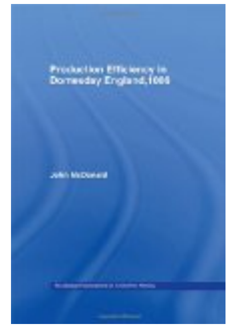
H-Net Reviews in the Humanities & Social Sciences



John McDonald. *Production Efficiency in Domesday England, 1086.* London and New York: Routledge, 1998. xiv + 240 pp. $85.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-415-16187-9.

Reviewed by Maristella Botticini

Published on EH.Net (March, 2000)

On the cover page of John McDonald's ***Production Efficiency in Domesday England, 1086*** it might be appropriate to include a warning label: "Reading this book may have fatal consequences for certain scholars." The reason is simple: it takes a lot of energy and passion for a medievalist to keep reading the book after page 14 when the author starts employing high-tech economic models (chapters two and three) and fancy regressions (chapter four). On the other hand, patient medievalists (and other scholars as well) will be rewarded by learning that scholars have been basically wrong in arguing that English estates were run inefficiently by Norman conquerors. According to McDonald (Professor of Economics at Flinders University of South Australia) these estates were run at similar efficiency levels to comparable production units in more modern economies, such as farms in the postbellum U.S. South, farms in contemporary California, and surface coalmines in the U.S (p. 137).

After a clear and insightful introductory chapter that describes the main features of the English economy at the time of the Norman conquest, elucidates the data of the Domesday Book, and outlines the main themes of the book, the reader enters with chapters two and three into a "jungle" of technical models that explain the techniques used by the author to measure production efficiency in agriculture. The core of the book is in chapters four and six where McDonald applies these techniques to a sample of estates surveyed in the Domesday Book (those of Essex lay estates).

The book addresses important questions such as: Which tenants-in-chief ran efficient estates? How was productivity affected by soil type, the size of the estate, the tenancy agreement, the institutional framework of the time and the proximity of a market center? Which inputs made the major contribution to the net value of output? Did slaves make a greater contribution to the manorial lord's net income than peasants? What was the effect of feudal and manorial systems, which discouraged mobility of inputs, on the system of production, input productivities and total output produced? Given technology and the institutional framework, were estates run efficiently?

Multivariate regression analysis carried out in chapter four indicates that efficiency depended on the spatial location of the farm (in which hundred the farm was located), but was not affected by the type of soil and proximity to urban economies. Larger farms tended to be more efficient suggesting that economies of scale were at work. Efficiency was influenced by whether an estate was held in demesne by the tenant-in-chief (estates being held in demesne tended to be more efficient) and who the tenant-in-chief was. Estates with relatively more grazing were more efficient than estates with relatively more arable or mixed farming. The existence of some ancillary resources on the farm (beehives, mills, or saltpans) seems to have made estates less efficient, whereas fisheries and vineyards do not seem to have had any effect. Overall, English estates were run efficiently by Norman conquerors. Yet the restrictions and rigidities imposed by feudal and manorial systems had a negative impact on agricultural efficiency (pp. 140-143).

While I highly recommend this book to both economists and historians, I think it is worthwhile to stress some weaknesses. The first issue is why the author does not compare medieval English agriculture to English agriculture in later centuries. This would have been even more interesting than comparing Domesday England to contemporary California farms or U. S. surface coalmines. We could learn, for example, how the demise of the feudal and manorial systems of production affected agricultural production in England, or how the development of more important and significant urban centers (compared to Maldon and Colchester in 1086) influenced agricultural efficiency. Second, given that it is not always clear whether the annual value of an estate included ancillary resources, one wonders if this can make the comparisons of the efficiency of various estates meaningless. The author dismisses the argument by arguing that the existence of ancillary resources would have had opposite effects and that therefore their overall impact on efficiency was probably minimal. But what about other incomes from feudal rights that could have entered into the annual values of estates?

Another critical point is the organization of the book. The technical chapters two and three should have gone into large appendices. Those who know the frontier technique are bored by reading these chapters; those who do not have the knowledge to understand these chapters can be really discouraged from reading the book. A further minor criticism is of technical nature and has to do with the multivariate regressions. The question is why the author does not include fixed or random effects to account for variables that do not vary across a tenant-in-chief or whoever was running the farm. His abilities, experience, and other unobservable variables could have affected the way he ran his estates.

The book requires a lot of patience and passion for high-tech economy history. If one is willing to persevere and arrive at the end of the book, the effort is rewarded. Someone else can apply the same frontier technique to Norfolk and Suffolk, for which, together with Essex, the Domesday Book provides the most detailed information, and check whether McDonald's findings still hold for these counties. More importantly, someone can do the same exercise on English agriculture for later periods and tell us whether and how the demise of the feudal system affected agricultural efficiency.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at http://eh.net/

Citation: Maristella Botticini. Review of McDonald, John. *Production Efficiency in Domesday England, 1086.* EH.Net, H-Net Reviews. March, 2000.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=3920