mechanics of commercial farming, with information on prices, banking and marketing strategies, as well as efficient farm work. On his death, the *Farming Magazine* in 1813 noted George's 'great attention to minutiae, unremitting industry and superior cultivation'. The letters attest to these qualities, as well as a godly approach to the rewards of honest industry. The reward was significant wealth; George purchased Fowberry Tower for £45000, where his son preferred architectural rather than agricultural improvements.

I lent *Farming Letters* to my father, whose own passion is Guernsey cattle. His verdict was that he enjoyed the excellent Introduction, which provides a concise account of the Culley's place in agricultural improvement, but found the letters too concerned with minutiae to read for pleasure. This minutiae will interest researchers investigating the workings of agriculture and markets at the turn of the nineteenth century. There is less information on regional or family life than might be expected, and the more pressing context was war with France, which affected prices and impinged on labour through the requirement to raise volunteer troops. The only excitement is the rumour of a French invasion in January 1804.

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Barry Reay, *Rural Englands: Labouring Lives in the Nineteenth Century*, Basingstoke and New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. 274 pp. £55 hb. £18.99 pb. 03336691859 and 0333669193.

The plural 'Rural Englands' of Barry Reay's title captures well the diversity and local variety that existed in English rural life, and this very welcome and beautifully written book demonstrates this theme exceptionally well. As Barry Reay writes, 'the extent of localization is so compelling that it forces a rethinking of any conception of a "rural England"...we need to replace it with rural *Englands'* (pp. 205–6). There is no doubt that this emphasis is correct, and long overdue in relation to some of the literature on rural England. The resulting book is an encompassing and most impressive survey on rural English labouring lives in the nineteenth century, one that is persistently interesting to read and which shows a most impressive knowledge of the sources and secondary literature across a diverse array of topics. This is the best overview and interpretation of its subject that exists, a masterful work as it is so wonderfully concise while being exceptionally wide-ranging, and it deserves to be very widely read, and urged as a real necessity for students. It is up-to-date, extensively sourced, and has a great deal of interest on subjects like wages, subsistence, women and children, rural demography, diets, regional costume, industrial villages, the rural-urban continuum, rural depopulation and emigration, leisure, enforced idleness and the richness of recreational culture, the elderly, artistic representations of rural life, reformations affecting popular culture, among many other topics. The presence of women in the book is commendable and a valuable corrective. There is much attention

paid to the north and the west, as a counter-balance to many south-eastern emphases in earlier rural historiography. Regional terminology, for example, to describe categories of worker, are shown in all their variety, as part of the book's intention to stress the regional or local detail that comprised England in this century. The hybridity of the rural and urban, the marginal nature of many communities between town and countryside, is well shown. On everything that he deals with, Barry Reay is professionally well-informed and his touch, judgement and erudition are highly reliable. The range of references is thorough and extremely commendable. Little is missed in recent literature, and I picked up many new references for my own purposes.

Barry Reay is Professor of History at Auckland University, and there is a colonial perspective shining through his text, notably in connection with emigration, that is refreshing and novel. The book is also well informed by oral history, using telling quotations derived from this method at many points. The voices of the rural poor are exceptionally well conveyed throughout, interspersed with the analytical accounts of patterns in their lives. Such empathy is a very strong merit of the book. There are excellent and well-chosen illustrations, including George Clausen's superb 'Head of a Peasant Woman' on the cover, and there is also a fine chapter on artistic representations at the end, with a persuasive invitation to rural historians to be more interdisciplinary. This book amounts to a most impressive and memorable personal synthesis, fresh, original and incisive, by one of rural England's leading historians, a real pleasure to read and to recommend.

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Simon Townley (ed.), *A History of the County of Oxford: XV : Carterton, Minster Lovell, and Environs*, Woodbridge, Boydell and Brewer, for the Institute of Historical Research, 2006. xiv+280 pp. £95. 1 904356 06 0.

In Oxfordshire, as in all counties, the Victoria County History has lately had storms to weather, but with a supportive County Council and successful fund-raising Trust it has weathered them remarkably well. This (its fifteenth volume in all, and third for Bampton hundred) maintains the exceptionally high standards of the Oxford office but is also, inevitably, touched by the rethinking forced upon the whole enterprise by financial pressures. Like volume XIV it uses the new format: whiter paper, larger type, clearer headings, more integrated pictures. The parish histories, by Simon Townley, Veronica Ortenberg and Robert Peberdy, cover Alvescot, Asthall, Black Bourton, Carterton, Clanfield, Kencot, Minster Lovell and Brize Norton, but of these only Kencot follows the new structure adopted in 2002, with distinct sections for 'social history' and 'buildings'.

Most of these parishes, and those treated in volumes XII-XIII, were formed from the huge mother-parish of Bampton minster, in a zone between the Thames and