor does there seem to have been increased proletarianization. In Marsham at least wage labor seems to have held to traditional patterns as a supplement to a smallholding economy. The attempt to follow the progress of labor legislation from its mid-fourteenth-century origins to sixteenth-century petty sessions records, which are unusually full and informative for Norfolk, is one example of the many ways in which the writer adds value to her study by crossing a traditional historiographical divide.

Hevingham illustrates the impact of customary tenures exposed to a free market in land. The results, engrossment and landlessness, Whittle concludes, were neither the result of population growth nor insecure tenure. Rather, it was the "grasping tenant" (p. 307), active in a historically free market in land, who helped reduce the supply of land available to the poor. It was also the existence of an active peasant land market from the fourteenth century and earlier, rather than lordly intervention, which aided engrossment and social differentiation. The distinctive English path, so far as it is exemplified in this case study, owed much to a light system of taxation, both by the state and by a decaying regime of manorial lordship.

The book's approach and style is heavily theoretical and statistical; data sets derived from court rolls and other sources are ground small, small, small. Since contributors to the debate are also fond of mutal recrimination about each other's theoretical unsophistication or naÃ¯ve use of data, the book is also threaded with lengthy discussions of methodology and historiography. All of this makes for a pretty challenging read. Aware of the dangers of percentage blindness and definition dizziness in her readers, Whittle maintains a commendable hold on both her arguments and the evidence which she elucidates. There are separate thematic introductions, interim summaries, and straightforward conclusions to each section. The unsophisticated reader (and reviewer) is seldom lost and the book in fact provides an excellent guide, not merely to its own theme but to the ways in which real research can be done on the big questions. In smaller doses readers at many levels will find particular sections on the use of wills and taxation records, on the perils of calculating population growth and wage rates, and how to reconstruct inheritance strategies of

considerable utility. Of like interest are some distinctive record types, including a run of some 140 payment and mortgage agreements in court rolls from the 1480s to the 1550s which allow changes in land prices to be followed, and the "unique" enforcement of labour regulations in Norfolk quarter sessions. Much good use is made of a 1566 petty sessions list which records employers and their servants in Marsham (although it actually survives in a rough court book of the manor).

But, there are gaps. Social and economic historians are inordinately fond of lists, running sources, and cadastral records which allow the identification of trends. Engrossment, it is argued, begins to accelerate in the 1440s, but there is a gap in the court rolls between 1461 and 1482, and 1559 and 1580. Exciting though the payment agreements are, they are uninstructive of trends. The writer is thus properly defensive about these and other problems of statistical completeness and quality, although some aspects of the discussion derive equally from the structural instability of all models of economic change. Some comparisons with neighboring manors produce variations. These are generally said to be "real differences," as between Scottow and Marsham, or the product of diversity, and sophistication in money dealings. Hevingham is both an appropriate model, but also a particular place amongst other equally particular places with a messy historical record. Whittle seldom leaps across such gaps, although she ventures to suggest that there must have been a link between the enforcement of labor regulations in the early fifteenth century and the petty sessions of the sixteenth. The end of serfdom remains the significant structural change of the later middle ages, the acceleration of parliamentary enclosure that of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The development of agrarian capitalism, it is argued, may have predated the first and reached its maturity after the second, but its roots and course belong to the history of peasant farming rather than lordship or demographics.

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