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P. J. Fisher, ed., *The Victoria History of the County of Leicestershire: Buckminster and Sewstern*. University of London Press, 2017. £11.95. 9781909646698 pbk.

This informative account of the history of two villages encompassed within a single parish provides a comprehensive history of their transformation over more than a thousand years. Located in the north-east part of Leicestershire, both villages were initially freeholder villages until the 1790s, when William Manners moved to Buckminster and constructed a mansion, along with cottages for estate workers. His descendants secured all the land, including the residential and commercial properties in the village, which still remain in the same family today. In contrast, properties in Sewstern were more individual in character, with a more pronounced spirit of independence, coupled with employment in a wide range of trades, which persisted until the development of the railways. The author should be warmly congratulated for selecting a parish encompassing two villages with such interesting similarities and differences.

Published as part of the Leicestershire Victoria County History series, it constitutes the second book since 1964, the first being of Castle Donington in 2017. The strength of this book is indicative of the meticulous way the research has been undertaken, with virtually no record unread or line of enquiry neglected in the author's efforts to produce such a detailed account. The book contains an exhaustive collection of pertinent footnotes to support the analysis. These are ably supported by an impressive selection of photographs, together with maps and diagrams to illustrate the analysis.

It would be easy to imply that the account would benefit from a more detailed emphasis on contextualisation, particularly in terms of exploring how the history of this parish fits in with that of other parishes in Leicestershire and other counties. Criticisms of this, however, are disingenuous, given that the overriding aim of the VCH is to promote local research. In this respect it succeeds, as it provides an outstanding case study that showcases the multitude of sources that are possible to consult and significantly enhances our understanding of a very interesting parish.

The book will be of considerable relevance not only to historians of Leicestershire, but also to those interested in local history, as well as the many who are in the process of researching their own village. More importantly it will, I am sure, succeed in inspiring more people to engage with VCH initiatives in their own areas, and one hopes that many other studies of this type will follow.

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A. Antoine, ed., *Agricultural Specialization and Rural Patterns of Development*, Rural History in Europe 12. Brepols, Turnhout, 2016. 304 pp. Pb €62. 9782503532288.

Specialisation has been a major explanation of economic growth, the idea set out clearly by William Petty in the seventeenth century and most famously purveyed by Adam

Smith. In conventional economic analysis, the degree of specialisation is seen as a function of market size, and as a key aspect of a move away from peasant societies enabled by urbanisation and lower transport and transactions costs, especially for perishable goods.

But, in agriculture, it is not so simple. Pressures to specialise may arise from various reasons. An ancient one is variant (and sometimes complementary) local ecologies. Seasonality entails specialisation over time as well as across space and between individuals. The impetus to specialise may come from the dynamics of landholding patterns, commercialisation emerging through morcellisation rather than demand-side growth.

Equally, it may be uncertain where 'specialisation' takes place and should be measured. Is it the marketable output, or the distribution of labour tasks, or the total production of the farm (much of which may be consumed on-farm)? These all matter if a prime consideration is efficiency, the traditional criterion for success. But perhaps the aim is not so much efficiency as diversity? The same questions can be posed in that case. The degree of specialisation will look very different depending on whether holdings are vertically integrated, practising mixed farming, or whether production processes are separated across households. The type and share of output reaching the final consumer might be the same across two societies practising these different forms of organisation, but the apparent degree of specialisation could look very different at the household level. 'Specialisation' at the level of holding may thus not be a product of the consumer product market but the relative merits of producing intermediary goods and raw materials 'in-house' or not. Once these topics are opened up we can see that one of the apparently simplest and best-loved explanations for economic development is difficult to conceptualise and analyse.

This is the problem that Annie Antoine and Laurent Herment pose in a very useful introductory essay to this timely volume, part of the important Brepols series of comparative rural history. They raise the significant differences between specialisation and diversification, arguing that there is no simple and consistent story of specialisation promoting efficiency. They argue that specialisation can be best understood in terms of a *pivot* crop to which activity is orientated, and the *capabilities* developed as a result that are more or less flexible, with various exposures to risk.

The introduction is followed by fourteen further case studies in three sections, the first focusing more on local ecologies, the second on the impact of shocks, and the third on specialisation on 'traditional socio-economic systems'. There is far too much to cover in a short review, from the oyster-beds of Brittany to hop-growing in Sweden, and from late medieval viticulture in central Europe to post-communist Bulgaria. The case studies provide a rich, varied and complex set of examples covering issues of technology, landholding, commerce, retailing, state regulation, and ecology. However, while being well worthy of examining as a set, they unfortunately do not attempt to develop a consistent form of analysis and enquiry, bearing very little relation to each other or to the introductory discussion. In that sense, the collection is an opportunity missed, and it poses more questions than provides answers. But they are good questions to pose.

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