Professor David Hey died in February 2016, and this book is thus sadly published posthumously by Bloomsbury. It is a strange sensation to handle a book that its own author cannot feel, see and be gratified by, yet it does him great credit that he was able to finish this work. It bears witness to his dedication, expertise and wide knowledge. The book is extremely well written, strongly engaging, by an author whose work in regional history, on the Sheffield region (‘Hallamshire’) and Yorkshire, on surnames, roads and carriers, on Richard’s Gough’s Myddle, on family history and so many other topics is well known and highly respected. David Hey’s personality and intellectual persona shine through everywhere, just as they did in his gregarious and companionable life. I expected to be much interested and informed by this book on the ‘grass roots’ and basis of English society in the early modern period, and I was.

For this work is highly readable, up-to-date on the historiography, wide-ranging in theme and chronology, and it provides an excellent survey and interpretation of the early modern period. One is reminded of the scope and purpose of earlier books by authors such as Charles Wilson (England’s Apprenticeship), Keith Wrightson, W.G. Hoskins, D.C. Coleman, Richard McKinley, Christopher Dyer or Barry Reay’s Rural Englands – the latter also stressing regional diversities in its plural ‘Englands’ but covering a later period. One sees the influence of scholars such as Alan Everitt and Charles Phythian-Adams. David Hey, as my colleague Andrew Hopper commented when he saw this book, was ‘a living legend really’. His books on family history in particular did more than any others to form a field, to inspire huge numbers of the public to engage in and research their family histories, to engross international members of the British diaspora, and to show the relevance of family history to wider historical studies. As one would expect from prior work by him, there is a welcome emphasis here on surnames, on aspects of material culture, on place names, combined with a more general survey of key features of the period’s religious, political and socio-economic history. There is able discussion of such features as vernacular architecture, the organization and living structures of the countryside, ways of earning a living, historic towns and cities, parish churches and chapels, population and family life. The book is chronologically wide. The addition of University of Leicester-founded DNA fingerprinting and profiling analysis, and related issues of surname distribution, to his coverage also has been highly interesting, with revealing case studies here of selected surnames and their local meanings.

David Hey’s books and other publications on the widely defined Sheffield region have a high reputation as scholarly and pioneering works on this important industrializing area. I did wonder therefore whether there would be a strong emphasis here on Yorkshire and Derbyshire, but this book is very wide in its coverage: it is remarkable that Hey manages to discuss such a wide span of England in his evidence. It also has much to say about London, often rather neglected in provincial historical emphases. There is very good regional balance throughout, and examples are widely drawn from across England. This makes it compelling...
in its generalizations, as well as being very accessible and appealing to readers from many regions. I personally regret the omission of Wales, but then no author can be perfect, and there is interesting comment on other Celtic countries.

In particular, Hey argues that people thought in terms of regions as ‘countries’. ‘Countries’ were geographic pays, known localized topographies, farming areas, market-town districts, cultural regions, dialectal zones. ‘Core’ families pertained to these, and core families and such ‘countries’ are concepts that supply the main structure for his book. This is a compelling line of interpretation that distinguishes his book from many others. It is a useful leitmotif that keeps the book well integrated as an argument. He may on occasion over-stress stability as against turn-over of populations, yet this is a promising emphasis for further research, opening up many questions. How did people define a ‘country’ thus seen? Was it cultural, a working area, a migration area, an ambit for labour hiring fairs, a market-orientated area, a dialectal district, a locality of certain ‘core’ families, a style-defined area of built, vernacular or folk culture, and so on? How did these matters, criteria and evidential forms interact? How did this concept of ‘country’ feature in public and subjective minds, and were there differences in concepts and criteria across regions, genders and classes? How did kinship networks relate to this theme? There is little doubt that this book will promote and frame on-going scholarly enquiries along such lines.

While the book is not really monograph-type primary research, it is presented as a new distinctive interpretation, with its own highlights and authorial priorities, with a wealth of new examples, with fresh interpretations of landscape history, family history and local history. It should be keenly read by academics and by a great diversity of students, from undergraduates to research students. Furthermore, and as with David Hey’s other books, this work is most approachable as well as being erudite, and it will thus appeal widely to the public. It has eye-catching illustrations and is attractively published and priced by Bloomsbury Academic – this is a publisher that is very notable for producing appealing and fine-looking academic books. It will draw many readers further into the early modern period, open their eyes to new ways of looking at their histories, via David Hey’s bracing mud-on-boots and northern English vernacular conceptions of the practice of history. The book will contribute much to an appreciation of the underpinnings both of general society as well as of so many regional societies, landscapes and regional cultures in the past – with all the resonance that such understanding has for understanding ourselves today and for a visual and immediate appreciation of the history everywhere around us.

K.D.M. Snell,
Centre for English Local History,
University of Leicester.