Edwin DeWindt’s collection of documents relating to the late medieval English peasantry is a highly successful addition to the Documents of Practice Series published by the Medieval Institute for the Consortium for the Teaching of the Middle Ages (TEAMS). Introduced, edited, and translated from the Latin by DeWindt, the documents testify to the complex and highly regulated nature of medieval peasant life. They include a list of customary work services, a charter, two court rolls, an account roll, and a list of fines and payments, each from the village of Warboys cum Caldecote, near Huntingdon, and each dated between 1294 and 1309. As a manor owned by the Benedictine abbey at Ramsey, Warboys has been subject to scrutiny by members of the Toronto School of social and economic historians and is thus an ideal location for a case-study of documents. DeWindt’s collection will be useful to students of both history and literature.

DeWindt’s introduction situates medieval English villagers within medieval social structures, patterns of settlement, and systems of administration. He explains the various types of records that shed light on the experience of peasants and outlines the advantages and pitfalls of each. DeWindt’s substantial and often humorous footnotes to the introduction provide a commentary that is both useful and highly readable. In footnote 33, for instance, he refers students interested in the mentalités of medieval people to Peter Abelard’s Historia Calamitatum and confesses parenthetically that medievalists have been known to refer privately to this text as ‘Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen’ (p. 16). In both text and notes, DeWindt acquaints students not only with the historiography of the late medieval English peasantry, but also with scholarship on other related disciplines, periods, and places. This balanced and wide-ranging bibliographic introduction is further supplemented by five pages of suggested readings following the documents. As with other publications in the TEAMS series, a brief glossary is also provided.

The six documents that make up the bulk of the book have been well chosen in terms of making medieval peasant life both concrete and accessible to students. DeWindt provides supplementary information about many of the individual peasants who appear in the documents, so that they seem more three dimensional than mere names. Some people appear in more than one document, allowing students to participate in the simultaneous delights and difficulties of record linkage. DeWindt has also been careful to select documents that illustrate both relationships among peasants and relationships between peasants and their manorial superiors. Students can find, for instance, records of merchet fees paid to the abbot of Ramsey for licenses of peasant women to be married, heriot payments due upon inheritance of the land of another peasant, and leyrwite fines made for fornication. They can detect seigneurial attitudes toward peasant labor in the schedule of labor services and in the charter that transfers both land and the labor of its occupants from one ‘owner’ to another. They can examine relationships within the village in court entries dealing with assaults,
debts, trespasses, and regulation of brewsters. Yet DeWindt’s judicious editorial
comments also instruct students in the interpretation of these documents. He points
out instances when accounts do not add up properly, when surnames are not used
consistently, and when the meaning of Latin terms is unclear. These documents are
an ideal source for making students ‘do’ history. One might, for example, ask students
to use them as the basis of a paper analyzing the position of women in the medieval
English peasantry or the maintenance of seigneurial and communal regulation in
medieval villages.

DeWindt assumes that the primary readers of his text will be students of medieval
history (22). Yet both the introduction and documents of his book also have much to
offer students of literature. While the documents date from the earlier end of the
fourteenth century, the evidence they provide of the complex and stratified nature of
English peasant communities posits a lively supplement to the more stereotypical
literary portraits of peasants by Chaucer, Langland, Gower, and others. Scholars of
literature who seek to use ‘non-literary’ texts in their work will find that DeWindt’s
introduction provides a good basic manual of interpretation. With the increasing
interest in interdisciplinary work and borrowing of source materials across disciplinary
boundaries, accessible guides such as this one are doubly valuable.

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