Foreword

Reversing the trends of a generation ago, current scholarship on the Black Death underlines its huge impact on later medieval Europe. In the present volume, Rosemary Horrox draws on up-to-date research, at the same time making a substantial contribution to it. She brings together a mass of hitherto untranslated, and in many cases unpublished, documents: on this basis readers will form their own assessment. From narrative accounts, often of heart-rending immediacy, the book proceeds to a variety of contemporary responses, drawn from many parts of Christian Europe. Students of intellectual history will find a wealth of pseudo-scientific explanations of the plague ranging from astrological conjunctions, through earthquakes releasing toxic vapours, to well poisoning by Jews – there is, tragically, plentiful documentation here of medieval anti-semitism. Commonest of all were moralising attempts to explain and justify unprecedented disaster in terms of Christian cosmology. Focusing on England, an exceptionally well documented region, Rosemary Horrox offers a wide range of evidence for the plague's variegated repercussions on the economy and, no less complex, on social and religious conduct. Contemporaries reported anomie and amorality, but also intensified piety. The evidence speaks for itself up to a point: Rosemary Horrox's commentary captures survivors' sense of mingled vulnerability and guilt. In this remarkable book, a uniquely difficult subject is presented with the requisite detachment, sensitivity and psychological insight. A distinguished political historian breaks new ground. The later Middle Ages will be studied more fruitfully as a result.

Janet L. Nelson, King's College London