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Reviews

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Allan G. Bogue, *The Farm on the North Talbot Road*, Lincoln and London, University of Nebraska Press, 2001. Pp. xv + 226. Maps, illus. $19.95 pb. 0 8032 6189 6.

The North Talbot Road, today an arterial road in the suburbs of London, Ontario, was an early axis of settlement in Westminster Township. Bogues had farmed in the township since John Bogue's arrival in Upper Canada in 1837, and on this road since he acquired land along it for two of his sons in the 1850s. The farm of this book's title, however, was the third that George Bogue (John's grandson) and his wife Eleta had owned on the road, and they farmed there for only eleven years. In 1939, they gave up farming, a decision dictated in part by their older son's marriage in 1935 and his decision in 1937 to farm with his father-in-law, which deprived his parents' farm of his energy and labor and of half its dairy herd. Another consideration was Eleta's wish to live in London to realize her ambition for Allan (who turned eighteen in 1939) to continue his education by attending university there. That objective was achieved, as Allan Bogue's distinguished, many-faceted historical career abundantly demonstrates.

His latest book aims 'to convey some of the complexity of farm life, its ups and downs, its moments of triumph or laughter, and its times of despair' (xii), through a meticulous record of what was normal, typical, habitual about work and life on and off the farm, set within the large changes of the period. Because little family documentation has survived, it is his memory, reinforced by a lifetime's knowledge of agricultural history, that provides the book's character and its essential core. But he has also sought information on the farm and its context in every kind of relevant source, land records, herd books, government documents, local histories, and other secondary sources. These are the basis, for example, of two appendices that provide careful estimates of farm outputs and income. The focus of the farm was dairying, but it probably accounted for not much more than half the family income in most years. Eleta's sales of chickens and eggs on the London market brought a by-no-means negligible income, amounting to at least as much as could be earned from sales of surplus heifers and bull calves. Other income-oriented activities usually included production of wheat for sale, and sometimes hay. In the mid-1930s, making more use of hired labor than ever before, the family earned substantial sums from tomatoes (and sometimes potatoes) sold in London.

If the title refers to the farm, the book is equally an account of a farm family, told from a younger son's perspective. The author was thirteen years younger than his brother Len, who worked alongside his father through most of the period covered here, and sixteen years younger than his sister Myrtle, who was his teacher for three years when she was principal of the two-room local school. George Bogue was an entrepreneurial, progressive farmer, who responded to the exceptional revenues from high produce prices during the

First World War by beginning the conversion of his dairy herd from grade to purebred. Active in the United Farmers of Ontario at the local level, he was also secretary of the farmers' cooperative in Lambeth (the nearest village), a director of the area's Holstein-Friesian breeders' association, and a participant in the federal government's Record of Performance test program of dairy herds. His decision to accept an offer for his successful farm and to take on the challenges of upgrading the farm he purchased across the road, though it proved unfortunate in several respects, was very much in character, not just for him but for everyone along the road. As Bogue writes, 'from its earliest beginnings the neighborhood was in a constant state of replacement and renewal'. (172)

This is a richly textured account, suffused with emotion without sentimentality, an altogether satisfying history of a very specific period, place, and family. On the cover, the publishers describe it as 'firsthand history of a rare and moving sort, . . . an elegy for a disappearing way of life'. The former claim is fully justified, but the latter fails to capture the quality of the analysis, which focuses on ways of life that varied even among near neighbors and that were constantly being remade. In describing and seeking to understand his family's life and work, Bogue honors and respects them and their neighbors. But he does not lament the passing of a way of life that, but for his mother's determination, might also have been his.

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The 1712 Land Tax Assessments and the 1710 Poll Book for Rutland. Introduction by Dennis Mills. General Editor: T.H. McK. Clough. Rutland Local History and Record Society, for the Village Studies Group for Rutland, Occasional Publication No. 7, Rutland County Museum, Oakham, 2005. 68 pp. £5.95. 0 907464 34 3.

This excellent and most useful publication contains two items in one, each related to the other: the 1712 Land Tax Assessments for Rutland, and the 1710 Poll Book for Rutland. Closely proximate in time, these transcriptions bear interesting comparison, and it is extremely helpful to have them published together in this form. It is very rare to see such early land tax returns, and this adds to the interest of this volume, covering as it does a period before subsequent shifts in land values made the land tax ever more problematic. The later land tax returns for Rutland between 1780 and 1832 were seemingly destroyed around 1940, with the exception of some for 1798 and very occasional parish survivals, although the source reappears after 1832. This augments the interest of this volume, which has been transcribed from the originals by the Village Studies Group for Rutland, ably co-ordinated by Alan Rogers.

The land tax assessments are very well introduced in a broad but concise way by Dennis Mills, making use of other assessments for Herefordshire and Lincolnshire. He deals with some of the problems associated with the source, as heavily researched over the past half century. Among the topics he covers are the issue of fixed quotas, principles of

allocation, acre-equivalents, who and what was being taxed, the land tax historiography, and the bearing of these sources upon debates such as those concerning the supposed decline of small landowners, and questions of 'open' and 'close' parishes.

Mills' introduction is then followed by a more detailed and Rutland-focused introduction and commentary by Tim Clough, dealing with these Rutland sources in their own right, discussing approaches to them and editorial conventions, and delving into them to show what they illuminate about individual Rutland parishes, society, landownership, and economy during the very early eighteenth century. His discussion is excellent in its professionalism and attention to source detail. It also contains enlightening analysis of the sources, for example dealing with land-tax charges per acre by parish, and uncovering some fascinating differences within Rutland. Parochial charges per acre varied between 4d. and 2s. 9d. The often larger parishes with poorer limestone soils in the north-east of the county had relatively low tax per acre, while the highest-taxed parishes were smaller in acreage, and lay in the west of Rutland. Intermediate taxed parishes were in the south and some western districts. Fully enclosed parishes tended to pay more per acre than those which were as yet largely unenclosed.

Alongside the charges for each individual, shown parish-by-parish, are the poll book transcripts for 1710, for the election of the two knights of the shire of Rutland. The original 1710 poll book, now in the Bodleian Library, was formerly in the collection of the famous antiquarian Richard Gough (1735–1809). Tim Clough analyses this source in association with the land tax, making comparisons between the sources, and among other matters throws much interesting light upon the non-residence of voters. The entire publication is a triumph of combined and well coordinated team work. It is most informative on the social, economic and parochial structure of Rutland, full of potential for comparison with yet other sources. It will prove fascinating reading for many local historians with interests in this county, or more generally for those studying these sources and their possible analytical linkages.

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A.J. Pollard, *Imagining Robin Hood: The Late-Medieval Stories in Historical Context*, Routledge. Abingdon. 2004. 272 pp.; 14 plates. 0 415 22308 3.

Robin Hood, a major figure in the popular culture of late medieval England (and Scotland), survives as an instantly recognised character in the twenty-first century. For the medieval Robin Hood we are dependent on a relatively small group of texts, above all the compilation known as the *Gest* written in the fifteenth century. The modern version makes Robin into a dispossessed aristocrat, who robbed the rich to give to the poor. By contrast the fifteenth-century Robin poached the king's deer, robbed travellers and cut off the heads of his enemies.

Historians have occasionally attempted to identify an original Robin Hood, which would take us back well into the thirteenth century as we know that the legend was already current in the 1260s. A more fruitful line, accepting that the stories are entirely fictional, is to search for an historical context for the growth of the medieval legend in the precise form that we know it, and so the East Midlands in the 1320s or Yorkshire in the 1330s have been proposed. The main question, however, is to explain the cultural and social meaning of the greenwood and its outlaws. Were the legends expressing the frustrated rebellious tendencies of the peasantry, as was argued when modern Robin Hood studies began in the late 1950s? Or were the stories escapist court entertainment, which reasserted the social hierarchy when Robin accepted office under the Crown at the end of his career as an outlaw?

Any explanation of the Robin Hood phenomenon must acknowledge his universal appeal. He was a peasant hero, whose deeds by about 1500 were enacted as part of the early summer festivities in villages throughout the land, but he was also celebrated in towns, and the upper class enjoyed his antics, from Sir John Paston in 1473 to king Henry VIII in an elaborate court game on Shooters Hill in 1515. But although they amused respectable people, Robin and his band were definitely not respectable, and we have testimony from moralistic clergy such as William Langland (in c. 1377) and Hugh Latimer, bishop of Worcester (in 1549) that these worthless stories distracted clergy and congregations from prayer and improving sermons.

Historians have been exploring the meaning of Robin Hood since 1958, but in the 1990s, after a long period of neglect by literary specialists, their interest has burgeoned. Now Tony Pollard, appropriately a historian of the fifteenth century, has written a full length evaluation of 'the matter of greenwood' as he calls it, which reasserts the historical significance of the stories, and demonstrates the interpretative insights that historians can contribute. He frames his arguments skilfully, knows the medieval texts and modern literature very well, and writes accessibly.

He begins with a discussion of the word 'yeoman', which is crucial to placing Robin Hood in his proper place in late medieval society, as Robin himself is described as a yeoman, he expresses his approval of yeomen, and the poems are addressed to a yeoman audience. Pollard's insights seem unpromising at first, because while he convincingly identifies Robin as a yeoman forester, this rather specialised office does not help to explain Robin's universal appeal. He goes on, however, to argue that the rank of yeoman at the top of the hierarchy of non-gentle society could win approval from everyone – the labourers and husbandmen could aspire to be yeomen, while the gentry could appreciate in a paternalistic way the loyal service of the good yeoman. The state benefited from yeomen who were substantial enough to pay taxes, and won battles as archers. The word yeoman was adopted in London to describe the employees of craftsmen (for example, tailors) or young would-be artisans who had completed their apprenticeship, who formed junior branches of major guilds. Everyone, peasants, townsmen and gentry, liked a yeoman.

Pollard goes on to show that this admired yeoman and his band lived in the fantasy world of the greenwood, where the season was fixed perpetually in early summer: the birds sang, the leaves were fresh and green, and the deer fat and easy to shoot. Just to emphasise the mythical nature of the forest, it was located in the north of England, where

a southern audience might suppose that large tracts of trees still existed. The important point about the woods was their separation from the workaday world, where all men were free from restraints. As Pollard points out, Robin's business with sheriffs and abbots occasionally brings him into contact with towns, but he never visits a village, hamlet, field or other reminder of the real countryside. The stories were set in an imagined past in which elements of the fifteenth century can be recognised, but many of their characters, such as powerful sheriffs and an admirable king, belong in a period before living memory.

Robin Hood was a criminal, specialising in poaching and highway robbery. A fifteenth-century audience, who were familiar with criminal gangs, found Robin acceptable because of his humorous style and use of righteous force. Just as the chivalric classes had a licence to be violent, so Robin could beat and kill those who wielded power corruptly. Similarly, in their depiction of Robin's religious attitudes, the ballads contrast his simple piety and devotion to the virgin with the corruption and worldliness of Benedictine monks and bishops, who deserve to be robbed and attacked.

Robin emphasised the concept of fellowship, which meant good company and loyal support, as could be found in all walks of contemporary life, in fraternities in country and town, the followings of great lords, and even in Oxford and Cambridge colleges. Fellowship based on equality was celebrated in the band of outlaws, and in one episode Little John, though a stalwart friend of Robin, refused to act as his servant. A knight could be taken into the company, provided that he would be a 'good fellow', and not expect too much deference. Guy of Gisborne, also a yeoman, showed his lack of good fellowship by betraying the hero, and, after Robin had finished with him, his severed head, the face mutilated, was fixed on the tip of Robin's bow.

The stories of Robin Hood are set therefore in a neverland of greenwood, in a mythic past, where the outlaws live freely in an atmosphere of fellowship, and can break the law if the local officials are unworthy. Robin subscribed to the widespread fifteenth-century belief in the common good, which led him to oppose the corrupt authority of the sheriff of Nottingham. Like other legendary outlaws, Robin was exonerated by the king and joined his service. But unusually Robin, in a passage highlighted by Pollard, became dissatisfied with the royal household, and returned to Barnsdale. This makes Robin's political and social outlook especially complex. He was not simply subversive, as he admired 'our comely king' (believed by Pollard to refer to Edward III) and expected the king to bring good government. But he did not believe that once corruption was removed, the king would rule justly, helped by sturdy yeomen like himself. His desertion of the court suggests that simple honest men could not with comfort participate in politics. The vision seems to be one of an England composed of independent communities, of foresters in the greenwood, of fellowships and fraternities, living under the remote and benevolent rule of a king, in which everyone promoted in common good.

This complexity of the ballads' political and social outlook may seem to us to belong in the same escapist, fantasy world as the rest of the Robin Hood stories, but Pollard reminds us that the political behaviour of fifteenth-century England can seem to us similarly contradictory and even foolhardy. In 1497 a rising in the west country opposed taxes to pay for war on the Scottish border. In villages such as Croscombe in Somerset, men who had played Robin Hood as part of the summer games, who were not hot-headed

youths but substantial heads of families who used the festivities to collect money for church funds, risked everything by joining in the rebellion. Anyone familiar with rural society in this period recognises the ambiguous role of the village elders, who exercised authority in their households and their villages, yet at the same time could offer resistance to their superiors. The gentry likewise upheld the law, stood up for an orderly society, yet on occasion raised private armies and fought their rivals. Subversion and respect for authority seem not to have been opposites, but were intermixed in ways that are difficult for us to disentangle.

This excellent book which provides these insights into the Robin Hood stories, and through them into the mentality of an age, deserves to be read, enjoyed and respected.

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David Stone, *Decision-Making in Medieval Agriculture*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005. xviii+303pp. £55.00. 0 19 924776 5.

In this study David Stone places the everyday decisions of farm managers at the heart of farming success or failure in the Middle Ages. Although largely based upon a series of seventy-eight account rolls from the Bishopric of Ely's manor of Wisbech Barton (1313 to 1429), this is no pedestrian description of local farming operations. Instead, it manipulates data on crops, stock, yields and prices in new and exciting ways to explore the mentality of those who worked the land. Stone's questions are direct and relentless. How did reeves respond to changing economic circumstances? How, when and why did they use yield-raising techniques? Did the quality of their decisions vary? The answers demonstrate the economic rationality that determined farming policy, and successfully challenge any notion that trends in production and profit were determined solely by the impact of external forces such as environmental change or epidemic disease.

Consistently thought provoking, the book's most significant work is contained in the earlier chapters analysing Wisbech, rather than the later chapters exploring the general implications for medieval farm management and agricultural techniques. While Wisbech's accounts contain little out of the ordinary, Stone's methods are innovative, particularly his measurement of estate policy against relative year-to-year price movements. This enables him to link Wisbech's declining fourteenth-century crop yields to managerial curtailment of expensive yield-enhancing techniques in response to falling prices, rather than to soil exhaustion. Similar arguments are put forward about the pastoral sector, where price-driven management decisions influenced fleece-weights, stock fertility and mortality. His conclusion, that farming success was often strongly influenced by managerial choice rather than by ecological or technological constraints, seems unimpeachable. A further stimulating hypothesis that resource management was most effective when and where economic conditions were comparatively unfavourable remains unproven, for many of the techniques described have also been found on manorial estates in the thirteenth-century period of expansion.

The dominant role assigned by Stone to Wisbech's reeves might be questioned, as the nature of surviving documentation makes the role of professionals such as stewards and bailiffs, and of central decision-making, difficult to reconstruct and easy to underestimate. Where cropping strategies fulfilled estate consumption objectives, policy must often have been supra-manorial. Central influence was powerful in the pastoral sector where estate-wide changes in the type, scale and organisation of enterprises were frequent, especially relating to inter-manorial sheep husbandry. Manorial reeves could be regarded as only the bottom tier of a sophisticated and responsive management structure, albeit the one responsible for applying decisions and adjusting farm activities in the light of local conditions.

We learn at different points that Wisbech's production was most commercialised in the 1310s, that later on it switched to greater grain consumption, and that the crisis of the early fourteenth century saw cropping decline from 500 to 290 acres. However, the lack of comprehensive time series tables revealing relative movements in receipts, expenses and 'profits', in the context of production levels, marketing and consumption trends, means that the demesne's overall economic history remains elusive. Also surprising are the author's repeated statements that accepted historical opinion characterises medieval estate management as backward, inflexible, irrational, and at the mercy of static technology and the environment. This is an argument that depends upon selective referencing and pays too little attention to the historiography of the past two or three decades. Nevertheless this book represents the most advanced attempt yet to reconstruct the mental world of medieval farmers from account rolls. The consistently fascinating findings demonstrate a greater responsiveness to the market on the part of medieval estate managers than economic historians have hitherto comprehended.

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Craig Taylor, *Return to Akenfield: Portrait of an English Village in the Twenty-first Century*, London, Granta Books, 2006. 229 pp. £14.99. 1 86207 887 1.

This fine piece of oral history revisits the site of Ronald Blythe's famous work *Akenfield*, which was first published in 1969. Blythe focused his study on two neighbouring villages in east Suffolk, renaming them as one place for his book. His work has been continuously in print ever since. This later study, thirty-seven years on, considers the nature of change over that period, and uses similar methods of oral history to do so. Much of its style and methods of transcription, with personal interviews rendered into coherent flowing prose, follow the precedent of Blythe's *Akenfield*, and indeed some of Blythe's other work. This facilitates comparisons over time, and produces some fascinating life stories from thirty-four interviewees, currently living in this district.

As one would expect, there have been radical changes in agriculture over this period. The labour force has been much reduced. Farm technology has advanced considerably,

and often become computerised. Machines like the modern combine harvester mean that much of the dust, dirt and drudgery of earlier farm work has gone. Farm sizes have continued to grow. Food production and marketing have become even more internationalised. The average age of farmers in the United Kingdom has risen to sixty, or sixty-eight for livestock farmers (p. 158). Commuting and incomers have become prominent features of village life. Where once derelict cottages were commonplace, the housing market has been transformed, to prices often well beyond the reach of those who regard themselves as long-term village inhabitants. The nature of 'community' has changed, if not entirely slipped. Foreign workers have appeared in significant numbers from countries such as Russia, Estonia, Poland or Portugal, to do agricultural work like fruit picking. Women clergy have been introduced, and multiple benefices are normal. The Suffolk accent has been much eroded, although some interviewees in this book still display it, to judge from the transcription of their words. These and many more changes are well manifested here, expressed through the personalities and stories of the people interviewed. Some of them view these changes with regret, despite being aware of the drawbacks, squalor or low wages of many earlier village lives. Ronald Blythe appears at the start and end of the book, showing himself to be supportive and sympathetic to the project, wisely commenting on what has been lost and gained in village life.

This book will fascinate many readers who appreciated *Akenfield*, or the subsequent 1974 film of that name directed by Peter Hall. It should appeal widely. Some academic oral historians who disagreed with the methods of *Akenfield* may regret that the diction here was not printed in a more verbatim manner, even perhaps sometimes as question and answer. Blythe was criticised by some historians, such as Raphael Samuel, for his rather formal rendition and reordering of speech. Yet there are many ways to conduct or present oral history. Precise analysis of diction and discourse is not invited here. For the purposes of this book I had few qualms about how conversation is displayed, even though a more precise and literal rendition would have enabled more revealing comparisons between insider and outsider, man and woman, youngster and old person, foreign or Suffolk-born worker. The author Craig Taylor is a journalist and playwright, and his talents in these fields show themselves, although the journalist is more to the fore. While his book bears witness to many crucial changes affecting Suffolk rural life in recent decades, it lacks the deeper historical and sociological content that *Akenfield* had, such as data from other sources dealing with the structure of employment, housing, agricultural production, and so on. Wider research like that done by Blythe in the 1960s is absent here. Nor is there any effort to relate what is said to other sources. It is not clear if there is any overlap between Blythe's earlier informants and those speaking in this book. Of the thirty-four interviewees, only seven are women, and this gender imbalance is unfortunate. Some of them have more to say about their pasts elsewhere, outside the locality, even in colonial situations, rather than having their conversation focused upon this Suffolk district. Many contemporary debates of a more academic nature, for example about the nature of 'community', are missing. Other ways of measuring 'community' or its absence are not entered into.

In such regards, *Return to Akenfield* seems to miss some academic opportunities, and may not become the classic that *Akenfield* did. Even so, it covers a wide span of

interviewees, very well chosen in terms of age and occupation, almost all of whom have much of interest to say. It deserves to be widely read, and is certainly intensely readable. This is the kind of book that will grow in significance over the years ahead, as this period of rural life itself comes to be seen as history. It is a fine token of an interested and humane author, pursuing a genuine purpose that does not seem opportunistic with regard to the earlier success of *Akenfield*. Its greatest and enduring value is in showing people's subjective reactions to some of the most sweeping and rapid social and economic changes ever to affect the English countryside.

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Mary Wiltshire, Sue Woore, Barry Crisp and Brian Rich, *Duffield Frith: History and Evolution of the Landscape of a Medieval Derbyshire Forest*, Ashbourne, Landmark, 176 pp. £19.99. 1 84306 191 0.

This book will be welcomed in Derbyshire as a substantial contribution to the county's history and will be of wider interest to landscape historians as a richly-detailed topographical study of a large Midland forest. The authors, who met at a Keele University extramural class led by Brian Rich, have a thorough acquaintance with their territory on the ground and have transcribed an impressive range of documents from the medieval and early-modern periods, principally from The National Archives and the Derbyshire Record Office. They have added substantially to the pioneering work of J.C. Cox, Derbyshire's distinguished antiquarian.

Duffield Frith may have had pre-Conquest antecedents, for extensive wood pastures were recorded in Domesday Book, but firm evidence is lacking before the twelfth century, when it belonged to the de Ferrers family of Tutbury Castle, a few miles away, just inside Staffordshire. The castle at Duffield seems to have been destroyed in the 1170s after a failed rebellion by William de Ferrers and no borough or market developed there. Later members of the de Ferrers' family and their successors, the House of Lancaster, preferred to hunt in the frith from lodges, particularly that at Belper, whose name derives from *beau repair*, a pleasant retreat (as does the very different name Bearpark, in County Durham). Belper formed one of the four wards of the frith, and the authors spend much time in tracing the boundaries and other landscape features within each of them. These are mapped effectively by using Burdett's county map of 1767 as a base.

Seven deer parks were enclosed within the frith, ranging from the small park at Belper, which was only one mile in circumference and which had been used to stock rather than to hunt deer, to the seven-mile circuit of Shottle Park. The evidence for these parks starts in the late thirteenth century, but no licences to empark survive. It seems to me that in Derbyshire, Yorkshire and perhaps other northern counties, lords sometimes, but not always, simply used their grants of free warren. This goes against conventional

wisdom, but the charter of free warren that was granted by Edward I to Roger Pilkington in Lancashire in 1291 includes marginal illustrations of both deer and boar as well as rabbits.

Ravensdale park, in the southern part of Duffield Frith, has a particularly interesting feature that Christopher Taylor has identified as the earliest known and best example of a deer course. This curves down a dry valley for almost exactly a mile, allowing spectators wonderful views of the chase from the top of the slopes and possibly the lodge at the finish. It may even have been established by that keen hunter John of Gaunt.

The authors provide a great deal of information about the management and economy of the frith up to its end in 1663. They emphasise the importance of farming and common rights, the management of the woods for an impressive range of products, the exploitation of stone quarries and coal and iron seams and the smelting of lead. Throughout, they are concerned to place the frith in a wider setting and are commendably up-to-date in their reading of the secondary literature.

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