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Review of *Fire from Heaven: Life in an English Town in the Seventeenth Century* by David Underdown

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microexamples and vast generalizations. Despite these difficulties, Ambrosoli successfully demonstrates that the interaction between “scientists, peasants and landowners” created the scientific study of agriculture. While his work exemplifies many of the problems of comparative analysis, it also shows how this approach refines the questions that we ask. Contrasting the social, economic, and cultural conditions surrounding the cultivation of nature in three countries, Ambrosoli clarifies to a great extent why Italy continued to be the site of Europe’s botanical imagination and France a nation that ordered nature, while England became the home to the “agricultural revolution.”

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Fire from Heaven: Life in an English Town in the Seventeenth Century. By
David Underdown.

New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1992. Pp. ix + 308. \$28.50.

David Underdown, one of the foremost scholars of seventeenth-century England, has produced major political studies, such as *Pride’s Purge: Politics in the Puritan Revolution* (Oxford, 1971), and works that combined social history with political change, such as *Revel, Riot, and Rebellion* (New York, 1985). *Fire from Heaven* is a case study of the west-county town of Dorchester, a proud and important community in the first half of the seventeenth century. The material and close reading of Dorchester’s records are fascinating and give us insight into the lives of the forgotten people. This book offers a key into the mental world of some of the leading families of Dorchester. Yet this book is far more than a local history. By focusing on the efforts for godly reformation in Dorchester, and the resistance of such efforts, Underdown uses Dorchester as a microcosm of the struggles of Puritanism in early Stuart and Civil War England. This case study helps us to understand more about the underlying religious and social ruptures that led to the midcentury revolution. Underdown’s study substantially adds to the debate on the nature of Puritanism. While he admits that the term itself is a modern abstraction, he argues that it also has important historical validity.

The catalyst for the reform movement in Dorchester was a great fire in August 1613. One hundred and seventy houses were burned, half the total number in the town. The fire had a great physical and financial impact, but the emotional and spiritual result was even greater: it led to a mass conversion and made the people of the town more receptive to their minister, John White, a man of eloquent speech and Puritan sympathies. To the godly, the fire was a message from heaven of the need to transform the town. This study focuses on who the reformers were, whom they wished to reform, how and why they did what they did, and why in the end they failed. Underdown suggests the struggle in Dorchester was for the very soul of the town. Matthew Chubb, town steward in the early seventeenth century, had a very different vision of the ideal community from the one espoused by White and his allies. Chubb represented the old conception of neighborliness, community, and a social order held together by an interlocking network of mutual obligations. He believed the town did not need the attention of self-righteous reformers and saw the Puritans, with their emphasis on the gulf between the elect and the reprobate, as uncharitable and divisive. Yet both Chubb’s and White’s followers all belonged to the same church: the conflict was in part for control of its rituals and perhaps even its doctrines.

One can read this conflict within one small town as a microcosm of the conflict that rocked early seventeenth-century English political society. Underdown uses the records of Dorchester to describe explicitly the kinds of behavior—missing church or leaving services early, drinking, dancing, illicit sexual behavior—that distressed reformers. As the century progressed, the reformers were able for some time to curb such actions, and they were strikingly successful at enforcing church attendance and regulating illicit sexuality. They also introduced very different approaches to deal with poverty and begging, problems that became even more severe with the economic depression of the mid-seventeenth century, induced by the disruption of the cloth market during the Thirty Years' War and the harvest failures of the early 1620s and 1630s. By the 1630s Dorchester was a reformed and disciplined community; but this reform provoked opposition as well as support. Underdown's study also tells us about social and economic status and its impact. The leaders of the campaign for reform almost without exception came from the upper ranks of the town's hierarchy, while most of the visible opposition to reform came from the poorest third of the population. The godly reformation could not have succeeded without at least the acquiescence of a substantial proportion of Dorchester's lower orders, but there was always a substantial element of the Dorchester population who responded to the godly reformation with indifference, anger, or mocking laughter.

As the seventeenth century progressed, the people of Dorchester worried about the pro-Spanish, pro-Catholic policy of the government. They were upset about Archbishop William Laud's policies and the taxes of the 1630s. By 1641 people in Dorchester shared in the national mood of fear and anxiety. During the Civil War, control of Dorchester went back and forth between Royalists and Parliamentarians, while the poor suffered terribly. Despite the town's puritan leanings, in the 1650s there was little enthusiasm for the Commonwealth. In 1660 people in Dorchester were sincerely glad about the Restoration, though later they were deeply disappointed that Charles II was not the Christian prince they had expected. After 1662, the vision of a reformed, godly community that had inspired the leaders of Dorchester since the fire of 1613 gradually faded. The reformers' goal of a better society was eventually defeated, Underdown suggests, by worldliness, ambition, and sheer inertia. But an even more powerful cause of its downfall was the tenacity of popular cultural traditions, which always remained just beneath the surface of popular consciousness. The mocking laughter that greeted the reformers indeed became the last laugh.

David Underdown has produced a book that, while solidly researched and sophisticated in its analysis, is also elegantly and accessibly written. Both scholars of seventeenth-century England and a more general audience will learn from and appreciate this study.

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Friends in Life and Death: The British and Irish Quakers in the Demographic Transition, 1650–1900. By *Richard T. Vann* and *David Eversley*. Cambridge Studies in Population, Economy, and Society in Past Time. Edited by *Peter Laslett, Roger Schofield, E. A. Wrigley, and Daniel Scott Smith*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992. Pp. xix + 281. \$49.50.

This volume represents the culmination of three decades of demographic research by Richard Vann and David Eversley on the Society of Friends, a group that consciously