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REMEMBERING PEASANTS

A PERSONAL HISTORY OF A VANISHED WORLD

by [Patrick Joyce](#) · RELEASE DATE: Feb. 20, 2024

A first-class work combining social history and ethnohistory with an unerring sense for a good story.

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A British historian looks deeply into the lost past of the peasantry, people who “hope for the future but do not forget the past.”

For most of history, Joyce writes, most people belonged to the peasantry, the class of people who made their living from the land. They were concentrated in scattered villages that favored something approaching democratic rule, even in the face of larger, more autocratic systems. The author focuses on Ireland, Poland, and southern Italy, but he also ranges widely. One surprise is how rapidly peasant communities have declined as agriculture has become less central to national and international economies. The famed English village of Akenfield, for example, the subject of a canonical book of rural sociology, has largely been gentrified and its past commodified, although the village does have “some Polish immigrant workers, people now more likely to have been peasants than anyone in the place.” Across the narrow sea, “rural Ireland has receded from people’s daily awareness,” with farmland now retired for leisure and tourism. Even the Mezzogiorno of Italy, considered “among the most ‘backward’ [areas] in Europe,” has become relatively wealthy. Joyce lauds many of the habits of agricultural peoples, including economic awareness, adaptability, and generosity. For example, he notes, in rural communities, money was loaned without interest, which by definition separated peasants from capitalists; politics tended to be decentralized, resistant to central authority, and bent in many cases toward anarchism (“not surprisingly, given peasant distrust of the state”); and religious belief preserved archaic and even pre-Christian beliefs while being being marked by “its lack of dogma, its indifference to theology, its human-centered God.” Why remember these peasants? As Joyce replies resoundingly, “We have a debt to those forgotten by history”: a debt that this elegantly written book seeks to repay.

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