



BOOK REVIEW

## James D. Fisher. *The Enclosure of Knowledge: Books, Power and Agrarian Capitalism in Britain, 1660–1800*

Cambridge Studies in Early Modern British History. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022. Pp. 330. \$99.99 (cloth).

Eric H. Ash 

Wayne State University  
Email: [ericash@wayne.edu](mailto:ericash@wayne.edu)

Craft and how-to manuals covering myriad practical topics were a large and vital part of the early modern British book trade. In *The Enclosure of Knowledge*, James Fisher offers a compelling and provocative reassessment of a major genre in such books: agricultural manuals. While Fisher considers books from throughout the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, he argues that the manuals published from the Restoration through the eighteenth century played a pivotal role in restructuring agricultural knowledge and in forging a new, capitalist-oriented division of agricultural labor.

The standard historical account of early modern agricultural manuals, which Fisher terms the “enlightenment model,” views these books as neutral means for the top-down dissemination of valuable farming knowledge. This model concentrates primarily on tracking changes in technology and practice, and tacitly assumes that the manuals were intended for the instruction of practicing husbandmen. It tends to gloss over the different social conditions and conflicting economic interests among the manuals’ potential readership, and interprets most farmers’ unwillingness to read and use such texts as merely an obstacle to agricultural improvement. In ignoring social and economic conditions, Fisher argues, the enlightenment model buys into the propaganda of the manuals’ authors.

Fisher offers a direct challenge to the enlightenment model by taking a more sociological approach to understanding the agricultural manuals, their authors, and their intended audience. He argues that the manuals were never intended to teach actual farmers how to farm, since that knowledge could only really be gained through direct hands-on experience, just as it had been for generations. Practical farming skills were fundamentally local, empirical, orally transmitted, and communal, all of which rendered them incompatible with being generalized, theorized, and transmitted via a printed text, so that actual farmers had little need for or interest in manuals claiming to teach skills they had already learned from childhood. The manuals, he argues, were written for a very different purpose and audience: he sees in them an aggressive effort to appropriate farmers’ valuable experience, knowledge, and skill; to reorganize it to make it palatable and comprehensible for an elite audience of educated landowners and professional land stewards; and to place it at their disposal so that they might use it to manage both their estates and their laborers more effectively.

To understand modest husbandmen, field hands, large landowners, and professional estate managers as being equally likely to read and profit from early modern agricultural manuals is to overlook the profound differences in their perspectives and interests, as well as the dramatic transformation of economic and labor relations taking place in the eighteenth-century British countryside. This was the principal era of enclosure, during which smaller independent yeomen farmers were pushed off the land, their farms swallowed

up and consolidated into larger estates, and themselves compelled to seek a diminished living as common field hands paid a daily wage for their work. Eighteenth-century agricultural manuals were written and published in this context, produced by and for a rising class of capitalist landowners and professional estate managers. The manuals coopted farming knowledge and transformed it from a commonly possessed set of customs and skills known as “good husbandry” into a theorized, systematized “science of agriculture.” They took farming knowledge from the minds of many and restricted it to the minds of a few, thus paralleling the practice of land enclosure itself. The rise of a more centralized, capitalist agriculture in Britain necessitated a reorganization of agricultural knowledge so that elite proprietors might have a better command over it, and thus more control over the workers who wielded it. And just as yeomen farmers resisted the enclosure of their lands, they resisted the appropriation of their knowledge by refusing to reveal their customary local practices or replace them with generalized theories.

Fisher grounds his argument in broader trends in early modern historiography, including the history of capitalism, the history of expertise and the professions, and Marxist analyses of proletarianization, the subsumption of labor, and deskilling. He sees the agricultural manuals as facilitating the rise of a new class of experts in the form of both “gentlemen farmers” and professional estate managers. Such men were both the main intended audience for such books and the authors of many of them. They were not experienced farmers, but they came to be perceived as learned “agriculturists.” Once farming practice had been appropriated, theorized, and made into a science, expert agriculturists could dismiss working farmers as impediments to improvement—ignorant, backward, obstinate, and ultimately unworthy of the knowledge they possessed. This process had a gendered component as well. Women were responsible for a sizeable share of agricultural work, particularly in dairying, but once male experts had appropriated their valuable knowledge, they could be effaced and ignored. All of this, Fisher argues, previews patterns of technological change and capitalist labor relations that arose in early industrialization, but taking place a century earlier, in the countryside rather than the mill town, and with books playing an analogous role to the introduction of mechanized manufacturing in deskilling the working class.

This is an important book with a much-needed reinterpretation of early modern didactic texts, their authors, and their intended purpose. Agricultural manuals failed utterly in teaching farmers how to farm, but they succeeded in undermining the control and authority working farmers had over their knowledge and putting them under the control of landowners and professional managers. The argument feels a bit preliminary and is not fully satisfying as presented: I would like to have seen a much deeper consideration of gender; the focus is entirely on printed texts, while manuscript literature is barely touched on; and a detailed case study or two of a real-life conflict between experienced farmers and manual-wielding landowners would have been most illuminating. Fisher acknowledges all of these lacunae, and points to them as fruitful areas for further investigation. As it stands, however, *The Enclosure of Knowledge* should appeal to anyone interested in the history of British agriculture, the history of expertise and the professions, and the history of early modern capitalism.