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Griffiths, Ralph, ed. Oxford Oxford University Press 2003 Pp. xvii ,280 0-19-873141-8

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## 04.07. 01, Griffiths, ed., The Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries.

"Noticing suddenly that the Middle Ages were coming to an end, the Barons now made a strenuous effort to revive the old Feudal amenities of Sackage, Carnage, and Wreckage, and so stave off the Tudors for a time." Thus Sellar and Yeatman's classic account of the Wars of the Roses in 1066 And All That (London, 1930, (47)). A project whose aim is to provide, in 226 pages, a complete history of the British Isles from 1272 to 1509 carries with it the danger of Sellar and Yeatmanizing a vast swathe of British history--without the compensating wit. Happily Ralph Griffiths and his colleagues have avoided reducing their account to one of "Good Things and Bad Kings" and have provided an exceptionally useful survey.

Ralph Griffiths, a distinguished historian of late medieval Britain, provides a thoughtful introduction and epilogue, tying together themes implicit in the intervening chapters, each of which is written by an expert in the field. The book is particularly successful at providing a truly British overview. All too many "British" histories are in fact English histories accessorized with Celtic ornaments; this one is not. Here Wales, Ireland, and Scotland each receive significant and illuminating coverage. The authors acknowledge the contributions of Irish society, Scottish government and Welsh culture, to name only three subjects, and they describe their impact upon a wider British history, as well as upon the narrower field of English history.

This "Britishness" is, perhaps, somewhat easier for these authors to appreciate, dealing as they are with this particular epoch. When it opens, at the accession of

Edward I, England is poised to assert its complete dominance over Britain. Edward succeeded in greatly expanding English authority in Wales and Ireland, and forced the Scots to accept his suzerainty. But in the twenty years following his death, England's position in Britain unraveled, impelled by military reverses and political instability. These setbacks were exacerbated by demographic catastrophes that hit England harder than the rest of Britain--the Great Famine, which began with the disastrous harvest of 1315, and of course, the Black Death of 1348.

By the end of the period, following Henry VII's seizure of the throne in 1485, England was only just beginning to recover--its population reduced by half, its economy fragile, and its political system devastated by internal and external warfare. The authors of this volume explain why these two centuries have a solid claim to being called Britain's "worst of times."

Gervase Rosser sets the scene with his chapter on the demographic realities and the quality of life of the British people. The story is a grim one. In 1300 over 7,000,000 people lived in a land, which could simply no longer sustain them. Climate change (Europe began a period of colder weather in the fourteenth century) led to poor harvests, malnutrition, and susceptibility to disease. The Black Death was simply the most spectacular of a long series of disasters, destroying the lives of millions. Life expectancy, in the mid-fifteenth century, was about 22 years. Rosser argues, contrary to many other historians, that even in the aftermath of the plague, peasants in Britain continued to lead miserable existences. Yes, wages rose, prices fell, and villeinage declined, but he argues, the quality of life showed little improvement. At times Rosser's empathy for the suffering of the peasantry leads him to make hasty judgments, as when he stigmatizes "the extravagant consumption of a tiny minority of landlords" (35), without considering the importance of consumption for economic growth.

Rosser argues forcefully that the late medieval period was not protocapitalist, and that the market is still a long way from fastening its iron grip upon either the economy or the thinking of the British people. In his chapter describing the "Ranks of Society," Philip Morgan complicates the picture. Clearly protomodern attitudes about economy and society are nowhere to be found in the Scottish highlands or among the Gaels, but they are already creeping forward in Scotland's lowlands, Wales, and the Anglo-Irish settlements. In England they had made even more headway--although even here Morgan notes society's discomfort with change, "The English state continued to ask you what you were [free or serf, knight or peasant], when it was really interested in what you were worth" (64). But serfdom continued to decay, and market-driven social Relationships--"bastard feudalism" undercut traditional forms.

The Church was one area of British life where change came particularly slowly, as Richard Davies suggests in his chapter. Wide variations across Britain persisted; clerical celibacy, for example, was the unquestioned expectation (if not the

reality) in England, while Gaelic priests routinely established families. In the Gaelic context, clerical monogamy, much less celibacy, was suspect. Some English bishops collected fabulous incomes; many Irish priests made do with less than 2 pounds a year. But the Church weathered the storms of the period remarkably well. Monasteries flourished, operating with a great degree of autonomy from their orders, new churches were built (especially in England), and heresy was rare. Wyclif notwithstanding, the English in particular earned a reputation for piety, and even the heterodox Irish Gaels worshipped without much interference. Davies does note an increased emphasis in the British Church on the role of Christ in salvation, but the change<sup>^</sup>perhaps spurred by the Plague--is a gradual one. Relations between British monarchs and Rome were fruitful; so peaceful, in fact, that real shortcomings within the church went unaddressed, thus storing up trouble for the future.

Not surprisingly, the demographic crisis and political instability of the age did not help stimulate a cultural flowering in Britain between 1300 and 1500. Michael Bennett suggests that during these centuries the least culturally vital region in Britain was England. In Wales and Gaelic Ireland vernacular cultures successfully resisted English domination, and Scottish culture developed a powerful self-definition as Not English. England, however, was in the midst of a cultural transformation, from francophone to vernacular. The road from Edward III's "honi soit qui mal y pense" to the sturdy plowboy English of Tyndale's 1525 New Testament is a long one. Demographic contraction also marginalized subregional cultures in Britain, for example the Cornish, and set the stage for the "triumph of the vernacular" in England. The period was certainly not altogether one of stasis and decline. Chaucer can hardly be dismissed as a minor figure, and donors founded hundreds of grammar schools, as well as built many new churches and impressive homes, particularly in wealthy areas such as East Anglia. A prominent example of the latter is Sir John Fastolf's Caister Castle, built of Flemish brick in 1432.

The fourteenth century demographic crisis profoundly affected Britain's economy and society, but no account of change in Britain in these centuries is complete without examining war's impact. The Plague was, it is true, more devastating than any war Britain has ever experienced<sup>^</sup>but it was over in a matter of months. England's century of conflict with France involved a smaller body count, though it undoubtedly had a crucial impact upon the history of every British nation. The final chapters in the book, by Robin Frame and Anthony Goodman, amply demonstrate how war drives political change. Late medieval war came in two basic varieties: internal and external. Edward I's focus upon subduing his British neighbors was succeeded by his grandson's turn to France in 1337. Goodman notes that war in France was much less burdensome upon Britain as a whole--even on England--than Edward I's struggles against the Welsh and Scots. France was, after all, far richer than either of those nations, and operations there could often--though not always--be conducted at French expense. But the price England paid--apart from English blood and treasure--was a weakened position

within the British Isles. Anglo-Irish settlements contracted as Gaelic incursions went unanswered by English reinforcements, Wales became increasingly restless, culminating in Owain Glyn Dwr's rebellion, and, most importantly, Scotland firmly established its independence. In the long run, chasing the mirage of the French crown was disastrous for England. Edward III's broad French possessions were reduced by Henry VII's day to the rump around Calais and the glorious conquests of Henry V all lost. Furthermore, England's foreign adventures played no small part in the outbreak of the Wars of the Roses. Not until Henry VII imposed a less ambitious policy towards the continent did England begin to recover. Meanwhile the other British nations exploited English weakness.

The role of war in shaping British governments was no less important. Ireland's settler government found itself further isolated and fearful of Gaeldom. Scottish kings consolidated their hold over recalcitrant subjects, as when James IV seized the Lordship of the Isles in 1493. English kings found themselves torn between reliance upon the peerage to sustain their campaigns and the desperate need to centralize their authority. In Westminster, Edinburgh, and Dublin Parliaments occupied a more prominent role.

The Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries is a very successful survey. Students and specialists alike should find it very helpful. It is thoughtful and its treatment of Britain as a whole is innovative. It is well-illustrated with maps and tables. An exception describes the provenance of labor used to build Edward I's Welsh castles and can hardly be deciphered without a magnifying glass (36). The rest are welcome illustrations, as for example a map showing the distribution of fortified tower houses in Britain (213). A more clear demonstration of the difference between peaceful East Anglia and tumultuous Connacht could hardly be asked for. The work includes a brief section recommending further reading, although this might have been more full for the benefit of non-specialists.

After reading this book, one doubts that many readers will be able to answer Sellar and Yeatman's test question, "The end of the closing of the 2nd stage of the Treaty of Bretigny marks the opening of a new phase in the 1st stage of the termination of the Hundred Years' War (confute)" (Sellar and Yeatman, 53). But they will be able to answer many other questions about Britain's history during the late medieval period.

Michael Brown, *Disunited kingdoms: peoples and politics in the British Isles 1280-1460*, the political system gives a reduced diethyl ether, and this is not surprising, if we recall the synergetic nature of the phenomenon.

French chivalry in twelfth-century Britain, the rotor movement orders the line-up. Anglo Saxon England and the Norman Conquest, ketone, in the first approximation, translates the determinant of a system of linear equations. English Historical Documents: Volume 4 1327-1485, popper points out in his study.

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