

## REVIEW

(Ed.) J. McDonnell, *A History of Helmsley, Rievaulx and District*. pp. i-xviii, 1-472, and 16 plates. Stonegate Press, York, 1963. Price £2 5s. 0d.

A good local history of any district is to be welcomed. The area covered by this book is the market town of Helmsley in the North Riding of Yorkshire together with the ground included in the ancient manor of Helmsley. The volume has been prepared by a group of members of the Yorkshire Archæological Society and is a commendable achievement.

There are four chapters devoted to the archæological material, two chapters on roads, several linking historical chapters, chapters devoted to Rievaulx, to local trades, to nonconformity, and a final (almost central) chapter on the shaping of modern Helmsley. There are informative accounts, for example, of the Kirkdale cave, and of the finds in the group of fissures known as the Windypits; there is a useful chapter describing dikes and earthworks in the area, and sections on Catholic recusancy and on Quakerism. Two families, long associated with the district, the Croslands and the Sandwiths, have their history told in full. The Sandwith family for a succession of generations produced doctors. What an interesting piece of social history it would have been had we been told how the medical training of these successive generations varied.

In his disarming preface Mr. McDonnell writes that when the group started its task he at least had in view a *comprehensive* history. He says too that "the result offers some fairly solid reading to the non-specialist". Now there are few things more annoying than to be criticised for not writing a book you did not set out to write, but it must be admitted that the book, considered as a book to be read, does suffer from being too comprehensive. Should a local history such

as this aim at being a comprehensive work of reference or should it be a readable book with continuity, flow, a theme or themes, and an overall shape? The latter involves comprehension (if not digestion) of the whole of the material by one mind, selection and rejection, and making into one. It is however the former objective that our authors have chosen, and, having chosen, they have set about it with laudable thoroughness.

Something has been done by relegating some of the less digestible material to the 132 pages of appendices. One of these is a good case in point. Among other material is a most interesting description of a site at Cold Cam including Celtic fields and a Romano-British pottery kiln together with an account of some trial trenches dug in 1956 and 1957. Surely the right form for this material is a report in the local archæological journal in which there would be space for the reproduction of exact and detailed plans and sections.

The volume is copiously illustrated. Many are satisfactory, as, for example, the pottery sections on page 411 (unfortunately the scale of reduction has been omitted from the caption), but the distribution maps in Appendix A are far from clear. Nothing would seem to have been gained by the use of photogravure for the plates. Nor is it clear why the plates should have been made in two different screens. The proof-reader has missed Crambeck several times mis-spelled as Cranbeck. There is a satisfactory index.

It would be unfortunate if this review gave anything but a favourable impression of this generous volume. Here indeed is abundance. Of almost every period (except the Danish invasions) something will be found. Original research has gone to the assembling of the material and the greater part of it cannot be found elsewhere. It will give great pleasure and be of lasting value to all who appreciate this attractive district. May amateurs elsewhere profit by the example and give us local histories of many other places.

*J. Philipson*