precisely the picture that Waite’s own interpretation suggests. We are told that apparently “Joris’ emotional anguish led to physical convulsions,” which he controlled with some kind of medication; that Joris nurtured a relationship “in which the prophet held almost cultic sway over his followers;” that he saw himself as a prophet “in the lineage of Jesus Christ himself,” claiming direct revelation from God, and refused to engage in rational discussion of his claims (pp. 80f, 134, 157). “Deranged narcissist” sounds like a pretty accurate description.

Finally, the book lacks a conclusion. This means we are left with no clear statement of how Waite views the significance of his own work. The threads of the chapters, three of which appeared in abbreviated form as articles, are never pulled together, nor are we told how Waite believes his interpretation has significantly advanced and revised our understanding of Joris.

The text of David Joris is supplemented with two maps, nine tables, and eleven illustrations, mostly from the Wonder Book (1543 and 1551 editions), all very attractively produced. There is a name and subject index which unfortunately omits secondary authors, and has no entries for David or Dirkgen Joris or their parents. Clearly, however, Waite’s book deserves to be read by all scholars interested in the Radical Reformation field.

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To anyone working with the records for wages, prices and productivity from medieval continental Europe, the sheer volume of English evidence is a perpetual source of envy, incomplete though it may be. Inevitably during the last 30 years with the increasing interest in social and economic history inspired by the Annales school this has encouraged the production of a huge number of works devoted to various aspects of English life and society and to the economic factors which influenced them. We have studies of diet (one of Dyer’s own chosen fields), housing, clothing, and so on. In an attempt to reconstruct peasant life we have a daunting number of studies of individual villages or groups of estates. It was high time that somebody tried to pull all this together into a form more digestible for students and scholars alike. This Dyer has undertaken to do, at least in one area, and we must all be grateful to him. This is not, for the most part, a work of original scholarship nor does it claim to be: it was commissioned for a series of textbooks designed to provide introductions to various reasonably precise topics. The conclusions are not new but some of the nuances are; and the coverage of secondary material is prodigious. Scholars and students will ignore it at their peril.
The book falls into three main divisions. The first concerns the aristocracy—
their incomes and expenditures, and how, if at all, they balanced these. Here Dyer
is naturally forced to deal with the vexed question of who constituted the aristocracy.
Wisely avoiding too clear cut economic or legal criteria, he concludes that the
aristocracy was those who dominated society, who provided military and adminis-
trative services and who consciously adopted a distinctive lifestyle. Economically
his aristocratic class covers rather a broad spectrum, including both the great
magnates and the gentry, men with an income of £3000 and those with a mere £10
a year; but he argues that differences within this group were matters of quantity not
quality. Rejecting medieval categories, he also includes many of the clergy whose
lifestyles were similar to those of lords or gentry within the group. They maintained
considerable households. Their largest single expense, taking from 25 - 70% of total
revenue was food, but Dyer rejects almost indignantly the stereotype of late
medieval lords overindulging themselves, which seems to be overwhelmingly based
on the rare incident of Archbishop Neville’s feast. The most useful part of this
section is the chapter discussing the problems of the aristocracy in balancing
the budget. Their revenues had on the whole diminished by the fifteenth century and
while this was cushioned by a fall in the real price of food, manufactured articles
had risen in value, catching the upper aristocracy at least in a pincer. This did indeed
lead to economies in expenditure on food and drink while homes, undeniably more
luxurious for the lord in the fifteenth century, in fact cost less to build and maintain.
Households could be reduced; and increased privacy enabled the lord to spend more
on himself and less on his servants. But the insistence on careful accounting which
developed in the fourteenth century is symptomatic of the preoccupations of the
landlords with the need to economise on their expenditures.

The second and perhaps most valuable part of the book concerns the peasants.
This group is defined, again very widely, as small scale cultivators regardless of
their legal status and ranging from yeoman farmers only just below the gentry in
wealth and status to poor tenants eking out a living from three or four acres held by
rent, service or both from a landlord. Dyer first tries to reconstruct the peasant
economy from records much scantier than in the case of the aristocracy for the
periods before and after 1350. This section is perhaps a little bland. It gives very
little hint of the controversy which the living standards of peasants have aroused
for some time: and in particular it sidesteps the issue of the effect of demographic
change generally on living standards. For instance we are told that “figures from
serf lists and wills suggest an average of two children” per family. Perhaps – but
some indication of other estimates (Postan, Titow, etc.), or even that other estimates
exist, might have been in order, given the virulence of recent debates. Dyer is
probably right in rejecting generalisations which have very little real meaning in
favour of case studies. He appreciates the need to demonstrate that the results he
obtains can legitimately be applied more generally. But the result is to rest much of
what he says on evidence which is, geographically at any rate, fairly limited. He concludes that the later medieval peasants had the ability to enjoy a higher standard of living that their thirteenth-century forebears, particularly in the lowest levels of the peasant hierarchy. There is nothing very startling here, though the marshalling of the data, some of them published before in highly complex form in very detailed studies, is a nice achievement of synthesis.

In some ways more interesting is the discussion of peasants as consumers which again covers their diet, their housing, their possessions and their resources in general. Dyer does not glamorise the condition of the peasantry – some of them lived perilously near starvation particularly before 1350 – but he gives a clearer indication of the life of the better-off peasants than is normally available.

The third section opens with a discussion of urban standards of living and consumption, pointing out, among other things, the fact, all too often forgotten, that even in the middle ages it cost a good deal more to live in the two towns than in the countryside and that lower incomes had to be stretched a lot further. Risks of famine were greater and living conditions less hygienic. Still urban dwellers on the whole enjoyed a better diet than their rural contemporaries. Their demands were similar – food, accommodation and textiles were the main priorities —: even in the two towns this was not a consumer society.

In his discussion of wages and wage labour, Dyer emphasises that most wage labourers were underemployed, often combining wage earning with other occupations. It is difficult therefore to estimate their standard of living since even the builders, the most regularly employed wage earners, did not work at building continuously. Nevertheless Dyer does discuss conditions of wage labour and annual earnings. He rightly challenges the “bread basket” of consumables used by Phelps and Brown in their classic attempt to relate wages to living standards though he accepts that their data, if used with sufficient caution, can still be valuable. What he also does, mostly by implication, is to reject too statistical an approach to medieval data. He includes a few tables and graphs but he does not for example try to construct indices which, based on inconclusive data, are as likely to mislead as instruct.

In a book on standards of living it is perhaps greedy to expect more on conditions of work. Nevertheless it would have been interesting to have something on the effects of conscription and migration on the expectations of labourers. It would also have been useful to have rather more discussion of the differences between the expectations of rural and urban workers. Granted that some labourers moved from one environment to the other, the fact remains that while wages were not usually very different, urban costs were higher. Finally, women get rather short shrift. Generally – though not invariably – women received lower wages for the same work than their male counterparts. Did this mean that their standard of living was lower or were they “cushioned” by their families?
The book concludes with two chapters, one on poverty and charity which analyses sources of charity and charts the growing tendency to discriminate between deserving and undeserving poor which was to become so marked a characteristic of later centuries; the other on the weather and its effect on standards of living, a long overdue summary of the work which has come out on weather patterns since the 1960s.

This is not a social and economic history of Late Medieval Britain. Dyer focusses fairly rigidly on his chosen topic. Nevertheless, since he accepts that standards of living are affected by a large number of variables, it covers a very wide field and it does so extremely comprehensively. The book is very readable and the combination of detail and generalisation skillful. One of the advantages of a work of synthesis is that it can act as a guide to current literature. In this connection the bibliography is a little disappointing: it is considerably more selective than the notes. The latter, on the other hand, are admirable, and Cambridge University Press deserves high praise for keeping them where they should be, at the bottom of the page.

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