

Economy and Society in Medieval England

In British historiography, economic and social history were first thrown together when both were young and backward offshoots of the study of institutions. Economic history, by exploring records in which no one else was interested and making some use of the elements of economic theory, rapidly outgrew that status. But social history lags and its future is uncertain. It has no special records to call its own, for its materials, though rich, are embedded in all classes of documentation. It has no generally recognized set of questions to call its own, for although historians have always drawn on political science for questions relating to the state and to constitutions, and are respectful of economics, they have been distrustful of sociology because this has not yet done much with long-run problems of change. Is social history then to become another specialty, working out its questions as it goes along? This course would not rule out the need of defining better its relation to other specialties. Is social history to remain a mere footnote to politics and law, literature and art, science and technology, describing the ways in which these impinge on social custom? If these points are numerous and puzzling, can it fulfil the promise of the school of Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre, becoming the nucleus of a new kind of historical synthesis? Or has it only some peculiar affiliation with economic history?

These questions can be answered only through new work and discussion of it. They give point to commentary on some recent English work on the medieval period. In this period the affiliation between the social and the economic aspects of institutional history has been a particularly strong tradition and, despite G. C. Homans' resolute attempt to set medieval English social history on its own feet, the greater interest over the last few decades in administrative history has tended to keep its status ambiguous. The discussion that follows is of the degrees of success of genuine efforts respectively to make the social more than a footnote to general history, to make it an equal partner with economic history, to give it depth in the history of a minority group, and to show the uses of one of its special tools, the science of genealogy.

The publication of E. F. Jacob's *The Fifteenth Century*¹ brings to completion the first great scholarly effort to write general English history in one period after another. The enterprise has not radically departed from the model set by the earlier Methuen series on the political history of England, but its authors have tried much harder than their predecessors to write a history of English society in other aspects besides the political. In this aim Sir Frank Stenton's volume on Anglo-Saxon England, having to deal with three conquests and three processes of thorough-going change – Christianization, the growth of ecclesiastical organization, and Norman feudalization – has been the most successful of the medieval contributions, its story of political leadership having at every step to be related to one or other of these processes. Owing to the elusiveness of information on the Anglo-Saxon economy, the economic context of social relations remained vague. But this was admitted: the book was a guide to future research as well as a masterly summary of existing knowledge.

E. F. Jacob's book is of necessity weighted by the emphases of the research of the past few decades. For this reason it is strong on government finance, foreign policy, the magnates' organization of regional influence, and on the role of the commons in Parliament. At a number of points fresh detail is added, as for example on the exploitation of Normandy in the 1420's, on the financial breakdown of the Lancastrian government, and on changes in the method of handling revenue from Crown lands under Edward IV. So far as is possible the book is lightened by dramatic arrangement of its parts. After the Congress of Arras, the story of war finance and foreign policy is broken by three chapters on the Church, the machinery of government, the households of the magnates, and the economy. There is relief, too, in turning from the field of Bosworth to survey the arts of peace. The last few pages are given not to Henry Tudor nor to any attempt at summary, but to Margery Kempe and the cult of women saints as exemplifying the vitality of popular religion.

Endorsing Kingsford's judgment of the fifteenth century as an age of ferment, Jacob tries to dispel the atmosphere of gloom that recent studies of the long years of agricultural depression, which lasted into the 1470's, have wrapped around it. He would like to view these years as engendering a new kind of recovery by forcing people out of ancient ruts. The retreat of the lords to rentiership is seen as the first act, as it were, in a social and economic revolution

1. E. F. Jacob, *The Fifteenth Century (1399-1485)*, *The Oxford History of England* (Oxford, 1961).

that opened the way to innovation through larger-scale tenant operation and some degree of enclosure, the latter in turn helping to displace population that could provide a labor supply for new textile entrepreneurs serving foreign markets. This view allows for great regional variation and is on the whole advanced with the caution that our present dearth of quantitative information demands.

The dictum that "The fifteenth century is not a time of stagnation but of mobility in the population of town and country alike"² is, however, more dramatic than logical, for the two conditions co-existed, and much of the mobility that is illustrated had no bearing on the process of economic revival. Many of the villagers who left home merely settled nearby in other villages of similar type. As for upward social mobility in the towns, if it was possible for trading artisans to move upward into merchant guilds quite rapidly, and for workers to move into artisan guilds, this was in part because of the high death rates that depleted guild ranks. There is no discussion of the population problem beyond the offer of "about 2.1 million" (J. C. Russell's tentative estimate for 1400) as the figure for the first half of the century, and the statement that it began to rise "towards the end of the depressive years." Nor is there any discussion of the extent of the internal market as distinct from production for export. Like the population question, this is of course still a research frontier, but it would have been helpful to refer readers to the debate on it that is printed in the proceedings of the historical congress held in Rome in 1955. Austerely, England's first important industry catering to mass consumption — the brewhouses of Netherlands and German immigrants, which did cheerful business through the age of stagnation — is overlooked. The sole drink referred to is the rich man's imported wine.

There is lacking any explicit reflection on the negative economic consequences of the magnates' activities. To be sure, the reader can reflect on this for himself. The negative contributions of the magnates lay not only in their fostering of local disorder where this was to their political advantage and in their financial exploitation of the feeble Lancastrian state. It lay also in their swelling of the administrative "overhead" of society to no purpose but to serve the private ends of their rentiership. In staffing the administration of their huge estate complexes they drained off ability that might conceivably have helped in the diversification of production that the

2. Jacob, *Fifteenth Century*, p. 370.

age needed. True, Jacob notes that their bailiffs and sergeants were often among those who farmed manorial demesne. But he does not note Raftis' observation, from analysis of Ramsey Abbey accounts of the period, of the heavy indebtedness on the part of the farmer to which these arrangements could lead.³ The small working capital of a succession of men may have been wiped out. Faithful servants of a magnate might of course expect pensions and other handouts. But redistribution of a portion of the great rentier's income in this way promoted a spirit of obsequious parasitism rather than risk-taking enterprise. A predatory and parasitic spirit, as well as yeoman thrift and constructive merchant enterprise, was a large element of the legacy that the fifteenth century passed on to the Tudor world.

In his few pages on the countryside, Jacob leans to the widely favored but still not very well documented judgment that the general trend throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries was towards a more competitive village society in which a land market was leading to increased differentiation. He tries to believe⁴ that competition for land was particularly strong, due to a supposed increase in sheepkeeping, in the early fifteenth century, although on the next page citing samples of the evidence that exists as to a shortage of tenants at this time. It is true that competition persisted, in the sense that more takers were available for better land than for poor, and for land on which improvements in the shape of buildings, garden, and pasture enclosures, and small industrial facilities, had been kept up. It is hard to conceive of a peasant society in which this would not be so. That kind of competition could hardly have been new. As to differentiation among the peasantry, so far as one can tell there had always been a scale, with freeholders who were on the way to becoming petty landlords at the top and cottagers at the bottom. The evidence from the depression years is so far of change only in the sense of a slight and variable upgrading in the amounts of land held all down the scale. It is not necessary to invoke a more competitive man to account for this. One of the circumstances that helps to account for it is the long spell of stagnation in population growth, which caused a high rate of dying out of village families. Some men added to their holdings those of neighbors who had died without heirs. Such holdings could be acquired for no payment but a small entry fine and a

3. J. A. Raftis, *The Estates of Ramsey Abbey* [Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies] (Toronto, 1957), p. 293.

4. Jacob, *Fifteenth Century*, p. 375.

money rent to the lord on which in the worse years the tenant could at least partially default.

The notion that the peasant was becoming a more competitive man has rested on the fact that the new wave of demesne leasing was for competitive rents, rents set by supply and demand instead of by custom. But can it be said with confidence that apart from these particular transactions with the lord, or before they developed, the peasant was familiar with nothing but fixed custom? The answer calls for more comparison with earlier periods than the piecemeal type of English historical synthesis, period by period, to which the Oxford volumes are directed, permits. The piecemeal procedure is a necessary stage in the synthesis of research in political and administrative history. But questions of economic development and of its relation to changes in the character of rural society require, at least for the medieval centuries, a longer-term setting. In casting back as he does into the fourteenth century Jacob concedes this point. It was simply not possible for him to go back far enough.

The pre-fourteenth-century history of the village land market has in fact been rather neglected. Information has accumulated since Maitland first noticed it, in the 1880's, but because interest has tended to concentrate on the manor rather than on the village and hence on the peasants only in their relations with the lord, no one but the late E. A. Kosminsky and G. C. Homans has given it much weight as an institution. Both these writers interpreted its activity in the late thirteenth century as due to growing economic pressures. Homans believed that until then its activity had been traditionally restrained both by the lord's interest in preventing alienation of tenements owing labor service and by peasant reluctance to permit permanent alienation of any part of a tenement that was subject to the custom of partible inheritance.

M. M. Postan, in an essay forming part of the introduction to a Peterborough Abbey cartulary of tenant sales by charter between the 1250's and the 1330's, sales largely by unfree men, has now brought new evidence and new questions to bear on the problem.⁵ The new evidence is drawn from inquests recorded in the Peterborough cartulary and in court rolls from other estates, which trace the descent of property from buyers of unfree status through several generations. Coming from manorial sources, this evidence substantially reinforces the conclusion to which a number of cases

5. C. N. L. Brooke and M. M. Postan (eds.), *Cartae Nativorum* [Publications of the Northampton Record Society, XX] (Oxford, 1960).

in the earliest royal court records and in Bracton point, namely, that a village land market was well institutionalized by 1200. Postan's main contribution is to draw an analytical distinction between two opposite characteristics that this market could assume. On the one hand, it could bring about a redistribution of land, tending to level out abnormal inequalities and to preserve a given social structure. Especially in the form of inter-peasant leasing it may be regarded as one of the prime economic devices by which peasant society was able to maintain itself with so little change over long periods of time. In this form it may have been very ancient, perhaps even "as old as the village itself." On the other hand, a land market could have the opposite effect of increasing inequalities. It is this second and later form, associated with growing commercialization, that has been the subject of Marxist interpretation.

The essay argues that the levelling type of market prevailed in English villages through much of the twelfth and all of the thirteenth century. The argument starts from the practical problems of a peasant family: how to meet needs that vary throughout its life cycle. The variation in needs dictates some resort to the labor market but could lead also, in the absence of any effective legal ban, to a land market. Could the modest chronic needs of the peasantry bypass manorial controls? Historians have not really considered this as a serious possibility. But they have not been much interested in peasant needs. By and large they have adopted the point of view of a lord resting on his legal right to forbid the alienation of unfree land. Although our earliest manor court rolls reveal quite widespread evasion of the rule, it has been assumed that manorial controls were breaking down under abnormal pressures in the period from which these come, the late thirteenth century, and that they continued to break down progressively while still on many manors remaining firm into the fifteenth century. It is true that there were manors where the record notes only the traditional standard units of unfree land, the virgates, half-virgates, and other smaller units, with none of the irregularities in the size of holdings that a market might be expected to produce. On these the lord supposedly kept to a conservative policy partly in order to facilitate the enforcement of labor services, which were assessed on the standard units. There has however long been some doubt about this whole interpretation, for a careful reading of court rolls shows clearly that alienation could occur without affecting the method of listing tenements in manorial surveys or of entering in the accounts the rents and services collected. For example, subtenants of a

tenant, who had become collectively responsible for performing his services or paying some of his rent, may be mentioned only on the occasion of a default. Notice of that tenant as holding a standard unit in a stable tenemental system is a mere fiction of the accounting record. If it be admitted that there may be a good deal of this kind of formal fiction in the records, then it is time to consider Postan's proposal that the picture of a stable tenemental system is a delusion, and that a village land market may have existed not only where the record reveals it but where the record does not reveal it. This proposal does not imply that manorial records are valueless; it means only that historians need to ask new questions of them. It opens up the general question whether peasants may not have been reacting to similar economic circumstances in much the same way all over medieval England, regardless of their status at law and regardless of the degree of manorialization in a region.

From this standpoint one would think of the emergence of a village land market as determined by the character and extent of local land supply. Access to suitable land that could be brought under cultivation easily would have delayed its emergence. Availability of demesne land for leasing could also have acted as a damper. This supply reached a peak in the twelfth century and again in the fifteenth. Inter-peasant dealing was preferably in land that, whether free or customary, was held from the lord wholly or mainly for money rent. Postan estimates that the amount even of customary land that was so held in the thirteenth century would have been "more than sufficient to sustain an active land market." The criterion of "activity" in a market of the levelling type is not high. Two or three transactions a year, between peasants who found their holdings too large to manage and others who had too little land, might be the normal expectation in a small village.

The role of manorial controls over unfree land and tenantry was to legalize, in the late thirteenth century, what had formerly been an illegal market. Far from beginning to weaken in the late thirteenth century they began to stiffen then after a century of laxity. The motive for stiffening, Postan demonstrates, had nothing to do with labor services but was fiscal. In a time of rising land values the illegal practice of alienating land outside the manor court, which deprived the lord of the opportunity to levy fines or raise rents at the time of transfer, could no longer be tolerated. The policy adopted was therefore to bring transactions into court for the payment of license fees or fines and increasingly after 1300 to go through the procedure of surrender of the land to the lord for

regrant to the buyer. There is a clear analogy with the banning of subinfeudation by *Quia Emptores* in favor of substitution, the new tenant replacing the old, a policy which was also adopted in defence of the lord's fiscal rights. But the peasant still sought to evade the rules, and the fifteenth-century record, especially in manorial surveys, may still conceal subtenants. The historian has still to be a detective in search of supplementary information.

The analytical distinction between the levelling type of market and the type that would cumulatively increase inequality is an ingenious device for exploring at the same time the economy and the social arrangements of peasant England, but it will not so serve if it is oversimplified. To look for a sharp transition from one to the other would be an error of this kind. Postan would agree with Reginald Lennard that more study is needed of the free peasantry. As the latter has emphasized, these appear already in the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries as less trammelled in any drive for accumulation than the unfree; Lennard discovered more differentiation and more use of money in the rural economy of that age than he had expected.⁶ Again, other agencies besides the land market had diverse effects on differentiation, notably inheritance customs and the dying out of families. In the late fifteenth century the levelling type of market probably persisted not only in areas isolated from trade but fighting a rearguard action, as it were, in the smallholding sectors of regions in which graziers or industrial villagers were thriving commercially.

In a concise, graceful and well-documented study of the English Jewry, H. G. Richardson has wrestled with another twelfth- and thirteenth-century market, the money market.⁷ As with the village land market, the problem is to recognize the different forms of demand and supply that were in play. Perfect knowledge of these factors would cover all forms of credit operation, both lending for productive purposes and consumption loans. Research is still so far from this ideal that Richardson is content to draw only a few distinctions, mainly between international financiers and those whose business, like that of the English Jews of this period, lay in England alone, and between the different forms of security that the latter accepted. He sufficiently indicates that deeper study of their roles in the economy should lead to more objective assessment of their social position, but rather than raise questions to which he has no

6. Reginald Lennard, *Rural England: 1086-1135* (Oxford, 1959), pp. v, 179-80.

7. H. G. Richardson, *The English Jewry under Angevin Kings* (London, 1960).

answer he goes on to apply his skill in administrative history to trace the evolution of the procedures by which the Crown exercised protection and control. He makes clear that this protection was adequate to prevent the hostile ecclesiastical legislation of the thirteenth century from taking effect. But the cost of protection rose.

Whether they can be answered or not, some of the questions that Richardson does not raise are worth raising. For example, were Jews helping to mobilize hoarded English wealth as some Italians were in the thirteenth century by inducing people to make deposits with them for loan? Another question is whether the common assumption is valid that the smaller Jewish loans were all of the pawnbroking variety and not for productive purposes. Although a customer or merchant might provide him with raw materials, a medieval craftsman had always to find his own tools and equipment. Especially in the early thirteenth century, when little new towns were still developing, many small men must have been in need of credit for productive purposes. A minority of the debtors of Abraham of Berkhamstead and of Oxford Jews were craftsmen and retailers whose borrowing may well have been of this nature. The chief stimulus to native activities that Richardson notes resulted from the legal incapacity of Jews to acquire a freehold interest in land, and it could have affected only people who were already wealthy landowners or merchants. The practice grew up in the thirteenth century of transferring debts of Jewish creditors that were secured on land to a third party, either an individual Christian or a religious house. This third party obtained a permanent title to the land from the debtor and paid off the Jew, at a discount. Other types of Jewish bonds were also discounted by high officials.

Social relations between these wealthy investors and the Jews with whom they dealt were friendly. But otherwise Richardson has little positive evidence as to the nature of Jewish-Christian social encounters. It is apparent that most of the Jews were craftsmen or victuallers of humble status, and he wonders whether guilds, which would necessarily have excluded them from religious fraternities, made it difficult for these men to earn a living. This is quite unlikely, since artisan guilds were still rare, and craftsmanship and trading skill were welcome in towns. The reasoning by which Richardson decides that, although by the late twelfth century the taking of interest on loans was so general among Christians as not to carry opprobrium, the profession of moneylending was "never fully respectable" is perhaps stated a little too broadly. The conclusion would hold true of pawnbroking. However, it is unclear

whether the greater members of the English Jewry engaged in this more than peripherally.

A supplementary note ascribes the Expulsion to a personal decision by Edward I, turning at the end on a sudden urgent need for cash to be realized through confiscation of Jewish houses and outstanding bonds. Edward was caught in a crossfire of opinion from his mother and anti-Semitic clerics and from his wife and high officials who had profited from business association with Jews and were friendly to them. The attempt to reconstruct the stages by which decision was reached, whether or not it is wholly correct, is an interesting piece of investigation. If the Jews had still been doing enough business to remain useful to the King as a continuing source of revenue his action would have been extraordinarily stupid. The interpretation is less convincing than Elman's,⁸ which turns on the fact that the tallages on Jews had in effect been taxation of the small landowners who were their most substantial debtors. A tallage necessarily brought severe pressure on such debtors, often direct pressure from the Crown, to pay up their debts quickly. It was the mounting resentment of this group that supported anti-Semitic legislation. Ultimately the Jews became dispensable both as private moneylenders and as a source of revenue to the Crown because of the activities of the Italians. Provided that one recognizes the differences between Italian and Jewish operations and does not simply regard the Italians as replacing the Jews, Richardson does not specifically reject this interpretation. He is perhaps merely tired of insular hero-worship of kings. His criticism of Edward is further backed by comparison with Gascony, where the effectiveness of Expulsion orders was hampered by friendliness.

A very different kind of book comes from Sir Anthony Wagner, Richmond Herald. His *English Genealogy*⁹ was written to reveal some of the broader implications of genealogy to the growing number of people who are curious about their ancestry and who wonder, with a character of George Gissing's, what a funeral would be like if all of the deceased's blood relatives were to attend. Much of the book is given to the techniques by which blood relationship can be established through records, and to the history of genealogical literature. Much also is given to findings that might be of popular interest, for example, to the downward diffusion of aristo-

8. P. Elman, "The Economic Causes of the Expulsion of the Jews in 1290," *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, VII (1937), 145-54.

9. Anthony Richard Wagner, *English Genealogy*. Corrected edition (Oxford, 1960).

cratic and royal blood. But the discussion goes beyond this level. It draws on Sorokin's valuable work on *Social Mobility* to show how history will reveal patterns in downward as well as upward mobility, even though the latter are for individual families better documented. Families that endure in the male line for any length of time have often seesawed up and down in the social scale, as Jane Austen's did. The frequency of this seesaw pattern, Sir Anthony points out, is due to the fact that waves of population growth may tend to increase the proportionate numbers of the poor.

The backbone of the book is the chapter on the Social Framework, against which mobility has to be measured. In the absence of any general history of social status in England Wagner has had to construct one for himself from the scattering of books and articles that are most relevant. Although more could have been gleaned from some articles in *Speculum* and in *The Economic History Review*, he has read practically everything that deals directly with questions of status. Any criticism of this chapter reflects therefore on the current state of social history rather than on the author. Both for reasons of space and because his sources are studies of groups definable by differing criteria, he has chosen to sketch the main changes in the fortunes of each of these groups separately through history instead of attacking the more difficult problem of how the groups discernible in any one period were articulated and how the articulation altered as a whole through time. This might indeed require several books. Inevitably, perhaps because the word "framework" suggests solid carpentry, there is some bias towards the idea of a continuing structure in which the difference between high place and low place had always much the same meaning. In an earlier chapter on mobility Wagner envisages the framework as "a lofty structure with many shallow steps by which the skilful and persistent may climb, while some others slipped down and many more kept the framework solid by standing still." This is an admirable statement of the English concept of a reliably solid tradition, which is not however always the most reliable guide to the past. It may not be usual for English historians to regard German historians as more imaginative, yet a recent article on the question of how the concepts of freedom and of unfreedom and of gradations in these varied from one region to another in early medieval Germany and altered through time is by contrast quite disturbingly imaginative.¹⁰ This problem becomes particularly important in Germany with the

10. Karl Bosl, "Über soziale Mobilität in der mittelalterliche Gesellschaft." *Vierteljahrschrift für Sozial und Wirtschaftsgeschichte*, XLVII (1960), 306-32.

rise of the *ministeriales*, but the approach is applicable also to all aspects of social status in England. Wagner is indeed well aware that the notion of an immovable structure may be deceptive, for he adds to his picture of it the story of a small farmer who did not know that his ancestor living on the same land something over two hundred years earlier had been a gentleman of coat armour. The phasing of the kinds of change that have succeeded each other will not be easy, but a Lewis Carroll picture of the status game through time as a game of croquet in which not only the players and the hoops and the mallets move but also the goalposts might be in order as a fresh start.

Sir Anthony Wagner is too modest about the contributions that genealogy can make to history, but he has many suggestions that would be worth drawing together and expanding into specific research proposals. His broadest suggestion occurs in his discussion of the dragging down of families by rising waves of population growth. The correlation of such waves with war or emigration, or with social, political, or technical revolution "ought to be among the meeting-points of historians and genealogists." At the end he makes highly practical proposals for cooperation between record offices in making the results of local research more widely available.

Along the same lines it might be a further help to reflection on the problems of social history if the essays and documents that local record societies continue to publish were periodically reviewed together. Specialists of course follow them, but there is often some lag before they come to more general notice. *Festschrift* literature notoriously suffers from the same disadvantage, the contents of any one volume being ordinarily so mixed that a reviewer not primarily interested in social history cannot be expected to comment on isolated contributions that may yet be significant. One of the essays recently presented to Bruce Dickins, for example, summarizes a colloquy on life in a late tenth-century rural monastery which gives an engagingly plausible view of a little town of that period as a centre of social life, a town elder having invited the entire monastery to a banquet.¹¹ It refers also to pilgrims buying provisions from the priest of a church where they have stopped to pray. Another of these essays maps the fortresses built in preparation for the campaigns of 917-18 against the Danes.

Among the dedicated groups publishing sources none sets a

11. G. N. Garmonsway, "The Development of the Colloquy," in Peter Clemoes (ed.), *The Anglo-Saxons, Studies in some Aspects of their History and Culture presented to Bruce Dickins* (London, 1959), pp. 248-61.

higher standard of scholarship than the Canterbury and York Society in its editions of medieval episcopal registers. Of prime importance to church historians, they are a most valuable source also for social history in revealing the workings of ecclesiastical patronage. The registers of Roger Martival, Bishop of Salisbury, impeccably edited by Kathleen Edwards so as to show the full procedures followed, cover the years 1315-30.¹² Martival, who had been Chancellor of Oxford University, was an unusually conscientious administrator. His chief problem was the insufficient supply of educated clergy. He dealt with this by requiring underqualified men to report to him for periodic personal examination until they could show adequate progress in study. In the early years of his administration a considerable number of the vicars and rectors could be ordained only as acolytes, being presumably young, but the proportion of those who were priests rose. Among his disciplinary problems were two rectors who after being excommunicated hopefully presented men to be their vicars, one of whom was unfit from lack of learning and the other as being himself under sentence of excommunication. Another problem was the constant use men made of influence in competition for preferment. At least three exchanges were preceded by incidents of persecution or intimidation. To have kinsmen or "powerful friends" in a diocese was helpful. Episcopal registers are obviously an important source for studies of the parish clergy as a social group. Their names often indicate their origins, their movements can be traced, and in many cases careers can be followed to the end, the exact date of death being often a part of the record.

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12. Roger Martival, *Diocesis Sarisbiriensis: Registrum Rogeri Martival, pars prima* and Index, ed. Kathleen Edwards [Canterbury and York Society, LV, LVI] (Oxford, 1959-60).