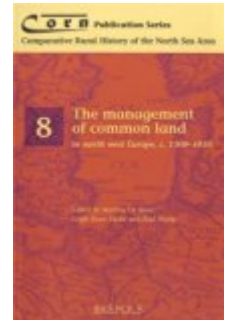


**Martina de Moor, Leigh Shaw-Taylor, Paul Warde, eds..** *The Management of Common Land in North West Europe, c. 1500-1850*. Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2002. 261 pp. EUR 60,00, paper, ISBN 978-2-503-51273-0.



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## The Tragedy of the Commons?

The significance of common land in north western Europe in the past has often been marginalized, as have the people who depended on the resources of such land for a substantial proportion of their livelihoods. Throughout western Europe, the period from the later eighteenth century has witnessed a sustained attack on the extent of such lands as they were encroached on piecemeal or enclosed by more formal, large-scale reclamation schemes. The social impact and the political implications of the removal of commons, particularly the conversion of peasant societies into rural proletariats, has generated a lively and continuing historical debate. Yet the scale and importance of commons in social and economic terms, in their heyday, has received less attention than their demise and the views of historians regarding their roles have often been coloured by those of contemporary, strongly partisan, pro-enclosure writers. Hardin's persuasive "tragedy of the commons" theory has tended to make us assume that any communally managed resource of this kind must inevitably have been managed in-

efficiently, a view which echoes the opinions of many commentators in the past. Yet this is often demonstrably a biased perception. Perhaps immediately prior to enclosure many commons were indeed mismanaged and over-grazed, but a longer-term perspective relating to their functioning is needed to form a more balanced judgement. The book develops a more positive view of the role of commons in supporting the poorer elements in rural societies.

This collection of studies emphasises that common lands were a key component of early-modern agriculture in many parts of north west Europe. An editors' introduction and concluding chapter sandwiches eight regionally focused chapters which examine the management of common lands as integral parts of the agricultural systems in northern and southern England, the Netherlands, Flanders, France, Sweden, and north western and south western Germany. While commons were mainly developed on poorer-quality land, they were far from being accidental survivals of completely "natural" landscapes but were carefully regulated multi-purpose resources

which were integrated with other elements in local and regional economies, and for which sustainable management was a reality rather than an ideal.

Each chapter tackles the same basic set of questions: how extensive were the commons and how important were they in the rural economy? What was the legal basis for common rights, who owned the commons, who used them, what institutions regulated them, and how successful were their activities? The result is, inevitably, a complex picture, shaped by the different legal institutions and customs of each region and locality but in their concluding chapter the editors successfully draw these individual studies together and come to some broad conclusions. The regional cameos, taken together, help to define regions of relative success and failure in terms of the survival of commons. In the past, commons were managed by quite sophisticated institutions, usually through some kind of court, which mostly had the power and flexibility to alter the rules that they applied. The editors conclude that the idea of the "tragedy of the commons" should be put to rest as a model for "the commons," but they emphasise that more detailed empirical and comparative studies are still needed to clarify the picture. The book has, however, provided a sound foundation for such research in the future and is recommended for the light that it sheds on an often neglected aspect of early-modern agriculture and rural society.

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