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The Draining of the Somerset Levels. By Michael Williams. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970. Pp. xvi, 288 + 21 plates. \$18.50.

This is a very thorough study, in the tradition of H. C. Darby's *The Draining of the Fens*, of the making of the low-lying and chronically flooded area that takes up a sixth or so of the land area of Somerset into usable grazing land. The story extends over eight centuries, from the earliest projects of river embankment and diversion undertaken by isolated ecclesiastical authorities in the thirteenth century to the most recent schemes for automatic pumping and new channels, with planning control exercised over the whole area of the Levels and substantial injections of finance from London. The book would make a useful addition to the personal shelves of British historical geographers and merits perusal, at least, by economic historians. Peaks of drainage activity occurred from 1230 to 1330, from 1770 to 1830, and from 1939 to the present, and each, especially the period 1770 to 1830, is described in detail, and contrasted with the periods of inactivity, on the basis of well-nigh exhaustive research into the written records of the region. One could not reasonably ask for a more complete and careful examination of the facts of the case: as far

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as the factual elements of the story are concerned, one must consider the job done.

One could, however, ask for a more sustained and penetrating analysis of why the facts were as they were. The economic analysis is sometimes weak. And little effort is expended in isolating what was common-place or peculiar about the experience of the Levels by comparing it with the experience of other reclaimed lands in England; surely if a local event of this sort is to shed light on broader historical issues, or even if it is to be understood, to put it as Darby did, as "an epic in itself" (quoted by Williams, p. 5), one must know which aspect of its history was common to other similar events in different circumstances and which was unique.

These points can best be illustrated by considering the theme in the book of most interest to economic historians, namely, the obstacles that individual self-interest put up to the provision of a commonly consumed good with powerful external effects. Drainage was the commonly consumed good. Any landlord in a drainage area benefited from a project, whether or not he had paid for his share of the costs. And there were external effects on those outside the local area: the drainage of one area might result in the flooding of another, as when the construction of a stout embankment upriver increased the rate of flow of water downriver in floodtime. Under such circumstances, Williams understands, there is no presumption that the actual amount of investment in the construction and maintenance of drainage projects was socially optimal. The medieval solution to the maintenance problem by itself was customary service on the maintenance of local flood-control structures, which services evolved in early modern times into duties attached to certain pieces of property for the maintenance of certain specific parts of the structures. Construction was left to the energy and self-interest of the major landowners. With no central direction over an entire watershed, the system worked poorly; the maintenance of the structures was neglected and their construction ignored entirely for long periods of time. A local embankment or drainage channel might be made and kept up, but large scale projects involving many interests, Williams argues, such as the draining of King's Sedgemoor or the construction of movable gates to stop the tides from worsening the condition of the River Axe in flood, were delayed long past their appropriate time by lack of a central drainage authority.

The flaw in Williams' use of this analysis is his inappropriate criteria of what was the "appropriate time" to invest in a given project. The criterion that underlies much of Williams' argument, indeed, is simply that of "perfect drainage": the socially ideal amount of drainage of the Levels is assumed implicitly to be their complete drainage, at all times back to the middle ages. This is an engineer's standard of perfection, and considering that drainage is not free, has little to do with what was socially desirable. Furthermore, it entails an unjustifiable use of hindsight. One can with hindsight, to be sure, second-guess thirteenth century abbots and eighteenth century agricultural improvers, exhibiting cases in which the commonality of consumption of drainage and its external effects resulted in the failure to construct a desirable project. If the desirable projects are identified merely by looking at what was done later, however, one runs the risk of confusing socially undesirable projects

with desirable but neglected projects. It would surely have been socially undesirable to invest in the elaborate drainage arrangements accumulated by the twentieth century during the thirteenth century, if only because the costs and techniques of drainage were different and the population much smaller. Indeed, when Williams comes to explain the spurt of drainage activity between 1770 and 1830 he does argue that population pressure increased the demand for improvements of marginal land; he might have noticed that the earlier period of important activity, 1230-1330, occurs during a probable burst of population growth as well; and he might, too, have illuminated the spurts of activity on the Levels by comparing them with similar spurts elsewhere in England. The central point, though, is that the pattern of drainage activity over time in the Levels may well have accorded roughly with the pattern of net social benefit, notwithstanding the presumption that market forces could not be relied on to produce the exactly optimal pattern. In fact, there was in a sense a market demand for centralized planning which, were it effective, would work against even this last presumption: Williams mentions that the responsibilities to maintain drainage works that had been attached to particular pieces of property became gradually transformed into taxes, which were then used to pay a centralized contractor to maintain the entire drainage works of the neighborhood (cf. Williams, p. 120). Without some more sophisticated technique for assessing the desirability of a project, in other words, one does not know how important in fact commonalities and externalities were on balance in discouraging the right amount of drainage.

Still, Williams' is a useful piece of work for the economic historian. He can see in it the development of property rights and of government intervention in the economy over a very long period of time and against the background of a single goal. The study of the effect of institutional arrangements on economic affairs is usually conducted with a heterogeneous collection of historical examples: with this and similar studies as its foundation, it can be conducted now on a more sustained basis.

DONALD N. MCCLOSKEY, *University of Chicago and Stanford University*