

Christopher Dyer, *Peasants Making History: Living in an English Region 1200-1540*. Oxford University Press, 2022. 379pp., 36 figs, 19 tables, hardcover £75 [ISBN: 9780198847212].

The regional study is a well-established genre of medieval history in France, including such classic studies as Georges Duby, *La société aux XI^e et XII^e siècles dans la région mâconnaise* and Robert Fossier, *La terre et les hommes en Picardie*; it is perhaps less so in England, with honourable exceptions such as Hilton's *A Medieval Society: The West Midlands at the End of the Thirteenth Century*. There can never have been a study quite like this one however, for Christopher Dyer sets out to take a "peasant-centred" approach and to move away from portrayals of peasants as "weak, miserable, poverty-stricken, ignorant and unchanging" (p. 1). He employs a wide range of evidence, looking not only at documents, but material culture and the evidence of the landscape itself, and he thanks specifically the custodians of the Historic Environment Records for the three counties he examines. Those three counties are Gloucestershire, Warwickshire and Worcestershire, which makes the volume of particular interest to readers of these *Transactions*.

In ten chapters Professor Dyer covers: peasants and landscape; landholding and status; their effect on broader society through migration and social mobility; the role of the family and household; peasant crops; peasant farming of livestock; peasants and towns; peasants and industry; and the outlook of the medieval peasant, his values and attitudes. There is a substantial glossary, a bibliography and index. Throughout there is an emphasis on the agency of peasants, both as individuals and as communities, although the constraints of their social status might imply that little was available to them. Serfs, bondmen, villeins - the unfree were subject to the lord of their manor to whom they paid rent and for whom they performed services, while every aspect of their lives presented a means for the lord to extract money, including marriage fines, fines on taking up a tenancy, fines to send a child to school and death duties. The manor was for its lord a means to exploit the land and those who tended it, but there were opportunities within its structures for those who chose to take them.

Peasant society was by no means homogeneous. Domesday Book records 1240 slaves in Gloucestershire, one of the highest totals in the country, but by the early twelfth century the slaves had become tenants. They were the *bordarii*, the oxmen, who worked the lord's land and supported themselves on small plots (p. 73), the lowest level in a highly graduated society. Above them were tenants who owed fewer labour services and had more land to work; they might enter into partnerships with others, sharing resources, to enhance their life-chances. Peasants with flair could develop their landholdings and manipulate succession practices so they left their families substantial inheritances and they might not be involved in working all their land at all, but sublet it to others (p. 56). Not everyone could have a share in the land of the manor anyway and younger sons and daughters often became servants. The 1381 poll tax returns for Gloucestershire suggest that 12 per cent of the population might have been employed as such (p. 117), and some individuals became country craftsmen, such as smiths and potters. The earliest references to clothworking in the Stroud district date from the late twelfth century and in the Forest of Dean mining and ironworking gave opportunities for tenants and wage earners. Further south the pipe rolls tell us there was mining in the royal chase of Kingswood from at least the 1280s, although this is not explored. Alternatively, the peasant might migrate for better opportunities and there is an example of the mechanics of such migration in the surnames of the inhabitants of Gloucester Abbey's borough, Northleach, which suggest their origins on the abbey's manors (p. 238).

It is however in the consideration of agricultural practice that this book shows most clearly role of peasants in promoting change. While historians have devoted much energy to lordly exploitation of the landscape through deer parks and planned towns – in Gloucestershire for example Tewkesbury

and Berkeley were founded near lordly residences - the role of peasants in developing settlements has often been overlooked. It was the peasants who had the know-how and skills to clear new land, as the increased population of the Forest of Dean between the late eleventh and early fourteenth century demonstrates (fig. 2.10). It was the peasants who knew how to get the most from the resources at their disposal, regulating the fields to coordinate grazing and cultivation (p. 145) and adapting their crops to meet the specialised needs of the market (p. 163). When the great shift from arable to pasture took place, which Professor Dyer illustrates for Gloucestershire by examining final concords for land transfers (p. 182), it was again the peasants who were at the forefront as livestock, particularly sheep, began to be kept for cash rather than subsistence.

It would be a mistake, then, to see medieval peasants as hapless and helpless. They were capable of exploiting opportunity and promoting their interest, not just individually but collectively. Village meetings regulated the community's agriculture; the community assessed and collected the Lay Subsidy tax (p. 310) and even resisted arbitrary exercises of power, like the fifteenth-century inhabitants of Dumbleton who refused to pay the customary "winter gift" over a number of years until their lord gave up and pardoned the arrears. Dyer's study is not perhaps a book for the non-specialist to read cover-to-cover, but it provides a wealth of detail on peasant life in England in the later middle ages arranged by topic. It is not always apparent what holds these three counties together as a region; as Professor Dyer indicates, (p. 7), it is not dominated by a single lord, urbanised, densely populated, intensively farmed, unusually free or particularly industrialised. Perhaps that is why it makes such a useful area to observe peasants and their approach to change.

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