



Review: Crisis and Change in the Later Medieval English Economy

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Crisis and Change in the Later Medieval English Economy

Progress and Problems in Medieval England: Essays in Honour of Edward Miller. Edited by Richard Britnell and John Hatcher. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996. Pp. xv, 317.

This exceptionally distinguished *festschrift* for an exceptionally distinguished economic historian differs from most such collections not only in its uniform excellence but in its organic and conceptual unity. It interrelates those very major themes of medieval English economic history concerning demographic, commercial, monetary, and peasant agrarian history. Since Edward Miller is most famed for his writings on the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, this *festschrift* fittingly commences with a set of three studies on this era by Edmund King, Ian Blanchard, and Richard Britnell. Together they show that from the chaotic civil-war era under Stephen until the mid thirteenth century, northern England, including areas temporarily annexed to Scotland, achieved a greater rate of demographic and economic growth, especially in agricultural production and in the proliferation of borough markets, than did the southern areas, in part from the stimulus of a remarkable silver-mining boom in Cumberland and Northumberland.

Some corroboration of that regional shift may be found in Pamela Nightingales's essay on the medieval growth of London into England's predominant port and largest city, a subsequent fate that was hardly pre-ordained. Using tax data for the nine leading towns, she contends that earlier, between 1177 and 1294, London's economic importance had in fact shrunk considerably, though she does not indicate which northern towns had gained the most over this period. She also contends that London's maximum medieval population, achieved around 1300, was only 60,000 rather than the 100,000 that some have suggested; and that represented just one in 66 of England's inhabitants, or about 1.5 percent of just four million in total, an estimate also much reduced from the currently touted six million. Thereafter, from the 1320s or even earlier, London—and possibly England as a whole—underwent a severe demographic and economic slump, which, along with the impact from the Black Death a full generation later, reduced the city's population to about 45,000. From the 1360s, however, London was able to stage, well in advance of the rest of the country, a demographic and economic recovery whose roots lay in a complex combination of political and economic factors that had even earlier allowed the city to draw more and more trade, finance, and especially foreign merchants from the provincial towns, and the northeastern ports in particular.

Rather more contentious are her conclusions that the ongoing forces of economic contraction, in particular "plague and the shortage of coin," worked with "royal policy and warfare to foster the conditions which made possible London's later extraordinary growth." With far superior commercial and financial facilities, and greater supplies of capital, London fared much better than other ports during the monetary and credit contractions that accompanied recurrent coin shortages, while rising real incomes, especially amongst a "more prosperous peasantry," produced expenditure patterns that promoted the growth of London's widely diversified manufacturing industries and import trades. By about 1520, London's share of assessed national wealth had more than quadrupled from that of the 1290s, to 8.9 percent, while regaining its former population maximum of about 60,000, which, now, however, amounted to one in 40 English inhabitants, or 2.5 percent of the national population of about 2.25 million. If these estimates are valid, then clearly we must drastically revise our views on the demography and economy of both medieval *and* early modern England.

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Undoubtedly the most important commercial factor in London's astounding subsequent growth was not the import but the export trades, above in woollen cloth; and by the 1520s, London was handling fully 75 percent of the nation's cloth exports, which in turn accounted for about 90 percent of aggregate earnings in foreign trade. Thus Wendy Child's companion essay on the later-medieval cloth trade is all the more valuable in casting new light on both the English cloth industry and its exports in the crucial turning point of c.1290 to c.1330, one also critical in the Nightingale essay. For many economic historians this era marked a veritable "urban industrial crisis" that brought about the destruction of the traditional draperies in the eastern lowland towns, from York to London, and thereby "paved the way" for a new, more vibrant, lower-cost rural cloth industry that subsequently, from the 1340s, expanded to gain ultimate mastery in European markets for fine-quality woollens. In the century-long debate over the causes and consequences, the two most renowned contributors have been Eleanora Carus-Wilson and Edward Miller. The former attributed the entire industrial-commercial transformation to labor-saving technological change: the spread of water-driven fulling mills in the rural uplands of western England (and Flemish inability to adopt them); the latter, contending that fulling mills provided no gains of real importance, attributed the rural and overall English "victory" to the far greater advantages of lower-cost labor and industrial freedom in this very era when a sclerotic, guild-ridden, high-cost urban industry was succumbing to a "flood" of Flemish imports that were evidently cheaper (though also urban-produced) and of better quality. Childs specifically challenges Miller's thesis that the new, rural-based industry staged an impressive "recovery" from the mid-fourteenth century by exporting predominantly far cheaper woollens—what he called "slump products." On the contrary, she finds that in the very early fourteenth century, English cloth exports, presumably those from the traditional urban industry, were much healthier than Miller had supposed; and furthermore, as Patrick Chorley and this reviewer have more recently contended, that England's cloth exports in the later thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries had been and remained predominantly in the lower and lowest price ranges. From the 1320s and through the 1350s, English cloth exports evidently did suffer a marked decline, which she also attributes (as does this reviewer) to adverse external market forces rather than to internal, structural problems. When the English cloth trade finally did come to enjoy a boom in the later, post-Plague fourteenth century, her evidence does show a marked shift in exports from lower-priced worsteds and mixed-fabric textiles to much more costly, heavily fulling woollens; but she rightly points out that those exports now also include some very cheap kerseys and other mixed fabrics, though evidently only as a small proportion of total cloth exports.

Some corroboration of this commercial transformation may be found in Anthony Tuck's essay on exports of very coarse and cheap northern and Scottish wools from the border town of Berwick: a catastrophic fall of 92 percent, from the 1330s to 1420s, despite the unique privilege of low export duties, compared to the more modest decline of 54 percent for aggregate English exports, chiefly in very high-quality wools from the more southern ports. Combined with other data on English cloth exports, these statistics provide further evidence for both a relative shift in European cloth manufacturing and trade towards more luxury-oriented woollens during the later Middle Ages and an overall contraction in west European cloth production in this same era, long before Spanish *merino* or other wools became an effective substitute for the English, in both quantity and quality.

In a subsequent essay, John Hatcher much more fully explores this theme of a prolonged economic contraction, culminating in the "great slump of the mid-fifteenth century." Although conceding that evidence for economic growth and prosperity offsetting general decline can be adduced in some regions and eras of the late-medieval European economy, he can find no grounds for optimism in mid-fifteenth-century England, "when an

extraordinary range of powerful depressive forces combined to impose an enduring and wide-ranging slump of precipitous proportions,” with very few winners. Although retaining the emphasis of his earlier publications on the dolorous consequences of demographic decline, lasting until the end of the century, Hatcher joins Nightingale (here and in her many other publications) in giving much greater weight to the forces of monetary contraction, so often inaccurately and unhappily termed the late-medieval bullion famine. Certainly the mid-fifteenth century provides far more credible evidence for *relative* monetary scarcities, with widespread credit contractions and general deflations, than does any other post-Plague period—though diminished monetary flows and credit contractions may well have been the consequence rather than a primary cause of economic depression.

Most economic historians, already familiar with much of his evidence on commercial and urban decline, will find that the most impressive part of Hatcher’s long essay lies in his analysis of the equally severe depression in the agrarian economy—and in the pastoral as well as in the arable sectors, with an especially dramatic fall in wool prices to the 1460s, which did nothing to stimulate exports. In part, some problems in sheep-farming evidently resulted from excessive transfers of land from arable to pastoral uses in the era c.1380 to c.1420; and Hatcher’s conclusions, corroborated by two other authors in this volume, thus contradict Eileen Power’s widely cited denial that any such relative shift to pastoral farming ever took place in the post-Plague era. Even dairying and stockraising, despite an earlier rise in the per capita demands for meat and related animal products, failed to sustain any true prosperity past the 1430s. Few peasant farmers were or remained “prosperous;” most, despite falling rents, were no better off than their landlords, if they depended on cash sales of their products. Perhaps some subsistence farmers, especially *famuli* (see the Farmer essay), and other daily wage laborers were amongst the few winners of the midcentury—but very few indeed then lived by money wages alone.

Two other complementary essays paint an equally gloomy view of the agrarian economy and society in the later fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. David Farmer’s seminal study begins where Michael Postan’s famous monograph on *The Famulus* (published in 1954) had ended, around 1300, and traces the subsequent late-medieval fate of these generally servile agricultural workers, who constituted the great majority of manorial ploughmen. Indeed they continued to provide the bulk of ploughing and other labor services on the manorial demesnes but with many striking changes over the late-medieval era. For the manorial acreage seeded in grain, the number of ploughmen so required, and thus the aggregate number of *famuli* declined continuously throughout the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. Surprisingly, however, the steepest declines were to be found in two quite disparate eras: from 1305 to 1340, well before the Black Death; and from the 1380s to the 1420s, long after the Black Death, while the intervening “plague” period was one of relative prosperity and stability. Even more surprising is the strong evidence, supported by data in the Raftis essay, that labor productivity fell rather than rose on the arable from the 1340s to the 1420s, though it did indeed rise in sheep and other pastoral farming. Thus Farmer provides much more evidence to support Hatcher’s contentions about the shift in land use from arable to pasture in the later fourteenth century.

His final observations concern changes in the personal and social status of the two chief classes of *famuli*: the service *famuli*, or “tenants-in-serjeanty,” who, in return for ploughing services and other demesne-tasks, received small holdings, with rents fully acquitted or greatly reduced; and the stipendiary *famuli*, who received wages in money and kind for their labor services. At the beginning of the fourteenth century, as Postan had found, the service *famuli* continued to be in the preponderant majority; but by the century’s end they had become the distinct minority. That represents the inexorable shift from services to money payments that can be found elsewhere in the manorial economy. Farmer concludes

that most manorial *famuli* evidently preferred a stipendiary status in the depressed conditions of the later fourteenth-century arable economy, when rents were falling and money wages were rising, indeed finally rising in *real* terms from the 1380s. But with such great diversities in sizes of holdings, conditions of tenure, variations in stipends in both cash and kind, "it is impossible to construct any index of the remuneration received by the class as a whole," the vast majority of whom were still considered to be serfs at the end of the fourteenth century. And for many *famuli*, stipendiary payments in grain still remained more important than wages in cash, despite real rises in the latter; but, contrary to popular assumptions, it is not clear that the *relative* prices of grains, compared to those of other agricultural commodities, with often radical fluctuations, were actually falling in this era (1380 to 1420). Then, from the 1420s to the mid-fifteenth century, with increasing labor shortages, the now meagre evidence does suggest that more of the remaining *famuli* were finally somewhat better off, both in personal status and real incomes.

These vexing problems of "collapse of the manorial economy" and the so-called end of serfdom in the later fourteenth and fifteenth centuries receive further and profound attention in Ambrose Raftis's essay, based on the manorial accounts of the Ramsey Abbey estates. Did these two interrelated phenomena take place with and because of the very rapid decline in the direct exploitation of manorial demesnes from the 1380s, and in particular with the shift from arable to pastoral farming that Hatcher and Farmer have described? Raftis's extensive data show a remarkable stability or continuity in the number of work-service or supposedly servile tenures from the 1360s to the 1390s, though with considerable variance in the declining number of servile "works" owed from estate to estate. During the later fourteenth century, and especially towards its end, the peasant land markets became more fluid and much more complex, as customary tenants came to hold a wider variety of properties with widely differing combinations of work-services (*opera*) and money rents attached to them. Despite a greater willingness of many landlords to make rental concessions in reducing or commuting supposedly servile services, Raftis finds that "the more wealthy tenants held most of the lands owing work services, as part of their larger tenurial portfolio;" and that "such tenants would not flee the manor in order to escape service," for "many, indeed, were free." In Raftis's view, the increasing number of servile smallholders who deserted their holdings from the 1390s did so not in order to escape oppressive servile obligations but rather to seek alternative and more remunerative employment, after failing to achieve sustainable incomes on their still very small and badly undercapitalized tenancies. Thus, contrary to Michael Postan's widely cited view that the gap between rich and poorer peasants had narrowed by the later fourteenth or early fifteenth centuries, only the wealthier peasants of this era, those with large, land-extensive and capital-rich holdings, could prosper in the now changed agrarian economy, one that favored capital-intensive pastoral farming, for which, of course, livestock constituted by far the largest share of peasant investments. Thus the gap in peasant manorial status had evidently widened, not narrowed.

Finally, the other major theme of Hatcher's essay, on urban decline during the late-medieval economic contraction, receives extensive treatment in Christopher Dyer's essay on national taxation and town communities. Dyer convincingly demonstrates that the crown's radical changes in administering its taxes from 1334, by imposing collective assessments on towns and villages, to obviate the malfeasance and other pitfalls involved with personal tax levies, forced these communities to assume much greater responsibilities for local self-government, and in ways that made such tax collections more acceptable to the public at large. For various towns across England, Dyer found that the tax burden (chiefly on wealth in "moveables") came to be spread more widely, so that proportionally more persons actually paid taxes, despite the undeniably stark depopulations and crises that

ensued, and despite many efforts to exempt the growing numbers of the indigent. In general, the proportion of the population taxed rose from one-third in 1330 to substantial majorities taxed by 1500. For many of the larger towns that meant some shift in the tax burden from wealthier to less affluent citizens; but in five sets of Midland and East Anglian villages, Dyer found that those deemed “better-off” in fact bore a higher proportion of the collective tax burden in 1500 than had their predecessors of 1300, in part by assisting the poor in paying their taxes.

Space does not permit the same consideration of the remaining four essays in this volume, which, though also admirably written, do not focus so clearly on the predominant themes of this *festschrift*: the demographic, monetary, fiscal, commercial, and especially agrarian aspects of economic contraction and crises in later-medieval England. Those by Edmund Fryde and George Holmes, both dealing with crises and failures of particular Italian merchant firms in London (the Scali in the 1320s, and the Medici in the 1470s), shed some additional light on related commercial-financial problems in later-medieval England, as does Jenny Kermode’s essay on Chester’s rise and fall as an “upstart” port in the early sixteenth century. Finally, Jean Birrell’s charming essay on deer poachers suggests alternative and extracurricular means by which some peasant smallholders, and not just the hungry ones, sought to ameliorate their living standards in later-medieval England.

In sum, therefore, the preponderant majority of the contributors to this sterling *festschrift* have given us stimulating, revelatory, provocative, and often pathbreaking essays on major structural changes in the late-medieval English economy that no medieval economic historian, and not just those working primarily on England, can afford to ignore.

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