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Agricultural Records in Britain, A.D. 220-1977 by J. M. Stratton; Jack Houghton

Review by: Donald McCloskey

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## Reviews of Books

### ANCIENT AND MEDIEVAL

*Agricultural Records in Britain, A.D. 220-1977.* By J. M. Stratton and Jack Houghton Brown. Hamden, CT: Archon, 1978. Pp. 259. \$15.00.

The antiquarian inclusiveness of the dates in the title will warn the reader that the book has no use. In 220 "a great frost in England is said to have lasted five months," but we are not told who said so on what authority where and why. In 1977 (as in 1947 through 1976) the accounts of the weather are reproduced by kind permission of *The Times*, with additional intelligence supplied, apparently, by the authors (such as "1976: The year started in pedestrian fashion"). In his remarks on the grandfather of the present work (T. H. Baker's *Records of the Seasons* [1883]) Eric L. Jones made the relevant points: Baker "exasperates the reader by his failure to give adequate references to the sources"; "his lack of system means, sadly, that he undid much of his own work." His book, in this form, has "lived on into a century which demands more purpose and more rigorous method than he could command" (Jones, *Seasons and Prices: The Role of Weather in English Agricultural History* [London, 1964], p. 188). Stratton and Brown have not even troubled themselves to collect in a usefully centralized form the records that Baker had, such as inches of rainfall. Jones' book is the only serious approach to the matter in English. The Stratton and Brown book is a waste of time.

The danger is that the historically naive will take its slapdash collection of prices, say, as "data" for a Box-Jenkins trip. The opiate of the scholar is the book with no footnotes, beyond which he need not inquire, such as the present work, or the nearest textbook (for the extremely simple-minded), ranging up through Mulhall's accursed *Dictionary of Statistics*. The various abstracts of historical statistics are by comparison methadone clinics for kicking the habit, so careful are the best of them to give the exact source and the exact disabilities of each series. We need more of them, to train our data junkies in the elements of scholarly care. Who among you, for example, will volunteer to edit a few series for a New Abstract of British Historical Statistics, building on the foundations laid down by Mitchell and Deane? A whole volume could be devoted to agriculture, for example, giving the facts before 1800 more full treatment. Indeed, it might be called *Agricultural Records in Britain*.

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*Jewish Bankers and the Holy See from the Thirteenth to the Seventeenth Century.* By Léon Poliakov. Translated by Miriam Kochan. Littman Library of Jewish Civilization. London, Henley, and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978. Pp. xii, 275. \$11.50.

This book attempts to do far more than its title would indicate: going beyond the history of papal attitudes to Jewish banking, Poliakov tries to synthesize the many available studies of individual bankers and local *condotte* (charters) into a comprehensive description of Jewish money-lending in Renaissance and early modern Italy. Unfortunately this broader goal is his undoing. Jewish economic history in general and the history of Jewish banking in particular are not yet sufficiently well explored to warrant such a synthesis. Rather than mining one of the rich veins of archival materials or rabbinic *responsa* which he mentions in passing, the author contents himself with tracing the surface contours of a collection of uneven and too often amateurish studies by earlier writers. He can frequently do no more than hint at crucial questions in the history of Jewish banking, such as, for