

Microhistories: Demography, Society and Culture in Rural England, 1800-1930

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Author: Barry Reay

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Reviewer: Andrew Hinde

Local history is beginning to emerge from the shadows in which it has lain for too long. Tainted for decades by its association with antiquarianism, its struggle for academic respectability has been a long one. Of course there have been academic practitioners, notably those associated with the Department of English Local History at the University of Leicester; nevertheless, the general impression was that these were few in number and ploughing a lonely furrow, the rewards for which (in terms of academic esteem) were rather insubstantial.

This is changing, at least with respect to the social history of nineteenth century rural England. It is changing for a number of reasons. First, there is a growing recognition that many of the generalisations about the Victorian countryside which form the received wisdom on the topic are inadequate as descriptions of social life as experienced by the people of the time. For example, the "three great estates" model of rural society, in which the agricultural population is divided into landowners, farmers (usually tenant farmers) and landless labourers has come under attack for its neglect of small family farmers, who were quite numerous even in parts of the south-east.⁽¹⁾ Similarly, it is now becoming clear that farm service as a means of ensuring an adequate supply of agricultural labour had not died out throughout southeast England by 1851, as some have suggested, but lived on in a variety of forms in several localities.

Second, much extant rural history fails to engage with the day- to-day lives and perceptions of the working classes. The labourers are seen through the eyes of farmers; the "condition of the labourer" is discussed in much the same style as would be the condition of a used car. The family economics of poor households are oversimplified, being analysed in terms of adult male wages and household expenditure budgets, to the neglect of the income generated by the work of women and children and of the enormously complex and devious stratagems to which poor families resorted in an effort to make ends meet.

It is not that the materials are not available with which to carry out studies of country lives as they were lived. Poor Law records, court records, and oral histories (for example) are all there to be used. But, and here is the crux, working with these sources to the depth that is required in order to write convincing history of this kind is almost impossible unless the historian is prepared to write local history. Thus local history is

emerging not only because it is good in itself, but because it is necessary.

Developments in historical demography have, in some respects, run parallel to those in social history. Historical demographers have mainly been drawn from the social scientific community and have gone about their business using the method of social science, and burdened with the social scientists' predilection for generalisation, and distaste for the unique. Time and again in the historical demographic literature the internal homogeneity of England has been stressed, and regional and local variations minimised. Temporal patterns, too, have been simplified almost to the point of caricature. The decline in fertility within marriage, for example, is described as if it appeared "out of a clear sky in 1880 or 1890", affecting all sections of society within a very short space of time.⁽²⁾ Prior to this, fertility within marriage had, we are told, been constant for centuries.⁽³⁾ Like good social scientists, the historical demographers have stressed analytical rigour, and the need for empirical work to be replicable and for studies to be comparable. This explains the popularity of family reconstitution, a technique originally devised by the French demographer Louis Henry as a means of obtaining "pure" estimates of biological fertility. Family reconstitution involves using genealogical information derived from ecclesiastical registers to construct potted biographies of a subset of those resident in small historical populations. These biographies are then analysed, using a complex set of rules, to produce detailed demographic statistics relating to fertility, nuptiality and (infant and child) mortality.

Family reconstitution is good at providing the bare bones of population history. But because it necessarily separates the lives of its subjects from their social and economic context it cannot help supply explanations for demographic behaviour. Yet despite the fact that the basic patterns in English population history which family reconstitution reveals were known 14 years ago, demographers have been reluctant to venture outside its rather limited and limiting confines to examine the historical context of demographic change.⁽⁴⁾

Indeed, this task has been taken up, to the extent that it has, by historians. David Levine has been doing excellent work in this vein for decades, and he and a small group of colleagues have recently taken the demographers quite sternly to task for their lack of attention to historical contingency.⁽⁵⁾ Even at the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure, where a degree of fundamentalism about family reconstitution has at times been expressed, the need to examine local contexts is being recognised.⁽⁶⁾

This introduction has been rather long, but it provides the necessary historiographical context within which the scope of Barry Reay's ambitious book can be appreciated. For in *Microhistories* Reay attempts to demonstrate how the detailed study of the lives of the inhabitants of a local area, using a wide variety of quantitative and qualitative sources, can shed light on aspects of the social and demographic history of nineteenth century rural England which have hitherto remained obscure. Reay's *Microhistories* are histories from below; they are histories of the workers viewed through the eyes of the workers, and often told by the workers themselves (there is a lot of oral history evidence here).

After an introductory chapter describing the local area Reay has chosen to study, the Blean area of northern Kent near Faversham, the rest of the book is organised into thematic chapters. Two of the themes are demographic: fertility decline and health; four are social and cultural: the social economy, class, family life and kinship, and literacy; and one, sexuality, combines elements of both.

The order in which these topics are considered is, I think, significant. Reay begins with an analysis of fertility within marriage which is almost exclusively based on conventional family reconstitution (although Reay does use individual-level census data to add a bit more contextual information). The burden of his argument is that there were small but significant variations in marital fertility prior to the fertility decline of the 1880s. He suggests that the New Poor Law of 1834 might have influenced fertility behaviour, but this suggestion is little more than speculation. It is bound to be speculation, because Reay has, in this chapter, only allowed himself to use the kind of evidence used by the demographers, which reveals precious little about the motivations underlying demographic behaviour. Indeed this chapter of Reay's book is an excellent

demonstration of the limitations of the conventional demographic analysis of population change in the past.

The next chapter, entitled "health" (note, not "mortality") begins with a family reconstitution based analysis of infant mortality. Reay shows that the Blean was, for rural England at least, rather unhealthy in the nineteenth century, and becoming more so as the century progressed. But it is when other sources are brought to bear on the topic, notably the Reports of the Medical Officer of Health (known to medical historians as the MH12s) and also school log books indicating the extent of absence through ill health, that the sheer extent of morbidity which is hidden behind the mortality statistics becomes clear. Historians have often supposed (using mortality statistics) that the children of the rural labourers, though desperately poor, at least had the benefit of good health. Because he has gone beyond the mortality statistics, Reay is able to cast doubt on this supposition.

However, it is in the second part of the book, when he turns his attention to class and the social economy, that the slaying of dragons really begins. Reay's first target is the "adult male wage". This is not a straw dragon. The received wisdom concerning regional variations in rural poverty is still based largely on variations in adult male wages. For example, mid-nineteenth century rural Dorset has become a byword for poverty largely on the strength of the very low adult male cash wages that were paid. Dorset farmers of the time were much aggrieved by this, arguing that the complex system of payments in kind operating alongside the cash wages in the county meant that the Dorset labourer was not worse off than those in other countries. By using the well known Kent Oral History archive created by Michael Winstanley together with his own oral history evidence from the Blean, Reay is able effectively to show that adult male wages were only a part (often quite a small part) of the family economies of the poor. Not only were the contributions of women and children crucial to enable families to make ends meet, but also because adult male wages were not always to be relied upon, families were compelled to resort to a complex array of survival strategies in order to muddle through. These included the use of credit, petty theft, and "playing the poor relief system".

The "autonomous nuclear family" provides another target. Reay is concerned to show that families in the Blean relied substantially (though not, of course, exclusively) on assistance from their kin to help them through periods of social or economic difficulty. Contrary to the picture painted in much recent literature on kinship in historical England, kinship ties in the Blean were "dense". For most families, kin were all around, and provided an important complement to publicly available welfare services. Therefore although families were nuclear, they were far from autonomous.

Both the adult male wage and the autonomous nuclear family have been adopted by historians at least in part because they are easily identifiable from quantitative data. For the same reason, as Reay points out, "illegitimacy is a category much favoured by historians".⁽⁷⁾ Yet, as he shows in his chapter on "sexuality", historians' views of the social context of illegitimacy are at odds with what he observes in the Blean. The problem lies, again, with the limited range of sources which most historians of illegitimacy have employed. Relying heavily on parish registers, they have observed that only a small minority of births were illegitimate. This has led them to characterise illegitimacy as "deviant" behaviour, and to develop the notion of the "bastardy prone sub-society" (Reay's next dragon).

In what for me is the most impressive chapter of the book, Reay shows that, far from being deviant behaviour, "illegitimacy should be seen as part of the normal sexual culture".⁽⁸⁾ He uses detailed genealogies to reveal the absence of any obvious bastardy-prone sub-society. But the coup de grace is administered by his remarkable use of the examinations of unmarried mothers in the Petty Sessions records. These permit Reay to portray the sexual lives of the villagers of the Blean with a depth and immediacy unmatched, so far as I am aware, in any other writing on rural England. Indeed, there are echoes here of Emile Zola's famous naturalist description of life in the French village of Romilly.⁽⁹⁾

The remaining two chapters of the book deal with the gradual increase of literacy in the Blean during the nineteenth century, and with the inhabitants' perceived notions of the concept of class. There is rather more comfort for the traditional historiography here. For example, although Reay stresses the difficulty of

measuring literacy accurately, he concludes that the historians' traditional measure - the ability of a person to sign his or her name - remains valuable. Indeed he uses it, along with oral history evidence, to chart the slow and haphazard development of literacy among the working people of the Blean during the nineteenth century, a development which was slow in large part because literacy was not seen by the poorer people as a particularly important or necessary skill. Nevertheless, Reay is even here concerned to get away from too simplistic a division of society into literate and illiterate on the basis of a single, rather crude, measure.

The one traditional concept to emerge almost unscathed from Reay's penetrating criticism is the notion of the landless labourers as a distinct social entity. Although class images, as revealed by oral history evidence, were diverse, "[t]here was a coherent social-occupational group, self-replicating, largely endogamous and, by and large, landless", and this class cannot be qualified out of existence.[\(10\)](#)

In a final, brief, chapter Reay makes some general points about the role of microhistory within the historical research project. This chapter deserves close scrutiny despite (rather disconcertingly for any would-be reviewer) reading rather like a review of his own book! It is clear that Reay believes that "the local is central to the nature of the historical process".[\(11\)](#) Thus he does not want the book to be seen as a "case study", with all the questions about representativeness that that might imply. Neither is he arguing for a broader empirical project through which a general picture emerges from a series of detailed case studies, of which *Microhistories* could form a prototype. Nor does he claim to be writing a "total history" of the kind once advocated by Alan Macfarlane.[\(12\)](#) As he himself writes (helpfully for the reviewer): "[t]he message of this book is that it is impossible to understand society and culture without examining local contexts".[\(13\)](#) This, then, is the agenda on which Reay wishes to be judged. And, judged on this agenda, the book is surely a resounding success. The range of methods and the variety of sources which Reay has used have allowed him to display a remarkable understanding of what it was like to be a poor inhabitant of this area of Kent in the nineteenth century.

I have just two criticisms. The first concerns social change. Reay sees the local area as "the site for exploring significant social change". Yet in places in the book the unfolding of the historical process gets lost. This happens most clearly in the chapter on the "social economy".[\(14\)](#) Here Reay intersperses oral history evidence, mainly from the very end of the nineteenth century or the early twentieth century, with other (mainly written) evidence relating to much earlier periods. He produces a wonderful vignette in which the messiness and uncertainty of the material existence of the Blean's poor are impressively portrayed, but the cost of this is an obscuring of trends over time. Things were hard; "muddling through" was the order of the day; but were things in general getting better or worse? Reay gives us little indication. Yet one of the conclusions of Alan Armstrong's recent study of agricultural labourers in the nineteenth century is that their living standards were rising throughout the second half of the century.[\(15\)](#) Reay does not give Armstrong's book a good press, yet it seems to me that Armstrong conveys a clearer picture of what I believe to be a "significant social change" than Reay manages to do.

Second, nowhere in *Microhistories* is the impact of population mobility on any of the aspects of social life Reay analyses the subject of any serious discussion. Indeed, neither "migration" nor "mobility" appear in the index! It is one of the most significant weaknesses of family reconstitution that only the non-mobile people are analysed. Reay does an admirable job of putting family reconstitution's skeletal biographies into their social and economic context, but the mobile majority (and they were a majority, even among the poor) are still largely missing. This omission is especially noteworthy because the availability of individual-level census data after 1841 makes it possible to incorporate many of these migrants into a family reconstitution style analysis.

However, I do not wish to end this review on a note of criticism. *Microhistories* is a considerable achievement; it deserves respect; and it should be required reading for historical demographers and social historians. It lives up to its billing on the dust jacket as "a central contribution to the 'new rural history'". I greatly enjoyed reading it.

Notes

1. See for example Reed, M., "The peasantry of nineteenth- century England: a neglected class", History Workshop 18 (1984), pp. 53-76.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Reay, B., Microhistories: Demography, Society and Culture in Rural England 1800-1939, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p.67.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Wilson, C. and Woods, R., "Fertility in England: a long-term perspective", Population Studies 45 (1991), pp.399-410.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. For the basic results of English family reconstitution, see Wrigley, E.A. and Schofield, R.S., "English population history from family reconstitution: summary results 1600-1799", Population Studies 37 (1983), pp.157-184.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. See the contributions to Gillis, J., Tilly, L.A., and Levine, D. (eds) The European Experience of Declining Fertility: A Quiet Revolution, 1850-1970, Oxford, Blackwell, 1992.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. See for example Garrett, E. and Reid, A. Thinking of England and taking care: family building strategies and infant mortality in England and Wales, 1891- 1911, International Journal of Population Geography, 1 (1995), pp.69-102.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Reay, op.cit., p.184.[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. Ibid., p.212.[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. Zola, E., La Terre, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1980.[Back to \(9\)](#)
10. Reay, op.cit., p.155.[Back to \(10\)](#)
11. Ibid., p.262.[Back to \(11\)](#)
12. See Macfarlane, A., Harrison, S. and Jardine, C., Reconstituting Historical Communities, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1977.[Back to \(12\)](#)
13. Reay, op.cit., p.262.[Back to \(13\)](#)
14. Ibid, p.260.[Back to \(14\)](#)
15. Armstrong, A., Farmworkers: a Social and Economic History 1770-1980, London, Batsford 1988.
[Back to \(15\)](#)

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