

Peter L. Larson, *Rethinking the Great Transition: Community and Economic Growth in County Durham, 1349-1660*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022. Pp. xvi, 223. cloth \$100.00

The market town of Sedgefield in north-east England has a prominent place in recent political history. The constituency of the former British prime minister, Tony Blair, was one of 48 seats in the so-called 'red wall' to fall to the Conservatives in the 2019 election, and Boris Johnson, then newly appointed as Prime Minister, headed to Sedgefield to proclaim a new dawn in British politics. Social and economic historians of the distant past such as Peter- L. Larson pay less attention to the froth of such political developments, focusing instead on the deep undercurrents which shaped the lives of villagers and townsfolk. Sedgefield was around long before Blair or Johnson set foot in it, and alongside the neighbouring parish of Bishop Middleham lies at the heart of this important analysis of agricultural, commercial, demographic and material change in north-east England between the Black Death and the British Civil Wars, the findings from which Larson places within the context of regional, national and European developments.

The two communities Larson focuses on are located just to the south of the cathedral city of Durham, midway between the River Wear and River Tees. Between the late fourteenth and mid seventeenth centuries the population of both roughly doubled in size, having contracted after the plague outbreaks of the 1340s, with growth resulting from a combination of steady birthrates and streams of financially motivated immigrants. Across the period the average age of first marriage was 26 for men and 24 for women, and once married the average couple produced 2.98 children. Widowhood was commonplace, but widows often remarried, especially before the sixteenth century, and the average yeoman household employed between 2 and 4 female servants, many of whom subsequently married and remained in the local community.

In the fourteenth century villagers were tenants of either the Bishop or Prior of Durham, with tenancies changing hands when a sitting tenant either died or left the area. Copyhold lands were readily available, especially between the 1380s and 1420s, while entry fines and rents remained relatively steady across the period, both being well below market value by the end of the sixteenth century. These practices and developments enabled long-term residents of the communities to build and consolidate their landholdings, often taking out mortgages to do so, but the size of estates did not spiral out of control, with most yeomen operating farms consisting of fewer than 60 acres even by the end of the period. It was these middling sorts of people who were exercised political authority in the community too, serving as halmote jurors and churchwardens, often for a decade or longer.

Economic studies of north-east England have been dominated by analyses of mining and the coal trade, but as Larson demonstrates the south of the region had a distinct, vibrant commercial agrarian economy which supplied Newcastle in the same way that the Home Counties did London, with some yeoman increasingly specialising in farming either livestock or grain, while others using their lands for both. The profits from such ventures were fuelled back into yeoman households, and the increasing diversity of consumer goods recorded in inventories demonstrates that life for many of the middling sorts was improving. Yet not all enjoyed such novelties and luxuries, and Larson highlights how social inequality increased in the century prior to the civil wars, with many working as servants and day labourers for wages well below those of employees in London.

Larson positions his evidence and arguments within various historiographies. At a local level, the point of comparison is with the well-known case study of Whickham produced by David Levine and Keith Wrightson, while at a national level he builds on the findings of Joan Thirsk and Michael Zell on regional agrarian economies, comparing his findings with their work on southern England. Larson also refutes claims about the supposed backwardness of the north-east prior to the alleged take-off occasioned by the development of the coal industry, in the process engaging with the extensive literature on British industrial growth which has been produced by the likes of Robert Allen, Jane Humphries and Tony Wrigley. To a lesser extent Larson also situates his evidence within debates about the Great and Little Divergences, and while this agenda is not pursued as extensively, he is right to note that historians need to focus as much on peripheries as centres when explaining economic developments.

Trained as a historian of late medieval England Larson is more successful in adding to debates around the development of agrarian capitalism, engaging closely with the scholarship of Christopher Dyer, Richard Hoyle and Jane Whittle. He has important arguments to make about the timing and geography of the Consumer Revolution too, demonstrating that consumer growth among the middling sorts began well before the long eighteenth century, as argued by Jan De Vries, Mark Overton, Lorna Weatherill and others, as well as building on the findings of Adrian Green by demonstrating that the north-east had access to certain manufactured goods before supposedly more 'advanced' parts of England.

Larson is attentive to family and class structures, but while women are at the fore at several points in his study, gender is not particularly foregrounded as a category of analysis. It would have been interesting to know more about precisely how widows contributed to the local economy as credit brokers or landowners; how many single women worked as domestic servants; and whether the role of women in the brewing industry declined between 1300 and 1600, as argued by Judith Bennett. It is evident from the arguments presented by Larson that the north-east saw both changes and continuities in economic life across the three centuries prior to 1650, but demonstrating more clearly how these impacted on and were shaped by the activities of women would add further to understandings of this intriguing region.

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