

Christopher Dyer. *A Country Merchant, 1495–1520: Trading and Farming at the End of the Middle Ages*.

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. xiv + 256 pp. £65. ISBN: 978–0–19–921424–2.

Christopher Dyer's latest book is one of considerable charm, chiefly because of the detail in which it explores a locality and its people across a single generation between 1495 and 1520. There is little to compare it with in this respect. For comprehensiveness it might be likened to Rodney Hilton's account of the West Midlands two hundred years earlier, in *A Medieval Society* (1966), but the greater intimacy of Dyer's book makes a very different impact. The study anatomizes agriculture, trade, and society within about eight miles of Moreton in Marsh in Gloucestershire. This is territory long familiar to Dyer, and the bibliography to this new study attests to the thoroughness with which he has explored available manuscript sources in order to understand the region in all its varied aspects. To this documentation he adds a closely observed knowledge of local topography and archaeology. Above all, the study is enhanced by some rare material relating to a single family, the Heritages, and especially to John Heritage, whose surviving account book records the operations of a small wool producer and wool broker between 1501 and 1519. When John inherited his father's properties and commitments about 1495 he was living in Burton Dassett, chiefly by farming, but he moved with his family to Moreton within a few years, and by 1500 was trading there in wool. The book moves smoothly between the concerns and experiences of his family and the more general affairs of the locality to which it belonged.

In some ways the region around Moreton shared general characteristics of the midland open-field region, with its nucleated villages, common fields, and numerous marketing centers. Although public administration here was "the most fragmented and complicated in England," Dyer doubts whether the upper levels of local administration were of great moment for most inhabitants of the region in comparison with the manorial and parochial institutions that concerned them more nearly. For the purposes of this study the most distinctive feature of the countryside around Moreton was an exceptional level of depopulation in the two hundred years before John Heritage's time. Estimates based on tax returns suggest that population fell by 58 percent between 1327 and 1534–35, but this is likely to understate the decline. There was an exceptionally large number of deserted villages, some of which can be closely observed from their surviving traces. The predictable corollary

to this decline in numbers and decay of settlements was the accumulation of traditional peasant holdings in fewer hands, a severe contraction of arable husbandry, and a corresponding growth of pastoral husbandry, especially of shepherding, which places John Heritage firmly at the heart of his region and its preoccupations. The coherence of Dyer's description and analysis benefits enormously from this highly satisfactory concurrence.

The period from 1495 to 1520 corresponds to the early Tudor period that historians once confidently identified as a period of rapid economic development at the beginning of modern times. Dyer is more skeptical. He speaks of a "new age" with reference to the administrative inertia of the fifteenth century, and points to many features of ongoing change, but he shows that most of the changes in question were under way long before 1495, and has difficulty in pinpointing what was distinctively new between 1495 and 1520. A postscript to chapter 6 is more optimistically headed "Signs of Growth," but the evidence largely relates to longterm rising living standards and the growth of domestic cloth making since 1350. For all the excellence of the material for the Moreton region in this period, information bearing on the aggregate performance of the economy, here as elsewhere, is hard to come by. Where relevant evidence exists, even such secondary indexes as rent movements and entry fines imply only localized and gradual upward movement. Nevertheless, John Heritage's business offers an archetype of a form of small-town mercantile activity, supplying domestic industry, that seems much more a feature of the later fifteenth century than of the period two centuries earlier, when wool destined for export was handled by large, and frequently foreign, merchant enterprises. His trade, therefore, must deserve close examination and considered reflection for any interpretation of the distinctive commercial developments of the late Middle Ages.

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