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Review Of "God Speed The Plough: The Representation Of Agrarian England, 1500-1660" By A. McRae

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Review

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illusion, a mistake, a crime, or an episode closed off by its ending" (300), or that it was "just bloody-minded ethnic chauvinism which moved the English in their dealings with their neighbors" (294). His critique of these tendencies is all the more powerful since it comes from the person who, I would say, has done the most to think through the premises that now inform a British historiography. Pocock's piece also gives a sense of the issues around which British historians diverge and converge. For instance, *Uniting the Kingdom?* includes an essay by Nicholas Canny, a self-described "Brito-Sceptic" (147), who charges that British history's "holistic approach results in a tendency to emphasize similarity at the expense of difference, and ignores the fundamental diversities that made it so difficult for the several peoples of the two islands to live together within a single polity" (148). To this, Pocock's assertion that "I do not think anybody is currently putting forward . . . [the argument] that 'British history' is the name of a paradigm which offers to include every aspect of every people formed within the territory of the second United Kingdom . . . and reduce it to a common history" (295) can be heard as a rebuttal. Perhaps more than other such anthologies, this book shows how and why British history is a contested field.

Uniting the Kingdom? is divided into sections, each of which groups essays on a given historical period. These more specialized pieces range from the medieval era to the present, and they are uniformly nuanced and instructive, though to my mind, Jenny Wormald's "One King, Two Kingdoms," on the Union of Crowns in 1603, stands out for sheer intellectual verve and brio. Taken together, the essays in this timely volume demonstrate how richly complex — and sometimes conflicted — a multicentric approach to the history of the British Isles can be.

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Andrew McRae. *God Speed the Plough: The Representation of Agrarian England 1500-1660*. (Past and Present Publications.) Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996. 13 pls. + xv + 332 pp. \$64.95. ISBN: 0-5214-5379-8.

The rise of capitalism entailed changes in values and understandings as much as in structures and practices. In this lucidly written and vigorously argued book, Andrew McRae explores processes of conceptual reorientation that reconceived early modern rural England. The countryside has always provided meanings as much as material goods. But during the turbulent era between the Reformation and the end of the Civil War, McRae contends, representations of agrarian England were substantially recast. Displacing defenders of custom, stability, and the commonwealth, moralists, poets, and publicists who emphasized productivity, the market, and private wealth laid down the discursive foundations of an essentially capitalist imaginary. The figure of the innovative yeoman, who superseded the tradition-minded plowman, symbolized the new representational order. McRae traces the shift in three sections, each sur-

veying a specific discursive field constituted by both literary and non-literary works. The first examines what McRae terms “moral economics,” articulated in sermons and pamphlets of complaint in response to unsettling change exemplified by enclosure. Although never entirely discarded, this complex of ideals and imperatives was undermined from within by a new religious mentality that emphasized the individual and by new literary practices embodied in verse and dramatic satire.

Proponents of improvement increasingly gained the upper hand, and in the second part McRae carefully tracks their fortunes from sixteenth-century heterodoxy to seventeenth-century orthodoxy. His wide-ranging discussion incorporates husbandry manuals that lauded novel methods, surveying manuals that by disregarding established rights and obligations helped turn land into a marketable commodity, and a revived and revised georgic poetry that legitimated emergent perceptions and procedures. The final part takes up the view from the manor houses of the gentry and nobility — or, rather, the view ascribed to them by choreographers and pastoral poets. In their hands, notions of dutiful stewardship yielded to those of pleasurable and profitable ownership.

God Speed the Plough offers fresh readings of texts ranging from Smith’s *Discourse of the Commonweal* to Herrick’s *Hesperides*, and it even manages to add something to the well-worn discussion of Protestantism and capitalism. But the author’s new historicist approach places most emphasis on discourses as sites where strategies of representation constructed and contested meaning rather than on individual works. Printed sources are privileged, on the grounds that their falling prices and simpler presentation, together with rising literacy, made them widely influential among tenants as well as lords. Yet apart from specifying the number and date of editions (and reproducing an annotated title-page from a manual of husbandry), McRae attends little to the actual appropriation of the plethora of works that he so subtly analyzes. It is likely true, as he avers, that discursive change influenced agrarian innovation rather than simply reflecting it. Looking at field and pasture, however, agricultural historians have argued both that new practices percolated very slowly into the countryside and that market forces were already strongly felt in late medieval England.

Recent scholarship suggests that change in rural England was more protracted and that the Tudor and Stuart era had a less revolutionary impact on the countryside than previously believed. If this reinterpretation is correct, it may account for what McRae forthrightly acknowledges but never sufficiently explains: the coexistence throughout the period of strongly positive representations of the modes of moral economics and those of improvement. Still, whatever the character of agrarian change, and whatever its precise relation to ideological transformation, *God Speed the Plough* is a most perceptive, informative, and nicely produced study of changes in discourse and mentality that will richly reward economic and cultural historians as well as literary scholars.

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