

forth occurred; there has for years been no serious argument about their existence. The crucial question, to repeat it, concerns their scale and their effect and Macfarlane's study, which turns its back on "statistical tendencies" (p. 86), fails to measure scale and hence to determine effect. Such measurements are indeed at the present time impossible on any but the limited local level. Perhaps we shall yet have from Macfarlane's pen a local study in which he will submit his hypothesis to a meaningful test. When that study comes we may confidently expect that it will not conflate autobiographers with peasants, nor substitute arguments based predominantly on theoretical possibilities for measurements based primarily on actual practices.

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JOAN THIRSK. — *Economic Policy and Projects: The Development of a Consumer Society in Early Modern England*. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1978. Pp. vi, 199.

Dr Thirsk's story is a fascinating one. Spanning the period 1540 to 1700, it concerns the myriad new schemes to manufacture or produce on the farm, goods for consumption at home. In the 1540s England was menaced by the terrible problems of inflation and harvest failure, which combined with population growth to render the plight of most Englishmen truly desperate. It was this convergence of economic and demographic problems which led a group of intellectuals, the Commonwealthmen, to search for ways of relieving the poor, lowering prices, and reducing England's dependence on imports. Their solution, which the government adopted, was "projects". (A projector in sixteenth and seventeenth-century terminology was a cross between an entrepreneur and an innovator.)

Projects began slowly, but were well off the ground by the 1580s, thanks partly to the encouragement of enlightened men like Elizabeth's Treasurer, Lord Burghley. Skilled foreign craftsmen were brought in: Breton canvas makers, Huguenot and Dutch clothworkers, French stocking knitters, Dutch flower growers and so on. The fact that a number of European countries were expelling their Protestants helped. Projectors, both native and foreign, were encouraged by the granting of patents for the sole making of a new product or the sole use of a new technique. The first English patent was granted in 1552 for glass-making. After 1560 patents were handed out thick and fast for everything from the extraction of oil from rapeseeds to the manufacture of playing cards.

Not all projectors enjoyed a monopoly, however. Stocking knitters, for example, were soon found all over the kingdom and, by the 1690s, Thirsk estimates one person in every fourth labouring or poor household was a stocking knitter. Another project, tobacco growing, was introduced in 1619, but outlawed the next year. Nevertheless, the demand for the crop was so insistent that the government was unable to prevent small farmers from raising it, so that by the 1670s it was being grown in twenty-two countries. The ideal poor man's crop, it required little capital and much hard work. Many projects spawned other projects. Starch makers found that they could rear pigs as a sideline with the by-products of their process. The production of rapeseed oil made possible a host of other industries, and also promoted the drainage of the fens, which proved to be ideal rapeseed-growing country. Many projects were exploited by workhouse administrators as sources of employment for the poor — woad growing, stocking making, lace, pin and button making, etc. "The period from 1540-1600 and beyond was a long hard struggle for working men and women... Projects saved their lives" (p. 52).

By the end of the seventeenth century projects had substantially corrected the problems that the Commonwealthmen of the 1540s had addressed. Inflation had been wrestled

to the ground, imports had fallen, grain was being exported, and there was even a man-power shortage, despite the rise in population from two and a quarter to over five and a half million. "Fear that another million mouths could not be fed no longer haunted men like a spectre. They saw rather a million pairs of productive, busy hands" (p. 180).

If the story sounds a trifle optimistic, one can only report that Dr Thirsk has based it on a good deal of fresh research, including hitherto unused documents in the British Library's Cotton and Lansdowne collections. Along the way she also revises many received notions about the period. On puritanism, for example, she and Paul Slack have sharply challenged the conventional idea that the Puritans scorned the poor. The Cope family of Oxfordshire were sufficiently concerned about the problem of poverty that Sir Anthony, the "hot Puritan" of Elizabeth's reign, laid down 100 acres of the labour-intensive crop, woad. By 1616 his son Sir William was leasing and improving 2,000 acres for the same purpose.

Thirsk argues convincingly that a mass consumer society can be dated from the late sixteenth century rather than the Industrial Revolution. The dramatic and (to the authorities) alarming growth in the numbers of pedlars, chapmen and hawkers, is evidence of this fact. Moreover, habits of consumption were not always set by the middle and upper classes, who then transmitted their tastes to the lower classes. The knife and edge-tool industry, for example, started by catering for working people who needed knives for everyday purposes, and reached a discriminating and high-class foreign clientele at a late stage in the seventeenth century.

Thirsk also shows how pasture farming became more labour-intensive and benefited the nation more than grain growing.

It had been axiomatic in the sixteenth century that tillage should hold first place in farming. Cereals were the staff of life and ploughmen formed the backbone of the nation. But seventeenth-century experience taught that pastoral products like cattle hides, sheepskins, wool and timber in the long run created more employment than cereals since they provided raw materials that then passed through the hands of a multitude on their way to becoming ready-made goods (p. 147).

Most of the new industries located in the pastoral rather than the arable regions, because labour was more plentiful in the former than in the latter, where growing grain was almost a year-round occupation. The advantage of the domestic system was its duality. Being farmers as well as manufacturers, people enjoyed security and variety in a way denied to those who have only one occupation. Though despised by Adam Smith, the domestic system in its time vastly increased the prosperity of the country. It did so by providing employment for the whole family. Wage rates may have been static, but *family* income rose unmistakably. Thirsk thus solves the paradox presented by the Phelps Brown and Hopkins figures indicating declining or stationary real wage rates in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, contrasting with the incontrovertible evidence, found in wills, that "labouring people are buying things in 1700 that had no place in their budgets in 1550 — brass cooking pots, iron frying pans, earthenware dishes, knitted stockings, even a lace frill for a cap or apron" (p. 175).

One of the delightful insights that emerges from the book is the astonishing number of things the English picked up from the Dutch — hops, vinegar, starch and fen drainage, to name only some of them.

In several major respects Dr Thirsk has compelled us to rethink the economic and social history of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Her slim volume is indispensable reading for any student of the period.

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