

## Book Reviews

**The Banbury Chapbooks**, Leo John De Freitas (A5, 136pp., many illustrations, appendices, indexes). Banbury Historical Society Records Volume 28, 2004. £12.00 + £1.00 p&p (free to records members) from B.H.S., c/o Banbury Museum.

In the mid-1790s little James Raine, son of a blacksmith, a frail child, who was later to found the Surtees Society, passed as much time as he could with his maternal grandmother. "She...had two books in which I took great interest, the one a life of Christ ornamented at the head of each chapter with a rude woodcut of a very characteristic nature. That of the crucifixion was intended to represent not only the event but also the darkness which overspread the land during our Lord's agony and I shall never forget the effect which this strangely depicted scene had upon my mind. I remember it as well as if I had seen it yesterday. Another copy of this book has never since fallen in my way. It belonged to the earlier part of the seventeenth century. She also had a copy of Aesop's Fables, tattered and torn and imperfect, equally ornamented with woodcuts, over which I used to pore with infinite delight. This book which was of an earlier date has never since come into my hands. I had during that period spent every hour I could call my own by the wheel of my grandmother and, revelling in the glories of an immense bundle of penny histories and ballads, made myself intimately acquainted with giants, witches, fairies and their doings, and had the Seven Champions of Christendom and the ballads of Robin Hood at my fingers' ends." This was printed in *A Raine Miscellany*, in 1989, pp.14-15.

The 1980s were a decade in which enormous leaps had been made in the study of cheap print. They did much to 'decodify' this century in James Raine's autobiography, which might have been passed over without special notice before. In 1968 Victor Neuberg had written a pioneering study of chapbooks, which he called *The Penny Histories: a study of chapbooks for young readers over the centuries*. (The last part of the title was mistaken. The readers were not only young.) Bernard Capp's volume on almanacs, my own studies of the chapbooks collected by Samuel Pepys over the decade of the 1680s, and then of the chapmen and pedlars who distributed them, all came later, followed by Tessa Watt's superb study of the origins of the chapbook genre, and the content of the ballads, which preceded it, in *Cheap Print and Popular Piety, 1550-1640* (1991). It is a great pity that this last is omitted from the bibliography here, and from consideration. A thesis, by Michael Frearson, on the earliest newsbooks, pointed, like Dr Watt's work, to the 1620s as the key decade in which these two new responses to a newly-literate market took off. Meanwhile, Victor Neuberg gave us his article on the Diceys. Now we have this additional good study of two particular little printing families in Banbury from the eighteenth century into the nineteenth. I tried to interrelate all these developments in an almost unknown article on 'The Pedlar, the Historian and the Folklorist: Seventeenth Century Communicants' which appeared in *Folklore* (1994), reprinted in my collected papers, *Figures in a Landscape* (2000).