

## The Economy of Medieval Wales, 1067-1536

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**Reviewer:** Adam Chapman

This is an important and valuable book. Many works of economic history include the word ‘Wales’ in a sub title or index but relatively few have engaged with the relatively sparse sources and unfamiliar context (to most English historians) of the royal shires—the north and west—and Marcher lordships—the south and east—that characterise Wales after the conquests of Edward I. Fewer still have seriously examined the situation before the 1280s, when native rulers retained areas of Wales in their own right. Matthew Stevens’s book is a welcome contribution to a historiography that is uneven and often very old indeed. It is the first book to provide modern national coverage, drawing together local studies which have been framed geographically covering a long period—as in A.D. Carr’s *Medieval Anglesey* (2011)—or regionally—as in William Rees’s, *South Wales and the March, 1284–1415: A Social and Agrarian Study* (1924) or that were not obviously concerned with the nature of the Welsh economy at all, such as the introduction to Keith Williams Jones’s edition of the *Merioneth Lay Subsidy Roll 1292–3* (1976). The latter provides, among other things, an attempt to understand the social structure and pre-conquest economy of 13th century Gwynedd. Stevens is not shy of pointing out the limitations of these earlier works and is right to do so.

This national framing is helpful: Wales, while not a coherent or unified political entity at any point during the middle ages, had a degree of geographic cohesiveness as an economic entity with upland and lowland forms of cultivation acting to complement one another. Though surviving in myriad different forms overlaid with custom and partially undermined by Edward I, it was also bound by a legal framework, the laws commonly attributed to Hywel Dda (c.880 – 950, was king of Deheubarth in south-west Wales), that mutated and adapted, surviving until the 16th century. Indeed, Welsh status was defined as being subject—willingly or otherwise—to these laws.

Stevens draws widely on the extensive historiography of medieval Wales and medieval Britain and also of Europe: his history attempts to place Wales in its European context, and to make wider comparisons, which has not generally been the pattern of earlier work. This can be perceived in the structure. There are three chapters with overlapping chronological coverage, from the immediate aftermath of the Norman Conquest of England and the early Norman incursions into Wales in 1067 to the Great Famine of 1315; from the Edwardian Conquest of Gwynedd in 1282 to the onset of the Black Death; and from the Great Famine to the Tudor restructuring of Welsh governance in the 1530s. The fourth chapter is the most innovative, from a

Welsh perspective, and seeks to model the economy of medieval Wales. The dividing points are a mix of broadly political and international crises.

The areas covered are necessarily large and diverse. The growth of urban life and its economic impact, the parallel decline of the kinship-based system of *gwelyau* (kinship based holdings of land) as a legal, landholding, and thus economic unit. These thematic choices mean that the chronological flow of the book is markedly different from most texts covering this period in Welsh history.

There are two very minor areas which detract from the book. The first is that each chapter is effectively presented as a standalone essay with endnotes. The use of endnotes is understandable in the context of a series that is both scholarly and accessible, but this is surely the worst of all worlds. This reviewer had to resort to a great many bookmarks. David Stephenson's recent, excellent, volume in the same series, *Medieval Wales c.1050-1332: Centuries of Ambiguity* (Rethinking the History of Wales, University of Wales Press, 2019) has endnotes at the back of the book and is easier to use, in consequence. This is perhaps something for the publisher to reconsider.

The second is the author's use of the historic counties of Wales to describe lands contained in Marcher lordships. While understandable at one level, this has the potential to create confusion by applying units unfamiliar to readers under 50 which are neither mapped nor explained. (Most of these counties were created as part of the unification of Wales with England in 1536 and most were abolished under the Local Government Act of 1972). This assumed knowledge matters because the same name can apply to markedly different territories. The modern local authority of Denbighshire—as constituted since 1996—includes all or part of the Marcher lordships of Dyffryn Clwyd, Bromfield and Yale and Denbigh as well as parts of Flintshire, a component of the medieval earldom of Chester. Before 1282 this area was contested by the princes of Powys and Gwynedd and earlier earls of Chester. Finally, the modern county of Denbighshire is different to the historic county with the same name which existed between 1536 and 1974. Which 'Denbighshire' is meant? Only the post-1282 holdings are presented on the clear and helpful map on p. XX. This confusion—doubtless derived from this reviewer knowing too much—partially undermines the author's objective, which is to locate the Marcher lordships described and to imagine them as economic units in their own right; discrete elements of wider seignorial holdings.

This strand is drawn out in the final chapter of the work, which is perhaps the most novel. In it, the author asks what various economic approaches—demographic, neo-Marxist and Class Struggle, commercialisation—might bring to the analysis of Wales. This both introduces and critiques the models themselves and highlights areas where we could usefully know more about the structure of Wales and its economic life.

Interestingly, Stevens suggests, all these approaches founder, to a greater or lesser extent, on the nature and consequences of the revolt of Owain Glyndŵr (1400–c.1416). This is not a new problem in Welsh history; the occasional suggestion that this revolt was a Welsh proxy for the great English revolt of 1381 or the Jacquerie takes Welshness as an analogy for class. A social analysis of the revolt's leaders and Welsh beneficiaries, as Ralph Griffiths has noted, suggests weaknesses in that idea, which Stevens's economic approach arguably reinforces. Ultimately this chapter suggests that conquest was important. Despite rebellion, geographical and environmental challenges, the fate of the Welsh economy was to become aligned with that of its eastern neighbour.

With David Stephenson's recent book, noted above, we are extremely fortunate to have two such affordable and accessible volumes that challenge the common image (and ignorance) of medieval Wales published in such close proximity. Stevens's work, using a multitude of local examples, does something important beyond its novelty and should encourage debate that is overdue among scholars of Welsh—and English—medieval history. For England, perhaps, we should see Wales.<sup>[1]</sup>

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[1] An allusion to the infamous statement: For Wales, see England (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1888).

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