Reay disclaims any ambition to achieve a total history of English society by piling up such microhistories for all parts of England; it would take so long, he says, that the research questions would have significantly changed in the course of the research (as the lengthy gestational period for such studies suggests). He also disclaims any ambition to write a total history even of these three parishes. Instead, he aims to elucidate broader problems of social change through the “microscope” of nominal linkage within this small area.

These problems are familiar. Most have been on the agenda of the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure—not only fertility and mortality, but also literacy, household structure, and sexuality—about which, he says, “more bad history has been written . . . than [on] any other subject” (179).

Although Reay acknowledges the influence of the Cambridge Group, the book qualifies many positions associated with them. His findings suggest that in the countryside, the “fertility transition” (involving some family limitation) began in the “dark age” of English population history—between the widespread failures in parochial registration at the end of the eighteenth century and the start of civil registration in 1837. Studying adjacent parishes enabled him to keep many migrants “in observation,” since migration, though common, rarely involved a trip of more than five miles. It also allowed him to trace extended kin relationships, which his oral histories show to have been more significant than the emphasis on the perdurably nuclear nature of English households would suggest. Care of the elderly, he believes, fell heavily on adult children in spite of the Poor Laws. Reay devotes some of his most pungent pages to illegitimacy, which he claims to have been so widespread as to make reference to a “sub-society of bastard bearers” inappropriate.

So short a review can only suggest the richness of this book—not least in its vignettes of ordinary rural women carrying their babies into the field while they worked and men contributing sixpence a week to get health insurance through their pubs—all making do in their common life. Putting these faces on social categories reminds us of life as it was lived.

Richard T. Vann
Wesleyan University


That the Irish linen industry has been the economic warp through which Ulster society can be viewed as a central thread of this collection of essays by scholars from a range of disciplines. Their premise is that the
production and expansion of the linen industry were dependent on England's political economy and the exploitation of cheap female labor. According to Philip Ollerenshaw's contribution, the debate about proto-industrialization during the last twenty years has added enormously to our knowledge of the cotton, woolen, and linen industries. His dismal conclusion is that in the competition between the various cloth-producing industries, linen was typically a loser, as were the regions in which linen was produced.

Jane Gray makes an outstanding contribution to this book with her comparison of the Scottish and Irish linen industries. Gray's strategy combines the strengths of the proto-industrialization thesis and world-systems theory to argue that the divergent paths of the Scottish and Irish linen industries can be explained through what she terms "incorporated comparative" analysis. Despite a number of shared features, the role of linen production in the two countries was radically different. In Ireland, household linen production perpetuated proto-industrialization and was a regional factor in the fragmentation of land—a situation that resulted ultimately in the collapse of the agricultural economy by mid-century. In contrast, the Scottish linen industry ushered in the age of industrialization and concomitant prosperity. The supply of female labor was critical in the outcome. In Ireland, a plentiful supply of female labor was the decisive factor in increasing the output of linen cloth under rural industrial systems of production, whereas, in Scotland, a regional shortage of female labor pushed merchants and manufacturers toward mechanized spinning processes.

Access to capital played a significant role in the contrasting outcomes. The Scottish industry centralized fairly early, encouraged by the activities of the British Linen Company that promoted the development of spinning by lending capital to purchase flax and spinning wheels. Ireland's domestic industry, however, remained highly decentralized, although it was given strong encouragement by the Irish Linen Board, as Harry Gribbon's study makes clear. Gribbon drew on the extensive business materials in the Northern Ireland Public Record Office for his examination of the Board's activities.

Anne McKernan and Nancy Curtin examine popular protest in the eighteenth-century Ulster linen industry. McKernan drew on Reddy's concept of the market as "contested terrain" to examine a 1762 rebellion of Lisburn linen weavers protesting against exacting compliance of certain previously unenforced standards in their industry.¹ Her study draws attention to newspapers as a valuable source for the study of the politicized activity of the masses. Popular politicization is also the topic of Curtin's study, which examines Gibbon's thesis that the popular discontent of Ulster weavers in the 1790s is explainable by the state of

the linen industry. Critiquing Gibbon, Curtin draws on class analysis to conclude that greater credence should be given to the discontent exploited by the ideologies and rhetoric of the United Irishmen.

The year 1825 marked a watershed in the development of the Ulster linen industry. From that point onward, yarn spinning moved toward mechanized processes. Joan Vincent's work bridges the two periods when she draws attention to the persisting importance of linen production in the northwestern counties of Ulster, countering those who believe that burgeoning development in the northeast sapped energies from this region. Concentrating on evidence from county Fermanagh, she concludes that the strategy of encouraging chain migration to North America ensured that farms would not be subdivided into the uneconomic units that doomed other parts of west Ireland when the Great Famine hit. The northwest was not alone in preserving the continuity of hand technology, as shown by Brenda Collins' study of six townlands along the River Lagan, upriver from Lisburn where hand-woven linen was increasingly produced by women and girls employed under the "Verlagsystem," whereby merchants purchased the raw materials for distribution to weavers.

Almost twenty years ago, Messenger’s conclusion that most linen mill and factory workers in her survey were not discontented with their lot aroused considerable criticism from labor historians. Applying the theoretical insights of Passerini, Cohen addresses this issue of the dualism between structure and subjectivity among linen industry workers in the Lurgan region, parish of Tullylish, county Down. Influenced by recent approaches to the deconstruction of masculinity, she argues convincingly that the social identities of the women that she interviewed did not derive from the nature and conditions of their waged work. The women's identities were determined more by their unwaged domestic work and their roles within the household than by intermittent waged work. A lack of alternatives tied the women to Tullylish.

Cohen has skilfully drawn together a diverse collection of top scholars from the fields of history, sociology, and anthropology. This volume is a valuable reference about social life in Ulster during the past two centuries, and a memorable examination of the economic history of the linen industry in relation to Irish history.

Ruth-Ann M. Harris
Boston College

3 Betty Messenger, Picking Up the Linen Threads (Belfast, 1980).