

Page 1 of 2

Susanna Wade Martins (2009). *Coke of Norfolk 1754-1842. A biography.*
Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Boydell Press. xii + 218 pp. £50.00.

ISBN 978-1-84383-426-7

The life of Thomas Coke spanned events which were pivotal in British history – the American and French Revolutions and the Napoleonic Wars, the Reform Act of 1832 and the accession of Victoria in 1837. This period also saw the flowering of agricultural enlightenment, the appreciation of the importance to farming of adequate capitalization and long term investment, and the elevation of the social status of the ownership of productive agricultural land.

In this excellent account, which benefits from full access to Holkham archives, Dr. Wade Martins has placed Thomas Coke within these contexts and has evaluated his role in the events and attitudinal shifts of his time. An “extrovert personality with little time or patience for academic pursuits”, Coke played a leading role in Norfolk society, serving as county MP for over 50 years and, on the national stage, providing loyal support for his friend Charles James Fox in the Whig-Tory power struggles of the Regency period.

The politics of the age are well summarized and integrated into the narrative. It is very welcome that the rather paradoxical eighteenth century conception of Patriotism is explored. Coke could describe himself as a patriot and, ultimately, accept a peerage as Earl of Leicester yet, by his own account, drink George Washington’s health every evening during the American War of Independence.

To sustain his political life (pre-Reform elections were very expensive affairs) and position in the county, the Holkham rent roll had to be maximized and Dr. Wade Martins describes this process thoroughly giving full credit to Coke’s steward Francis Blaikie.

Today, in large part due to the Holkham sheep shearings, Coke has his place in the British agricultural pantheon – Dr. Wade Martins provides something of a corrective to this as, indeed, Scott Watson and Hobbs did in “Great Farmers”, published in 1951. Coke’s agricultural contribution was, essentially, the fostering of an environment in

which his tenant farmers could perform to the highest standards and where they, and he, could exchange information and experiences.

Convivial, sociable and revelling in county and national politics and field sports, Coke lived a personal life of immense vitality and obvious enthusiasms. After 21 years of widowerhood, as a 68 year old he married his 18 year old goddaughter and fathered five children in ten years. Though his enthusiasm did not extend to the application of science to farming – he felt the new Royal Agricultural Society of England would do “more harm than good” and regarded “all attempts to introduce chemistry as an engine of cultivation as a complete fallacy” – he made his mark as one of the principal architects, in the broadest sense, of the present-day British landscape. Even though five generations have elapsed since his time, his influence is still evident.

This biography does Thomas Coke full justice, in style as well as in content. It is excellently illustrated with colour and monochrome plates with helpful, discursive captions and specially drawn maps and diagrams. The bibliography and index are extensive and the book has been meticulously produced. Coke’s memory is well served by this first-rate piece of work.

Stephen J.G. Hall MA PhD
Professor of Animal Science
University of Lincoln