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Alex T. Brown, *Rural Society and Economic Change in County Durham: Recession and Recovery, c.1400-1640*, Woodbridge, UK, Boydell Press, 2015, xv + 288 pp., ISBN: 978-1-78327-075-0.

Reviewed for EH.Net (April 2016) by Mark Bailey, School of History, University of East Anglia.  
[http://eh.net/book\\_reviews/rural-society-and-economic-change-in-county-durham-recession-and-recovery-c-1400-1640/](http://eh.net/book_reviews/rural-society-and-economic-change-in-county-durham-recession-and-recovery-c-1400-1640/)

Alex Brown is an Addison Wheeler postdoctoral Research Fellow at the University of Durham, and this publication is based on his Ph.D. thesis. Modern Ph.D.s in economic and social history tend to offer an in-depth study of a single community, but Brown tackles a large geographical area over an unusually long timeframe. In doing so, he establishes a platform from which to offer perspectives on a number of major debates, such as the transition from feudalism to capitalism, the rise of the gentry and the crisis of the aristocracy. His ambition is largely justified and fulfilled: this is a well-researched, clearly structured, uncomplicated and thoughtful study.

County Durham is chosen for a number of compelling reasons: the two major institutional landlords within the county — the bishopric of Durham, and Durham cathedral priory (renamed the Dean and Chapter in the 1540s) — have left a substantial archive; the precocious local development of the coal industry offers an opportunity to explore whether mercantile capital was invested in industry or diverted into land; and, finally, the region's geographical diversity provides a contrast between the arable lowlands in the east and the pastoral uplands in the west.

Brown begins by charting the impact of the fifteenth-century economic recession on rural society in Durham, and then assessing how decisions made in its depths shaped the ability of local people to respond to galloping inflation in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. In particular, he contrasts the responses on the estate of the priory with those on the bishopric. During the course of the fifteenth century customary land on the former was largely converted to leases, and holdings were reorganized into larger units often held by syndicates, enabling the priory to staunch the hemorrhaging of its revenues. During the sixteenth-century inflation, leases presented the priory estate with a mechanism for increasing revenues at a level commensurate with rises in land values. Unusually, the standardized leasehold units were seldom fragmented or absorbed into larger leases, and, as a consequence, the settled landholding structure supported in each township a sizeable group of middling yeoman, each of whom held consolidated farms of between fifty and one hundred acres.

In contrast, the bishopric responded to the cash crisis of the mid-fifteenth century by exploiting revenues from coal rather than reorganizing the structure of tenant landholding, and therefore little customary land was converted to leases or reorganized into standardized units. The persistence of the old tenures and landholding structures meant that after c.1550 the bishopric was unable to extract a commercial value from its agricultural holdings, whose rents were ossified at a low level by custom. Consequently, small numbers of tenants were able to exploit the favorable combination of low rents and rising agrarian profits to construct large farms, so that in c.1600 many townships on the bishop's estate possessed a polarized social structure characterized by a small but wealthy yeoman elite and a large number of cottagers, smallholders and laborers.

The prior and the bishopric managed estates whose composition was essentially fixed, whereas lay landlords were able to acquire and dispose of manors more freely. The depressed demand for land during the fifteenth century enabled a handful of lay landlords to construct sizeable estates across Durham, so that in c.1500 a small seigniorial elite controlled around one half of all lay manors in the county. By c.1600 these estates had fragmented, such that no lay landlord owned more than a dozen manors. Brown avoids regarding this dramatic change as evidence of either a rising gentry or an aristocracy in crisis, but instead argues that "passive" rentier landlords — who in Durham tended to be the great lay lords — were caught in a pincer movement of inflation and stagnant rents leading to financial ruin. Landlords who actively exploited opportunities in agriculture, trade

and industry fared better, and in Durham these tended to be the lesser gentry. The growth of the coal industry, especially after the 1570s, provided some leading Newcastle merchants with the capital to enter the rural land market, although they did so in order to secure control over coal seams rather than to establish themselves as landed gentry. New money from Newcastle trickled rather than flooded into the Durham countryside.

The novelty of Brown's approach is to contrast the managerial policy on two contiguous estates in the same part of England: thus, by holding constant the variables of time and place, he can isolate accurately key differences in institutional decision-making and so chart their subsequent impact upon both lords and tenants. The shift to standardized leaseholds on the prior's estate, and the bishopric's adherence to the old forms of landholding, locked each estate onto a different pathway of development with starkly different consequences for lords and tenants in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. He cites this as a powerful illustration of path dependency theory and of how managerial policies created major institutional constraints on seigniorial estates.

The study's broad sweep means that some important points of detail escape closer scrutiny. The reasons why the priory chose the leasehold pathway, and the bishopric did not, remain vague. The exact nature and evolution of the bishopric's copyholds, and, indeed, of the prior's leaseholds, attract little analysis for a study placing so much emphasis upon tenure. Indeed, the leases were neither straightforward nor unchanging, evolving over time from life leases, to short-term leases, and finally into longer-term leases with reversionary rights benefiting the tenant and protecting the integrity of the holding. Each phase required careful elucidation, including any evidence for changes in the formulae of grants.

But these are quibbles. Overall, this is an admirable and ambitious first monograph from a promising young scholar.

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Jess Gilbert, *Planning Democracy: Agrarian Intellectuals and the Intended New Deal*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2015, 368 pp., ISBN 978-0-300-20731-6.

Reviewed for «Agricultural History» (Winter 2016) by Daniel Immerwahr Northwestern University  
<http://www.aghistorysociety.org/pdf/90-1/immerwahr.pdf>

For the past twenty years, sociologist Jess Gilbert has been preparing a grand revision of the agricultural New Deal. He has kept his many readers on a slow drip, publishing his research in occasional articles and conference papers over the years. Now, happily and finally, we have the full story. And what a story it is. Typically, when we talk about New Deal agricultural policy, we speak of large-scale government interventions undertaken early on and not always effectively: the Agricultural Adjustment Act or the establishment of the Tennessee Valley Authority. Many of the best-known names, such as Rexford Tugwell or David Lilienthal, were top-down reformers—"high modernists," in the language of James C. Scott. But what Gilbert shows is that there was a countervailing tendency, "low modernism," which created "decentralized programs" that sought to involve "local citizens in substantive, meaningful ways" (8). This effort, which Gilbert designates the "third and intended New Deal in agriculture" came later and through different agencies (113). Gilbert's low modernists sought to devolve power to farmers in numerous ways. They jettisoned the normal processes of social scientific research in favour of more participatory approaches involving the input of local farmers. They placed those farmers on planning committees. And they ran a set of remarkable educational initiatives designed not just to promulgate technical information, but also to encourage wide-ranging political deliberation among the men and women responsible for raising the nation's crops. These multifarious projects all fed into the 1938 Mount

Weather Agreement (“the Magna Carta of the Third agrarian New Deal”), which reorganized the USDA around grassroots planning (116). Under its auspices, some two hundred thousand farmers served on planning committees, and about three million participated in study and discussion groups. But did this democratic planning work? It is not easy to say. The planning program’s history was brief, lasting only from mid-1938 to 1942, with many of the programs never fully taking off (239). The most detailed reporting comes from the model program in Greene County, Georgia, whose residents experienced “an almost unbelievable gain in living standards” (212–13). Yet Gilbert concedes that Greene was “exemplary, not typical” (209). Gilbert lists other achievements of other areas, but it is hard to discern what the average community’s experience was like, and it is hard to parse out how many of the gains he lists should be credited to grassroots planning and how many were due simply to the influx of federal funds. One especially wonders, given the marked tendency of the citizen-planners to be well-off white landowners, how many of the benefits made their way to sharecroppers and farmworkers. Whatever the impact of grassroots planning, though, its extent was astonishing. Within the expanding Roosevelt-era federal bureaucracy, low modernists managed to momentarily orient the agricultural state around citizen planning. Gilbert’s readers have already begun to wrestle with that startling fact. Now that the whole story is here, I have little doubt that they will be grappling with it for years to come.

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Carl Kitchens, Price Fishback (2015), *Flip the Switch: The Impact of the Rural Electrification Administration 1935–1940*, «The Journal of Economic History», 75, pp. 1161-1195.

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0022050715001540>

#### Abstract

To isolate the impact of access to electricity on local economies, we examine the impact of the Rural Electrification Administration low-interest loans in the 1930s. The REA provided loans to cooperatives to lay distribution lines to farms and aid in wiring homes. Consequently, the number of rural farm homes electrified doubled in the United States within five years. We develop a panel data set for the 1930s and use changes within counties over time to identify the effect of the REA loans on a wide range of socio-economic measures. The REA loans contributed significantly to increases in crop output and crop productivity and helped stave off declines in overall farm output, productivity, and land values, but they had much smaller effects on nonagricultural parts of the economy. The ex-ante subsidy from the low-interest loans was large, but after the program was completed, nearly all of the loans were fully repaid, and the ultimate cost to the taxpayer was relatively low.

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Ernst Langthaler, *Schlachtfelder. Alltägliches Wirtschaften in der nationalsozialistischen Agrargesellschaft 1938–1945* (Sozial- und wirtschaftshistorische Studien 38), Böhlau, Wien, 2016.

An Open-Access version of the book is now available online ([PDF](#))  
<http://www.ruralhistory.eu/newsletter/2016/rhn-2016-011>

Previous research on agrarian society in Nazi Germany has focused either on the regime’s actions or the rural population’s reactions. In order to overcome this opposition, this study concentrates on the fields of interaction between Nazi regime and rural population.

Taking the province of Niederdonau in German-annexed Austria as an example, the study aims at answering the following questions: first, how did the actors use resources such as land, labour, capital, knowledge and products in their farming practice? Second, which power relations did the actors establish among themselves and with the instances of the political-economic system? Third, how were life-world, state and market regulation of farming related to each other?

The investigation builds upon a diverse resource base, consisting of ego-, official and published documents, which is being interpreted with aid of qualitative and quantitative methods. The results correct and extend the current state of research on Austrian agrarian society in the Nazi era. Contrary to the conventional wisdom of the Nazi era as an interlude or step backwards on the way to modernity, the study outlines the contours of a Nazi megaproject directed towards an alternative modernity beyond liberalism and socialism: on the one hand, the peasantry as a backbone of the 'people's body' (*Volkskörper*) should be strengthened; on the other hand, farm productivity should be raised according to national autarky. The megaproject of *racial productivism* – the creation of a both 'racially' and technically productive peasant – became effective at different levels of the agrosystem: At the technical level, only state-supported pioneer farms managed to raise land use intensity; the overwhelming majority tended to extensification due to lack of labourers and equipment. At the institutional level, the nation state was established as the central regulator of the agricultural sector – from factor- and product markets to the actors' habitus. Though agrarian modernization was *intended* by the Nazi decision-makers, it became only *partially* effective. Despite the Nazi regime's attempts, a 'green revolution' in the full – both technical and institutional – sense did not take place in German-annexed Austria. However, the years 1938 to 1945 were a kind of 'pre-revolutionary' transitional period, which passed on stable institutions for the technical take off of the agricultural revolution in postwar Austria. Though the 'great leap' to *racial productivism* failed, the actors of the agrosystem took small steps along the productivist transition between the 1930s and 1950s.

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Joseph P. McDermott, *The Making of a New Rural Order in South China: I. Village, Land, and Lineage in Huizhou, 900–1600*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014, 480 pp., ISBN 978-1-10704-622-1.

Reviewed for «Agricultural History» (Summer 2015) by Ian Matthew Miller, Harvard University.  
[http://www.aghistorysociety.org/journal/current/bookreviews/2015-07/McDermott The Making of a New Rural Order in South China by Ian Matthew Miller.pdf](http://www.aghistorysociety.org/journal/current/bookreviews/2015-07/McDermott%20The%20Making%20of%20a%20New%20Rural%20Order%20in%20South%20China%20by%20Ian%20Matthew%20Miller.pdf)

Using the exceptionally rich source base from huizhou prefecture in central china, this book aims to describe rural society "to a level of detail previously associated only with anthropological reports" (5). This ambition is even more astounding considering the scope--this volume covers the years 900 to 1600, with a planned second volume covering subsequent centuries. The six chapters alternate between two interconnected narratives--first, the competition between lineages and other local organizations for ritual and economic dominance; and second, the articulation of lineage management of their landed resources.

McDermott details the competition between lineages--kinship-based ritual organizations--and other ritual groups for local power. he shows that this was not just a competition for worshipers but also for their money and land. in the song and Yuan dynasties (960–1367), lineages were far weaker and poorer than Buddhist temples, village worship associations, and other groups. This changed markedly in the ming dynasty (1368–1644), when lineages monopolized control of many of these ritual institutions and became the preeminent economic institutions in the countryside.



Within lineages themselves, mcdermott shows a transition in the song from the model of communal families that shared all their property, to lineage trusts that organized a portion of family property for collective benefit. He then documents the articulation of one such trust in the ming dynasty. The doushan trust owned both paddy land and forested mountains and also controlled many bondservants. From 1379 until 1454, the trust was managed by its founder, who focused on the apportionment of servant labor on the farmland; the forests were largely left as lineage commons. After his death, control passed to a grandson who recognized the low productivity of farmland and began to focus on timber profits. When he died in 1492, however, the trust fell into crisis. management was split and members used the forests for personal gain, an issue left unresolved by several changes in internal organization. if the doushan trust failed to resolve the issues posed by slow-growing forests and collective management, other lineages developed better solutions.

Many apportioned forest resources as shares, allowing them to offer secure tenancy and avoid most management conflicts. some shareholders began to sell their lots in advance of lumbering. By the late sixteenth century, this practice was so common that “it is possible to speak of a futures market operating on huizhou’s mountainsides” (431). This book gives a more detailed look into the growth and development of lineage trusts than was previously available. it provides a much-needed window into local economies and a key reminder of the material aspects of ritual organizations. however, it is unclear to what extent these trends applied outside the exceptional context of huizhou, an issue of which the text is keenly aware. Also, certain figures presented as lists or tables would be more accessible as graphs. despite these limitations, this is a significant work and highly recommended to scholars interested in the history of rural china.

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Andrea S. Wiley, *Cultures of Milk: The Biology and Meaning of Dairy Products in the United States and India*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2014, 208 pp., ISBN 978-0-674-72905-6.

Reviewed for «Agricultural History» (Summer 2015) by Kendra Smith-Howard, University at Albany–SUNY.

[http://www.aghistorysociety.org/journal/current/bookreviews/2015-07/Wiley\\_Cultures\\_of\\_Milk\\_The\\_Biology\\_and\\_Meaning\\_of\\_Dairy\\_Products\\_in\\_the\\_United\\_States\\_and\\_India\\_by\\_Kendra\\_Smith-Howard.pdf](http://www.aghistorysociety.org/journal/current/bookreviews/2015-07/Wiley_Cultures_of_Milk_The_Biology_and_Meaning_of_Dairy_Products_in_the_United_States_and_India_by_Kendra_Smith-Howard.pdf)

The bookshelf holding milk histories is quickly becoming as well stocked as a supermarket dairy case. Andrea Wiley’s *Cultures of Milk* is distinctive from the others for its comparison between the dairy cultures of India and the United States.

Wiley’s book demonstrates the breadth of the methods anthropology lends to the study of food. Drawing on history and ethnography, Wiley also examines biological factors, such as the genetic mutation that enables individuals to readily digest milk sugars beyond the age of weaning, as central causes driving dairy animal domestication. While attentive to biology, *Cultures of Milk* is not determinist history. Indeed, Wiley presents a puzzle: India developed a strong emphasis on dairying even though many of its inhabitants lacked the enzyme to digest it. Hence, she argues, studying the nation’s dairy culture requires an understanding of cultural mores, ideas, traditions, and institutions. Agricultural historians may be disappointed by Wiley’s interpretive emphases. *Cultures of Milk* says very little about cultivation practices, except for briefly discussing operation Flood, a World Bank project whose objectives included improving dairy productivity in India. The historical profiles of Indian and American dairy cultures are largely researched through secondary sources, although the author ably incorporates some originals, such as a cook- book printed for and by the wives of British colonial officials. In another original contribution, Wiley extends the reach of Sidney Mintz’s

Sweetness and Power, reminding readers that British and French aristocrats gained a taste for tea and coffee by mixing it not simply with sugar, but also with milk. When Indians subsequently took to tea drinking in the early twentieth century, they mixed the tea with milk.

Overall, the pairing of American and Indian dairy cultures proves to be the most valuable element of *Cultures of Milk* and its biggest interpretive challenge. The comparison has merit. Milk is important for both economies—India produces more milk than any other nation, while the United States consumes milk at a much higher rate per capita. Both nations were British colonies, and their state policies tied milk consumption to citizenship. Yet the dairy cultures of the two nations differ significantly. India had a longer indigenous dairy culture that preceded British colonization, and so its history is much longer than that of milk in North America. The religious and political significance of “mother Cow” in India far overshadows the religious significance of milk in the United States, even if some dairies use biblical references in their brand names. Despite great efforts on Wiley’s part to weave the two together in a unified analytical frame, the book largely reads as juxtaposed profiles of the dairy cultures of two nations.

Although other recent works about milk, most notably Deborah Valenze’s *Milk: A Local and Global History*, have examined the worldwide reach of this commodity, Wiley’s book is unique in the depth of its comparison between the United States and India. Scholars will gain perspective by incongruity by seeing the dairy history of the United States presented alongside that of India -where buffalo and cows’ milk compete for consumers’ favor and where the scarcity of milk has discouraged its incorporation into school nutrition programs. Although Wiley presents chapters as courses to a meal, not as a perfectly composed plate, the reader will finish *Cultures of Milk* satiated all the same.

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Jiayan Zhang, *Coping with Calamity: Environmental Change and Peasant Response in Central China, 1736–1949*, Vancouver, University of British Columbia Press, 2014, 292 pp., ISBN 978-0-7748-2596-2.

Reviewed for «Agricultural History» (Summer 2015) by David Bello, Washington & Lee University.  
[http://www.aghistorysociety.org/journal/current/bookreviews/2015-07/Zhang\\_Coping\\_with\\_Calamity\\_Environmental\\_Change\\_and\\_Peello.pdf](http://www.aghistorysociety.org/journal/current/bookreviews/2015-07/Zhang_Coping_with_Calamity_Environmental_Change_and_Peello.pdf)

Zhang proposes to cope with the challenges posed by the calamity of inundation in hubei’s Jiangnan plain through an almost unprecedented consideration of peasant response to the environment, rather than to the market. The author introduces the ecological conditions of the region, traditionally known as the “marshy kingdom,” in chapter one that distinguish it from those defining north and south china. Jiangnan thus emerges as a different pattern of rural economy, adding a third, and comparatively unexplored, dimension to the standard north-south divide in chinese agrarian studies.

The most significant human response to these waterlogged conditions, systematically begun in the ming dynasty then expanded through the Qing and republican periods, was state and private dikeing. dike construction and maintenance became the mainstay of Jiangnan’s socio-economy, which was even grouped in dike-enclosure communities (a unique “dike-yuan society”). chapters Two, Three and Five cover the mechanics of these activities, with their resulting contradictions between center and locality and public and private. chapter Five, based on twentieth-century sources, makes a strong case for inundation, rather than class or market forces, as the main conditioning factor on relations of land ownership because of the uncertainties it created. Although social and ecological costs were high, dikes became the prerequisite for the extent and quality of human habitation in Jiangnan. When properly conducted, dike management could offset such costs, including those of persistent inundation, itself a substantial result of ongoing, and not always rational, agrarian diversion of natural flows.

so, despite its emphasis on non-human challenges from the surrounding environment, the argument develops quite conventionally to blame human population pressure and water control mismanagement for systemic failure. Zhang, born in Jiangnan and trained as an agronomist, by no means ignores local ecological factors. human adaptation to chronic inundation through reliance on water resistant crops and aquatic plants is the main theme of chapter Four, while chapter six reveals how agrarian identity was swapped for a for-aging (specifically, fishing) identity when inundation overwhelmed some communities. chapter Four is also notable for its demonstration that the cash cropping of dry land cotton was substantially determined by elevation, rather than by market demand, to decisively inhibit its development beyond subsistence requirements. Both chapters richly reveal the critical extent to which peasant attention was absorbed by the local ecology. They make a new contribution to an environmental approach to chinese agrarian history in general and, more specifically, to the large, mainly non-english, literature on water control that lies at its core.

nevertheless, human action occupies the most elevated terrain of the marshy kingdom on very traditional terms that take no account of developments in ecological studies over the past several decades that indicate disturbance, not equilibrium, is the “natural” state of things on earth. The contradictory effects of diking, which inevitably over concentrated water to the point of undermining its own success, are not exceptional in these updated terms. This is a condition with which the existing literature on pre-modern chinese water control, and not just Zhang’s book, has yet to cope.

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*Mondes ruraux et urbains (comptes rendus)*, «Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales», 70, 2015, pp. 979-1059  
<http://www.cairn.info/revue-Annales-2015-4-p-979.htm>