Abstract: This communication will review some of the more notable trends of the last 15 years in writing on the rural history of later medieval England (c.1200-c.1500). It will focus in particular on two apparently contradictory historiographical developments: first, the emphasis on commercial growth and the economic dynamism of the peasantry in this period, and second, an increasing stress on environmental disaster and ‘crisis’ in the countryside during the fourteenth century in particular. The paper will ask whether and how these two strands can be reconciled.
1. Introduction

The following remarks represent an attempt to pick out some of the more notable trends in writings on late medieval English agrarian history that have appeared since the beginning of the twenty-first century. The observations are based mainly on a selection of around 50-60 works published since 2000 (see References). This selection is certainly not intended to be definitive or exhaustive. Numerous important works in this field have appeared which are not discussed here, and which address significant themes and questions not considered below, owing to a lack of time and space. (For another, more comprehensive recent discussion of the historiography in this field, see Routt, 2013.)

It should be stressed that much of the work that is being done on rural or agrarian history, including that discussed below, is inseparable from the economic and social history of the period more broadly defined. There are of course highly active and successful specialist UK journals in the fields of agrarian and rural history, namely Agricultural History Review and Rural History. However, given the importance of the agricultural sector, scholars of the English countryside are obviously used to thinking about the relationships between town and country, and about the relationships between agriculture and broader economic change. Medieval English social and economic history in the wider sense has long been a distinctive and thriving field and this trend continues. This latter characteristic is demonstrated by the appearance over the last five years of substantial festschriften published to mark the retirement of major figures in the field (Goddard et al, 2010; Dodds and Liddy, 2011; Bailey and Rigby, 2012; Kowaleski et al, 2015). These collections contain contributions by a variety of younger scholars, many of which represent significant contributions to rural history.

2. Chronological trends and debates

The studies of the rural history of the period c.1200-c.1500 discussed below comprise both new local or regional case studies (e.g. the relevant chapters in Hare, 2011; Bailey, 2007), and attempts at overview and synthesis. Regardless of the scale of the enquiry, however, most of the research discussed operates either explicitly or implicitly within a larger, well-established chronological framework of economic expansion, crisis and contraction (Hatcher and Bailey, 2001; Britnell, 2009). According to this familiar framework much of the thirteenth century was a period of economic and demographic growth, followed after c. 1290 by a half-century of problems and crises, and then from 1349 (the Black Death) by a century and a half of significant structural change brought about by the dramatic transformation of the land/labour ratio. Much of the work in rural history discussed here seeks to some degree to refine that simple framework, to identify its sub-phases in greater detail (on the latter phase, see for example Britnell and Dodds, 2008; Hare, 2011, Bailey, 2014). Alternatively, or additionally, such work seeks to develop more sophisticated or convincing interpretations of the trends and tendencies observed. Another shared feature of the rural history scholarship discussed below is that most of it remains posited on a basic division of rural England into lords and peasants, or a seigniorial and a non-seigniorial class of producers. One achievement of the work discussed here, however, has been to produce a clearer sense of the variety within each of these larger groupings, and especially within the seigniorial sector (Campbell and Bartley, 2006). Campbell has estimated that c.1300 some 20 percent of rural incomes went to lords (totalling some 20,000 households, of whom about 95 per cent can be categorized as ‘minor lords’), while the other 80% of incomes was received by various kinds of non-seigniorial producers (Campbell, 2005).
Where chronological trends are concerned, two areas of debate have long been of particular importance, and have remained so since 2000. The first concerns the causes of the early fourteenth century ‘crisis’, which in the countryside is recognized as a period of heightened mortality, periodic dearth, growing poverty, and general instability. Traditional Malthusian and Marxist explanations of developments in this period are now been deemed inadequate as fresh evidence has accumulated (Dyer, 2010; Britnell, 2009). In one of the most important contributions to English agrarian history of the last 15 years Campbell has proposed an revisionist explanation in which the period’s distinctive tenurial arrangements gave power to wealthy peasants and encouraged the subletting and subdivision of holdings and the concentration of population in a countryside unable to support its growing numbers (Campbell, 2005). Questions remain about the extent and detailed character of the tendencies identified by Campbell. Nonetheless his is a powerful and complex thesis, the implications of which have still to be grasped and explored by subsequent research. (It is also interesting to note the muted role of environmental change in Campbell’s 2005 article, which marks a contrast with his subsequent works dealing with these decades; see below.)

The other key period of general debate currently engaging agrarian historians is the fifteenth century. The real wage data, as traditionally interpreted, suggests that the fifteenth century was the ‘golden age’ of the English worker, including the rural worker, with real wages in this era of labour scarcity reaching their highest level of any period before the nineteenth century. In contrast, recent estimates of GDP per capita suggest little change across the fifteenth century (Broadberry et al., 2015). Hatcher has argued that the real wage rate evidence is a highly misleading guide to general fifteenth-century living standards, since our evidence about numbers of days worked is shaky, workers had little scope for securing regular employment at high wage rates in a period of low demand, and in any case the number of pure wage-earners in the economy was relatively small (Hatcher, 2011). More recently debate of this question has focused specifically on the relatively scarce but crucial evidence of the wages of agricultural labourers (Dyer, 2015).

3. The environment and the rural economy

Over the last two decades the field of environmental history has grown markedly and become increasingly well defined. It is of course not surprising that as the world contemplates the impact of climate change in twenty-first century, investigators have sought to explore more intensively the environmental challenges of the past, and human responses to them. Moreover, the data available for the long-run study of climate have become much more abundant in recent years. This is not an entirely new concern for medievalists: before 2000 medieval historians and historical geographers had given some consideration to changing weather patterns and the English rural economy. However, what is new is that the varied impact of the environment is currently centre stage in the historiography of the later medieval countryside, and a good deal of emphasis has been placed on the role of nature as a ‘historical protagonist’ or independent factor driving the chronological trends in the economy outlined above. Equally, methods for the measurement of climatic proxy variables have been successfully applied to medieval England (see Pribyl et al, 2011, which uses the date of harvest to chart trends in temperature).

In this literature the fourteenth century has received renewed attention and emerges above all as an era displaying both exceptional climatic disturbance and variability, and exceptional suffering due to the repeated impacts of pathogens affecting humans and animals. Thus the economic difficulties and reverses of the fourteenth century tend to be interpreted in this work as the result of exceptional or unprecedented environmental variations and shocks which brought about harvest failure, epizootics and epidemics. It has also been suggested that
extreme weather and human and animal diseases were interdependent or mutually reinforcing in potentially important ways. The picture of the early and mid-fourteenth century that emerges from this research is ever more gloomy, as new data are presented that demonstrate the severity of the harvest failures that caused the Great Famine of 1315-17, the striking extent of bovid losses in the Great Bovine Pestilence of 1319-20, and the deadly concurrence of weather-induced harvest failure and human disease in 1349-50 (Campbell, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c, 2012; Slavin, 2012, 2014; Stone, 2012; Newfield, 2009). Many of the problems of this era were caused by exceptionally wet and cold weather, but recent research has also stressed that some periods of the first half of the fourteenth century were also problematic due to drought (Stone, 2014).

Overall, these studies have tended to minimize societal or demographic factors traditionally thought in part to have triggered or exacerbated the problems of the period. What they show instead is late medieval rural populations battered by combinations of extreme natural forces that very few pre-industrial economies could have withstood. The idea of this as an era of ‘crisis’, and especially environmental crisis, has been strengthened and deepened, and this is reflected in the titles of recent publications (Brown et al, 2015, chs. 4 and 5; Kitsikopoulos, 2012; Drendel, 2015).

4. Peasant agency and the rural economy

If ‘environment’ has been a keyword in publications on the rural history of medieval England appearing since 2000, arguably the most important keyword in the research of the 1990s that preceded it was ‘market’. The profound commercialisation of the economy in general, and of the countryside in particular, was demonstrated by a series of important publications appearing in the later 1980s and 1990s. The ‘long’ thirteenth century provided the chronological focus of this work on the penetration of commercial exchange into all facets of economic activity. Between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries, the emergence of the market for commodities was followed by the development of markets in land, labour and capital (Campbell, 2009). Not everyone is convinced that an approach which emphasized market incentives and responses can reveal the mechanics of broader economic trends. Epstein, for instance, concluded that ‘The commercialisation model describes growth, but does not explain it.’ (Epstein, 2000: 49). However, by the end of the millennium few doubted that late medieval England deserved to be analysed first and foremost as a market economy.

An important strand in the work from the late twentieth century mentioned above involved historians of agriculture who explored the ways in which market opportunities shaped agrarian techniques and farming systems. Most of this work concentrated on the agricultural practices of landlords, and was based on the rich data preserved in manorial account rolls. Those sources were analysed in unprecedented numbers and on a national scale using increasingly sophisticated techniques. The culmination of this trend was of course Campbell’s monumental English seigniorial agriculture, published right at the beginning of the period under consideration here (Campbell, 2000; see also e.g. Thornton, 2003). As a result of such work the capacity of later medieval landlords to adjust production in response to changing market signals was no longer in doubt.

What is notable about work on agriculture published since 2000 is that it has been interested less in further study of landlords using account rolls, than in the relatively poorly documented but quantitatively more important peasant producers (see also several chapters on this topic in Kowaleski et al., 2015). Stone showed that the sophisticated managerial decisions revealed by the account rolls were actually made by peasant demesne farm managers who possessed an acute understanding of market conditions, and were able to adjust cropping according to
prices (Stone, 2005). He also suggested that levels of peasant yields and animal stocking densities may have been underestimated in relation to those of desmesnes. Using tithe accounts, Dodds revealed similar forms of sophisticated market-awareness and price-responsiveness among non-seigniorial producers (Dodds, 2007, 2008). Indeed tithe records, which were relatively neglected until about a decade ago, are now proving an especially promising source for peasant agriculture. Not all scholars have found evidence of market-oriented peasant agriculture in the tithe materials. However, even those who have reached different conclusions from these sources about the objectives of smallholder husbandry nonetheless also accept that such farmers undertook rational decision-making, and possessed a capacity to vary behaviour in response to changing stimuli (Sapoznik, 2014a, 2014b).

This work on peasant agriculture is part of a broader tendency in recent historiography to investigate and emphasize peasant agency, autonomy and effective decision-making. In such work, while it is recognized that estate structures shaped economic choices over the long term (Brown, 2014), the peasants rather than the lords emerge as the vital and dynamic element in the late medieval rural economy and society. Rather than being impoverished, downtrodden or constrained by tradition or circumstances, peasants are seen as highly capable of adapting and shaping their own destinies (DeWindt, 2015; Larson, 2006). Accordingly, topics such as peasant diet and material conditions have achieved prominence in recent historiography. The conclusions of such work are broadly optimistic, emphasizing, for example, the generally satisfactory nutritional content of even a pre-plague diet based on legumes, rather than its monotony or inadequacy (Birrell, 2015; La Poutré, 2015; Dyer, 2013, 2014). Work on peasant credit and on land markets has also explicitly associated its findings with the idea of an adaptive peasantry capable of overcoming problems (Briggs, 2009; Page, 2012: 195). One important general work which has encouraged this view characterizes the late medieval period as a ‘new middle ages’, that is, as ‘a period of flexibility and variety, which went through a process of commercialization in the thirteenth century, and emerged from the shocks of the fourteenth-century crisis with an enhanced capacity for change’ (Dyer, 2005: 40). In other words, while ‘crisis’ is not ignored in this view, the importance of crisis is played down in preference for a focus on human initiative and resilience within the agrarian economy of the later middle ages.

5. Conclusion: a contradiction?

It seems, then, that recent research on the rural history of late medieval England presents something of a conflict or contradiction. On the one hand, the period, and especially the early to mid-fourteenth century, is seen as a time of exceptional and severe environmental shocks against which medieval society was sometimes powerless. On the other hand, there is a growing interest in a dynamic peasantry which was largely able to shape its own destiny, and which possibly practised comparatively productive agriculture. To what extent have scholars recognized this contradiction, and/or sought to explain it?

I know of no published work which makes an explicit or sustained attempt to investigate such a contradiction, or to see whether the two trends can be reconciled. Instead, the coexistence of the two trends is implied by a growing body of literature which focuses on the extent to which human institutions were able to respond effectively to natural disaster. Of course, literature on strategies for coping with the hazards of pre-industrial existence is not new (Richardson, 2005). However, it is striking that there is now a growing number of studies which accept that while microbes and the weather (not to mention other man-made threats such as warfare) undoubtedly brought catastrophe to the fourteenth-century countryside, England at this time nonetheless possessed highly developed social and political structures which had the potential to minimize the impact of such catastrophe. In other words, to borrow from the title...
of one recent study, much current research is asking: how effective was medieval society at ‘coping with crisis’ (Curtis)?

So far, investigations of this issue have led to rather pessimistic conclusions. Some writers have argued that formal market structures and political measures are unlikely to have had any beneficial effect during especially severe crises such as the Great Famine, and may even have made matters worse (Slavin, 2014; Sharp, 2012). Informal arrangements between neighbours are thought to have had done relatively little to provide a safety net during the most difficult periods (Schofield, 2009). Investigation of the arrangements in place to deal with fourteenth-century famine alongside those available in the later sixteenth century point to the comparative weaknesses evident at the earlier period (Smith, 2015). However, one should not necessarily underestimate the local efforts that were made in the early fourteenth century to ameliorate the effects of shocks that were ultimately climatic in origin (Briggs, 2015). Furthermore, the fifteenth century may prove to have been of considerable importance in the long-term development of the local political and charitable structures that became effective in ameliorating the effects of natural disasters in later centuries (Dyer, 2012a).

Thus while most scholars would now find it hard to refute the growing evidence for worsening environmental conditions and their short-and long term impact on the late medieval countryside, perhaps the more pressing question has now become ‘by what means did people overcome the resulting hardships’, since at no point did society and economy break down entirely for any length of time. To investigate this question will require a renewed focus on institutions, or the humanly-devised structures in which all social and economic activity was conducted.

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