The "Common Voice": History, Folklore and Oral Tradition in Early Modern England

D. R. Woolf

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THE "COMMON VOICE": HISTORY, FOLKLORE AND ORAL TRADITION IN EARLY MODERN ENGLAND*

Historians have long recognized the contributions to modern historical methodology of the antiquary, that curious explorer of records, student of ancient coins and tireless traveller in search of inscriptions and other sorts of archaeological evidence.[1] John Leland's "laboriouse serche" for England's antiquities has become legendary,[2] while high praise is given to generations of his followers from William Camden in the sixteenth to Ralph Thoresby in the early eighteenth century. It is less often acknowledged, however, that Leland and his successors relied to a great extent not only on manuscript and archaeological material, but also on a variety of oral sources ranging from popular traditions to the personal recollections of the aged. The purpose of the present essay is to examine the uses to which oral sources were put between 1500 and 1700, and to offer an interpretation of their

[1] For accounts of Renaissance and later antiquarianism, see Eric Cochrane, *Historians and Historiography in the Italian Renaissance* (Chicago, 1981), pp. 423-44; Denys Hay, *Annalists and Historians* (London, 1977), chs. 6, 7, 8; Donald R. Kelley, *Foundations of Modern Historical Scholarship: Language, Law and History in the French Renaissance* (New York, 1970); George Huppert, *The Idea of Perfect History: Historical Erudition and Historical Philosophy in Renaissance France* (Chicago and Urbana, 1970). Useful insights into the classical background of historiography based on oral tradition may be found in M. I. Finley, "Myth, Memory and History", *History and Theory*, iv (1965), pp. 279-302; A. D. Momigliano, "Historiography on Written Tradition and Historiography on Oral Tradition", in his *Studies in Historiography* (London, 1966), pp. 211-20. Modern oral historiography is dealt with in Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* (Oxford, 1978); David Henige, *Oral Historiography* (New York and Lagos, 1982).

[2] *The Laboriouse Journey and Serche of Johan Leylande for Englandes Antiquities*, ed. John Bale (London, 1549, S.T.C. 15445), now published in *The Itinerary of John Leland in or about the Years 1535-1543*, 2nd edn., 5 vols. (Carbondale, Ill., 1964), i, pp. xxxvii-xliii; *Joannis Lelandi antiquarii de rebus Britannicis collectanea*, ed. Thomas Hearne, 3 vols. in 4 pts., plus 2 vols. of appendices (Oxford, 1715), which also includes a number of Leland's miscellaneous and poetical works. New editions of both would be welcome.

declining popularity after 1600.[3] I shall argue that the reasons for this decline lie not only in changing attitudes to historical evidence, but also in the widening division between learned and popular cultures in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.

The subject of oral traditions has recently attracted the attention of several students of popular culture.[4] Yet most accounts of English antiquarianism have little to say on the topic, either ignoring oral traditions altogether or summarily dismissing them as an example of lingering medieval credulity in otherwise forward-looking scholars.[5] The reason why this should be so is clear enough: most modern historians place little stock in oral sources when they study anything more remote than their grandparents' generation. We have, in increasing volume as the past approaches the present, a multitude of books, documents, letters, manuscripts, coins, funeral urns, paintings and maps, from which to reconstruct history. Such "hard" evidence is to be preferred, where it can be found, to the "soft" evidence of folk-tale, unwritten and undatable local custom, and ancestral tradition, because only the former is tangible. But the early modern antiquary was not always so fortunate as to have tangible evidence close at hand.

The exploitation of oral sources, traditional and non-traditional,

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[3] An exhaustive treatment of the topic of oral tradition would include a more thorough discussion of such aspects of oral culture as the ballad, as well as the sort of tales and songs purveyed by strolling players and mummers, than can be made here. I have therefore confined myself in the present essay primarily to traditions regarding great families, places or physical monuments as recorded by early modern antiquaries.

[4] See especially Keith Thomas, *The Perception of the Past in Early Modern England* (Creighton Lecture, London, 1983); Keith Thomas, "Age and Authority in Early Modern England", *Proc. Brit. Acad.*, lxii (1976), pp. 206-48, esp. pp. 233-4; Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (London, 1978), pp. 91-115; Barry Reay (ed.), *Popular Culture in Seventeenth-Century England* (London, 1985), introduction and *passim*; Margaret Aston, "English Ruins and English History: The Dissolution and the Sense of the Past", *Jl. Warburg and Courtauld Insts.*, xxxvi (1973), pp. 231-55, refers briefly (p. 234 n. 13) to Lambarde's exploitation of memories of the monasteries.

[5] For Tudor and early Stuart antiquarianism and its implications for historical writing, the best accounts are in F. J. Levy, *Tudor Historical Thought* (San Marino, 1967), pp. 124-66; Arthur B. Ferguson, *Clio Unbound: Perception of the Social and Cultural Past in Renaissance England* (Durham, N.C., 1979), pp. 3-27, 78-125. F. Smith Fussner, *The Historical Revolution* (London, 1962) contains much good material, though it is flawed with anachronistic notions of Renaissance standards of truth. On the antiquaries themselves, the best works are T. D. Kendrick's excellent *British Antiquity* (London, 1950; repr. 1970); May McKisack, *Medieval History in the Tudor Age* (Oxford, 1971). For later Stuart and Hanoverian scholarship, the best account remains David C. Douglas, *English Scholars, 1660-1730* (London, 1939; rev. edn., 1951).

by historians has a pedigree stretching back to Herodotus. Many medieval chroniclers included in their accounts evidence garnered from eyewitnesses to events, as well as traditional tales which were often associated with miracles or with the cult of a particular saint. Eadmer, writing at the end of the eleventh century, based his *Historia novorum* on "things which I have seen with my own eyes and myself heard". William of Malmesbury reported what he had "heard from credible authority" and borrowed from old songs to fill out gaps in the written record, while Orderic Vitalis frequently passed on things he had "learned from the oldest monks" and from other people he encountered.[6] In most cases medieval writers exercised due caution in accepting reports, though they generally accepted those which came from men of blameless character: thus Orderic could report without hesitation the testimony of "a trustworthy man of upright life" while remaining sceptical of many miraculous tales when he himself had seen no "solid proof of any such things".[7]

Medieval topographers, too, frequently recorded the lore associated with places they visited. Gerald of Wales referred often to "vulgar tradition", and was impressed by the ability of the Welsh to commit their royal genealogies to memory; it was precisely these memorized traditions which spawned romances such as Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* and vernacular chronicles such as the *Brut*. At the end of the fifteenth century William Worcestre sought information from monks, hermits and, on occasion, common people, on places of interest. On visiting Bristol in 1480 Worcestre recorded:

> that a certain — Dynt, by craft a pumpmaker of the city of Bristol, told several men that he had heard from old people who used to tell him that they had seen a tree called in English a hawthorn growing in the High Street in the place where the splendid Cross stands.[8]

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[6] *Eadmer's History of Recent Events in England*, trans. Geoffrey Bosanquet (London, 1964), p. 1; William of Malmesbury, *Chronicle of the Kings of England*, trans. J. A. Giles (London, 1847), p. 4; *The Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis*, ed. Marjorie Chibnall, 6 vols. (Oxford, 1969-80), iii, pp. 7, 291.

[7] *Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis*, ii, p. 19; iv, pp. 243, 261. The destruction of many irreplaceable documents by Danish incursions also forced him to heed "the oral traditions of old men". See Brian Stock, *The Implications of Literacy* (Princeton, 1983), p. 76.

[8] Gerald of Wales (Giraldus Cambrensis), *The Itinerary through Wales and the Description of Wales*, ed. W. L. Williams (London, 1908), pp. 19, 33, 109, 128, 157-8; William Worcestre, *Itineraries*, ed. John H. Harvey (Oxford, 1969), pp. 119, 193, 199-201, 261, 331. C. S. L. Davies has commented usefully on the somewhat misleading notion of "credulity" in the primarily oral late medieval environment, pointing out that "men were too conscious of the limitations of their own experience to dismiss a tale too readily": *Peace, Print and Protestantism* (London, 1977), p. 38;

When John Leland conducted his own tours in the 1530s and 1540s he therefore had ample precedent for seeking out and recording oral information; he differed from medieval writers only in the degree to which he made the traditional nature of much of his evidence explicit. It was not that Leland was "credulous" and did not know better than to rely on oral testimony; on the contrary, he knew very well that the manuscripts, books and archives to which he devoted most of his career as a humanist did not by themselves provide a sufficiently full record of the past.[9]

When Leland ascribed information to an oral source, he frequently used the phrase *in hominum memoria*: in general this denoted for contemporaries the memory of men living — what we would call oral history — rather than received tradition. At Queen Camel or Camallat, Somerset, he reported the recent discovery of Roman coins, adding, "There was found *in hominum memoria* a horse shoe of sylver at Camallate". At Lostwithiel he discovered that "in tyme of memorie of men lyving" the local stone bridge had gradually sunk deeper and deeper into the sand. The locals at Besselsleigh, Berkshire, informed him that the last of the Besils, a family dating from "the tyme of Edward the firste or afore" was "alyve *in hominum memoria*".[10] Leland was not uncritical of the information that he garnered, and he discriminated among his sources. The ideal subject was an articulate, literate man who had lived in an area for some time: monks, priests and merchants, for example. Visiting Bewdley in Worcestershire, he "asked a merchant there of the ancientness of the towne". The merchant replied that it was a new town, whose liberties were granted by Edward IV, a fact that Leland could not have gathered by looking at its considerably older buildings.[11] He prefaced his account of the history of Gloucester Abbey by stating his source: "these notable things following I learned of an ould man, made lately a monke of

(n. 8 cont.)
cf. Lucien Febvre, *The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century: The Religion of Rabelais*, trans. Beatrice Gottlieb (Cambridge, Mass., 1982), pp. 438-51.

[9] C. E. Wright, "The Dispersal of the Monastic Libraries in the Sixteenth Century", in F. Wormald and C. E. Wright (eds.), *The English Library before 1700* (London, 1958), pp. 148-75; Lucy Toulmin Smith, introduction to *Itinerary of John Leland*, i, p. xiii; Kendrick, *British Antiquity*, pp. 49, 53-5, 63; McKisack, *Medieval History in the Tudor Age*, p. 11. On the deplorable condition of the public records until the late sixteenth century and its only very slow improvement thereafter, see R. B. Wernham, "The Public Records in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries", in Levi Fox (ed.), *English Historical Scholarship in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (London, 1956), pp. 11-30.

[10] *Itinerary of John Leland*, i, pp. 151, 206; v, pp. 72-3; for other examples, see pp. 143, 156, 163, 186, 254; iii, p. 27; v, p. 100.

[11] *Ibid.*, ii, p. 88.

Gloucester". Often he suspected that a recent building had replaced a more ancient one on the same or a different site. It was no chronicle but the testimony of its monks which told him that "the old Abbay of Bardeney [Lincolnshire] was not in the very same place wher the new ys, but at a graunge or dayre of theyrs a myle of".[12]

But besides the opinion of the learned and literate, another sort of oral testimony rated highly by Leland's standards. This was the "common voice" or "common fame": what almost everyone in the area agreed had happened in the past. Leland may have made the error of taking each individual testimony as an independent source, but he had little reason to doubt what people who had lived in an area all their lives agreed on, unless he had external evidence which contradicted or clarified it. He happened upon a small pool in rural Caernarfonshire, "wher they say that Idwalle Prince of Wales was killid and drounid".[13] At Oxenhall, near Darlington in Durham, locals recalled the long-standing tradition of a "horrible noyse" in which the earth had raised itself up and then collapsed, leaving a huge crater which country folk called "Hell Kettles". Leland suspected that this was the earthquake of 1179, recorded in twelfth-century chronicles, an opinion later endorsed by his Jacobean disciple, William Burton.[14]

The common voice was sometimes to be trusted, at other times dismissed. At Winchelsea, by Leland's time a decayed town, the common voice blamed French and Spanish raids for the end of better days when the town had twenty aldermen, all "marchaunts of good substaunce". This he recorded without further comment. But in Rutland, where the "commune fame" was that one Rutter had been given as much land as he could ride around in one day on a wooden horse, which he did by magic, thereby founding the tiny county, Leland was more sceptical. "This is very like a lye", he wrote with some understatement, "and more lykelihod it is that for Rotherland, or Rutherland, it is shortely caullid Rutlande".[15]

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[12] *Ibid.*, ii, p. 61; v, p. 36.

[13] *Ibid.*, iii, pp. 76, 83; cf. iv, p. 4. Defoe would use the phrase "common fame" similarly, to denote accepted facts about a community's past, nearly two centuries later: *A Tour thro' the Whole Island of Great Britain*, ed. G. D. H. Cole, 2 vols. (London, 1927), i, p. 281; cf. ii, p. 460, for Defoe's reference to "the voice of the people".

[14] William Burton, *The Description of Leicestershire* (London, 1622, S.T.C. 4179), p. 270, citing the MSS. of the *Collectanea*, i, fo. 418 (ed. Hearne, i, p. 327). Defoe makes no mention of this tradition. He believed that the Hell Kettles were "nothing but old coal pits filled with water by the river Tees": *Tour thro' the Whole Island of Great Britain*, ii, p. 657.

[15] *Itinerary of John Leland*, iv, pp. 89, 113, 124, 127; cf. i, pp. 30, 110, 276; ii, pp. 66, 75.

Early modern traditions were much less formal and less rigidly structured than are the modern African traditions to which they bear a superficial resemblance. With the notable exception of the Welsh bards, whose eisteddfodau — briefly revived under Elizabeth and again in the late eighteenth century — were praised by Michael Drayton for providing an unbroken oral narrative of the past, there were no "village remembrancers", men assigned the task of transmitting a stable, "official" local tradition to succeeding generations.[16]

Yet the informal tales and folklore of early modern England do share with African traditions a sense of time alien to most western historians. Oral cultures have little sense of a relative past and either do not assign dates to events in their tradition or forget large parts of the past; the transmitters of such traditions thereby "telescope" their own history and provide a chronology which, though it is comprehensible to the members of their group, will mislead outside observers conditioned to dealing in firm dates.[17] What is true of the formal tribal narrative holds *a fortiori* for rural early modern England, where the sense of the past was focused less on time than on space, less on dates than on locations. Almost every rural community contained or abutted on a field, hill, river or ruin which it associated with a saint or local hero or with a memorable event; minor occurrences and personalities of local interest were often conflated over the centuries with great figures, real or mythical, such as Robin Hood or Julius Caesar, with whom they had no real connection. The same topographical structure which underlay medieval traditions, customs and beliefs about holy places, wells, caves and tombs is apparent in early modern ballads and romances, the heroes of which generally have toponyms — Guy of Warwick and Bevis of Southampton, for instance. As we have seen, it also lies at the root of the traditions reported by Leland.[18]

[16] Michael Drayton, *Poly-Olbion*, x, lines 234-58, 267-77 ff., in *The Works of Michael Drayton*, ed. J. W. Hebel, K. Tillotson and B. H. Newdigate, 2nd edn., 5 vols. (Oxford, 1961), iv, pp. 207 ff. Cf. John Selden's note (p. 83) on the eisteddfod (which Selden calls a *stethva*); significantly, Selden (who ordinarily had no use for oral sources, as we shall see) thought that such a *formalized* type of tradition, involving a complete, orderly narrative, would assist historical accuracy by allowing regular correction of inaccuracies by the witnesses to public recitations of community history.

[17] On "telescoping" and other aspects of chronology, see David Henige, *The Chronology of Oral Tradition* (Oxford, 1974); Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology*, trans. H. M. Wright (Chicago, 1965); cf. Vansina's revisions to this work, "Once upon a Time: Oral Traditions as History in Africa", *Daedalus*, c (1971), pp. 442-68.

[18] Thomas, *Perception of the Past in Early Modern England*, pp. 4-9; Walter Johnson, *Folk Memory: or, The Continuity of British Archaeology* (Oxford, 1908), *passim*.

Leland's Elizabethan successors had at their disposal considerably more physical evidence of the past than their predecessor; they also began to develop techniques for analysing and exploiting such evidence. From the time of Archbishop Parker's circle, early in Elizabeth's reign, manuscripts were catalogued and edited, and coins collected and studied, in an increasingly collective enterprise. From 1586 till early in the reign of James I, the Society of Antiquaries met in London, while capable scholars like Lambarde and Spelman developed the study of Anglo-Saxon language and laws.[19]

The Elizabethan and early Stuart antiquaries adopted Leland's approach to oral sources just as they followed him in his study of monastic registers and chronicles. Lambarde based his account of the topography and antiquities of Kent on material "as either faithfull information by worde, or credible hystorie in writing, hath hitherto ministred unto me".[20] Such "information by worde" was not, of course, always traditional. Like Leland, Lambarde talked to the learned as well as the illiterate and relied on what the former had read and committed to memory. In an age when transportation to places outside London was slow, and when even the rudimentary task of transcription was made difficult by uncomfortable archives and gloomy libraries, information retrieval depended much more heavily on the human memory.[21] The antiquaries were aware of the failings of memory, but they relied on it none the less: Camden himself apologized for "some escapes of memorie, for who doth so comprehend particularities, in the treasury of his memory, that he can utter them at his pleasure?".[22] The erudite Devon antiquary, Sir

[19] C. E. Wright, "The Dispersal of the Monastic Libraries and the Beginning of Anglo-Saxon Studies", *Trans. Cambridge Bibliog. Soc.*, i (1949-53), pp. 208-37; C. E. Wright, "The Elizabethan Society of Antiquaries and the Formation of the Cottonian Library", in Wormald and Wright (eds.), *English Library before 1700*, pp. 176-212; Robin Flower, "Lawrence Nowell and the Discovery of England in Tudor Times", *Proc. Brit. Acad.*, xxi (1935), pp. 47-74; M. Friedländer, "Growth in the Resources for Studies in Earlier English History, 1534-1625" (Univ. of Chicago Ph.D. thesis, 1938), *passim*; Kevin Sharpe, *Sir Robert Cotton, 1586-1631: History and Politics in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 1979), pp. 48-83.

[20] William Lambarde, *A Perambulation of Kent*, 2nd edn. (London, 1596, S.T.C. 15176), p. 30.

[21] On the difficulties facing antiquaries and other tourists, see Joan Parkes, *Travel in England in the Seventeenth Century* (Oxford, 1925; repr. 1968), pp. 15-224, 299-301: not the least difficulty faced by some enquiring travellers was local hostility to and distrust of "strangers". For the transmission of knowledge among élites in this period, see F. J. Levy, "How Information Spread among the Gentry, 1550-1640", *Jl. Brit. Studies*, xxi (1982), pp. 11-34.

[22] William Camden, *Britain*, trans. Philemon Holland (London, 1610, S.T.C. 4509), "To the Reader".

William Pole (d. 1635), was praised by his friend and disciple, Tristram Risdon, for his incredible memory rather than for the careful transcriptions which have made Pole so useful to modern genealogists. "Such a gift had he of rare memory, that he would have recited upon a sudden, the descents of most eminent families", Risdon wrote in awe, "from whose lamp I have received light in these my labours". The scholars could bear in mind the question of Shakespeare's Iachimo:

> Why should I write this down, that's riveted,
> Screwed to my memory.[23]

As late as the Restoration, one scholar's miscellaneous recollections might become another's reference tool. The puzzle of some missing manuscripts was solved for Anthony Wood in 1661 with the aid of an "élite" oral tradition nearly a century old. The manuscripts had disappeared in the mid-sixteenth century from the Merton College Library. Wood had heard, from a scholar named John Wilton, that Thomas Allen, the Jacobean antiquary of Gloucester Hall, had in turn told him years earlier "that old Garbrand the bookseller, that lived where Bowman the bookseller doth now, bought them of the college". Allen had purchased several of the manuscripts as a young man, and his collections passed at his death to the Bodleian where Wood soon found them.[24] In 1699 John Wallis recalled that half a century earlier the scholar Thomas Gataker (d. 1654) had shown him various remains of an old channel dug to divert the Thames for the building of London Bridge. Gataker had told Wallis of "many other such remains which had been within his memory but were then filled up". The information, as relayed by Wallis to Samuel Pepys, thus descended several generations before it was finally committed to writing, thereby preserving long-vanished features of the landscape.[25] In one of his many hours at the table of the venerable Cornelius Lee (1629-1702), the young antiquary Abraham de la Pryme heard that

[23] Tristram Risdon, *The Chorographicall Description or Survey of Devon*, written *c.* 1635 (London, 1811), p. 29; *Cymbeline*, II.ii.43-4; the oral aspects of thought and communication about the past are explored in D. R. Woolf, "Speech, Text and Time: The Sense of Hearing and the Sense of the Past in Renaissance England", *Albion*, xviii (1986), pp. 159-93.

[24] Anthony Wood, *The Life and Times of Anthony Wood, Antiquary, of Oxford, Described by Himself*, ed. Andrew Clark, 5 vols. (Oxford Hist. Soc., xix, xxi, xxvi, xxx, xl, 1891-1900), i, p. 424.

[25] *The Private Correspondence and Miscellaneous Papers of Samuel Pepys*, ed. J. R. Tanner, 2 vols. (London, 1926), i, p. 210.

the French king Henri IV had been assassinated by Jesuits in 1610 for warning James I of the Gunpowder Plot. "This relation", noted Pryme, "he says, he had from the mouth of a great popish lord, in King Charles the First's time, who had it discover'd to him by his confessour".[26]

From trust in the remembrance of written detail, it was but a short step to trust in the common memory, if not in every detail it handed down. Lambarde found that many tales of the Kentish past had survived in both oral and written forms. He recounted the tales of popish impieties in St. Nicholas's Chapel near Hythe, putting in writing "some such of them as I have learned, either by the faithful report of honest persons that have seen and known the same, or els out of such written monuments as be yet extant and ready to be shewed".[27] Of all the Elizabethan antiquaries, Lambarde came closest to putting his finger on the problem that most frustrates the oral historiographer today, that of "feedback", which occurs when writing influences, distorts or even creates outright an oral tradition. By rendering the origins of a tradition suspect, feedback diminishes its value as a source.[28] Lambarde came across a good example of this in the folk-tale surrounding Earl Godwin of Wessex, the father of King Harold II. According to tradition, Godwin choked to death on a piece of bread, shortly after which his land sank into the sea. What Lambarde suspected was not the integrity of the honest people he spoke to, but the origins and purity of these particular tales. "Neither were these things continued in memorie, by the mouthes of the unlearned people onely, but committed to writing also, by the hands and pens of monks, frears [sic], and others of the learned sort". Over the centuries the written version had so completely infested the traditional version that it gave the tales an unwarranted and mislead-ing credibility, "so that in course of time, the matter was past all peradventure, and the things beleeved for undoubted veritie".[29]

William Camden knew the island of Britain in much less detail than Lambarde knew his native county, and like Leland he was forced

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[26] *The Diary of Abraham de la Pryme, the Yorkshire Antiquary*, ed. Charles Jackson (Surtees Soc., liv, 1869-70), pp. 233, 258.

[27] Lambarde, *Perambulation of Kent*, p. 173. Leland had accepted as authoritative the memory of informants who had read old books or records: *Itinerary of John Leland*, i, p. 12.

[28] David Henige, " 'The Disease of Writing': Ganda and Nyoro Kinglists in a Newly Literate World", in Joseph C. Miller (ed.), *The African Past Speaks* (Folkestone, 1980), pp. 240-61.

[29] Lambarde, *Perambulation of Kent*, p. 105.

to exploit the common memory in order to remedy his ignorance. Though he "poored upon many an old rowle and evidence", he felt no shame in admitting that he had also wandered over England and "conferred with the most skillful observers in each country".[30] Like Leland, he spoke both to the common folk and to learned residents who had themselves garnered morsels of local lore, generally attempting to verify their statements with reference to a document such as the Antonine Itineraries.[31]

As in Leland's case, the traditions encountered by Camden frequently derived from the perception of local people that at some time in the past their community had enjoyed a level of economic prosperity and commercial or political importance now greatly declined, but of which ruins and other antiquities remained to testify. In Croydon the inhabitants pointed out a place where "in old time" a long-vanished royal house had stood. The tiny village of Overburrow (or Burrow), Lancashire, had a tradition that it had once been a large city until a famine reduced it to poverty. "This tradition", Camden observed, "they received from their ancestors, delivered as it were from hand to hand unto them". Camden thought the locals might be correct, for the plenitude of engraved stones and Roman coins, and the checkerboard paving pattern, suggested that this had once been a Roman camp. Here physical evidence supplied the chronology lacking in the tradition, while Camden's documentary source, the Antonine Itineraries, provided further reinforcement and suggested possible Roman names for the place.[32]

Other antiquaries continued to report orally based data, primarily concerning buildings, inscriptions, landscape features and the history of local families, well into the seventeenth century. Thomas Gerard, describing South Petherton in Somerset, recorded of a long-vanished royal house that he was:

> beholding to histories to tell us [there] was one here, and to tradicion to point out the place, for the very footeings of it are soe farr lost that noe man would ever believe a pallace stood in that place, which they shew us, being something south of the church.[33]

The Elizabethan biographer, John Smyth, noted the memories, then

[30] Camden, *Britain*, "To the Reader".

[31] F. J. Levy, "The Making of Camden's *Britannia*", *Bibliothèque d'humanisme et renaissance*, xxvii (1964), pp. 70-97; Stuart Piggott, "William Camden and the *Britannia*", *Proc. Brit. Acad.*, xxxvii (1951), pp. 199-217.

[32] Camden, *Britain*, pp. 302, 590, 753; for some other examples, see pp. 194, 428, 525, 587, 590, 753, 795.

[33] Thomas Gerard, *The Particular Description of the County of Somerset*, written *c.* 1632, 1st edn., ed. E. H. Bates (Somerset Rec. Soc., xv, 1900), p. 115.

a century old, of the final skirmish between the feuding lords Berkeley and Lisle in 1469 at Nibley, Gloucestershire. Smyth still heard locals:

> relate the reports of their parents, kinsmen and neighbours present at this skirmish, some with one lord and others with the other; and of such as carried victuals and weapons to some of those companies . . . and afterwards climbed up into the trees (being then boys of twelve and sixteen years) to see the battle.[34]

When Sir John Oglander took up his inheritance on the Isle of Wight in 1607, he set about excavating the great Cistercian abbey which had once stood on his lands, but he had difficulty locating its foundations. "I went to Quarr, and inquyred of divors owld men where ye greate church stood". One Father Pennie, "a verye owld man", told him that the foundations were to be found in a nearby cornfield, but Oglander's attempts to dig them up proved unsuccess-ful.[35] William Burton found a vivid memory of the battle of Bosworth field among its locals early in the seventeenth century, a memory reinforced by discoveries in 1602 of a "great store" of armour, arrowheads and weapons on a nearby enclosed field. This was both oral tradition and oral history, since Burton had the testimonies of some ancient men who had seen the battle fought, "of which persons my selfe have seene some, and have heard of their discourses, though related by second hand".[36] The inhabitants of Hornchurch in Essex told John Weever that their parish church, formerly a priory, had originally been called "Whore-church". It had received its modern, more decorous name by the grace of "a certaine King, but by what king they are uncertaine". He recorded a story "as it hath gone by tradition from father to sonne" of a local hero buried at Tilney, Norfolk, who "upon a time (no man knowes how long since)" had led the commoners in revolt against an unjust landlord.[37]

As this last example suggests, local tradition was not subject to the same canons of order and hierarchy as written history: there was no censor operating in the parish, notwithstanding various Tudor

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[34] John Smyth, *The Lives of the Berkeleys*, ed. Sir J. Maclean, 3 vols. (Gloucester, 1883-5), ii, p. 114, quoted in M. H. Keen, *England in the Later Middle Ages* (London, 1973), p. 514.

[35] Stuart Piggott, "Antiquarian Thought in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries", in Fox (ed.), *English Historical Scholarship*, p. 105.

[36] Burton, *Description of Leicestershire*, p. 47.

[37] John Weever, *Ancient Funerall Monuments within the United Monarchie of Great Britain, Ireland and the Islands Adjacent* (London, 1631, S.T.C. 25223), preface and pp. 225, 312, 646, 866; John Aubrey encountered a rival tradition at Hornchurch in the 1670s, according to which the name derived from the horns of a hart having been kept in the church for several centuries: *Anecdotes and Traditions Illustrative of Early English History and Literature*, ed. William J. Thoms (Camden Soc., original ser., v, 1839), p. 106.

attempts to deter treason in speech as well as in deed.[38] The ballad-singers persecuted as vagrants by Elizabethan and Stuart governments were distrusted not only for their lack of local ties but also for their irresponsible, uncensored songs,[39] which often compared present times poorly with imagined great days in the past, glorified thieves such as Robin Hood, and presented serious historical figures, even kings, in a humorous light. Like unwritten song, oral tradition answered to no one: it was "masterless history". A tradition in praise of riot and rebellion could scarcely be more welcome to England's ruling orders than a printed history advocating the same, and it was vastly more difficult to control.

Other traditions, while not socially subversive, nevertheless challenged what amounted to the "official" view of history under the Tudors and early Stuarts. Sir George Buck, whose dogged attempt to rescue the character of Richard III from a century of Tudor vilification was published only several years after his death, and even then in a bowdlerized, watered-down form, based his case not only on scrupulous scholarship but on traditions. Much of his information came orally from the octagenarian John Stow, who had himself spoken in the mid-sixteenth century with old men who recalled Richard in a favourable light.[40] Personal recollection of recent historical events could be even less convenient: in May 1645 a London spinster was sought by parliament for referring to the king as a "stuttering fool" and asking, with reference to the assassin of the duke of Buckingham in 1628, "Is there never a Felton yett living?".[41]

The comparatively rare occurrence in the records of the antiquaries of traditions and memories at odds with élite beliefs about the order

[38] Oral treason, and even sedition, had in fact become very difficult to establish at law by the late seventeenth century, if not earlier. Even in the heated atmosphere of 1685, a case at Middlesex sessions against one Thomas Child for "speaking treasonable words" against James II fizzled out for lack of convincing testimony; in 1668 a yeoman was acquitted of sedition for saying that "Soldiers were better paid in the days of Oliver" and, more seriously, that the king was a traitor: *Middlesex County Records*, ed. J. C. Jeaffreson, 4 vols. (London, 1886-92; repr. 1974-5), iv, pp. 2-3, 284-5.

[39] *Poverty in Early Stuart Salisbury*, ed. Paul Slack (Wilts. Rec. Soc., xxxi, 1975), "Register of Passports for Vagrants", pp. 46, 49.

[40] George Buck, *The History of King Richard the Third*, ed. Arthur Noel Kincaid (Gloucester, 1979), pp. cxvii-cxxiv, 162, 298; C. L. Kingsford, *English Historical Literature in the Fifteenth Century* (Oxford, 1913), p. 270. The sixteenth-century battle between Welsh adherents to Arthurian legend and those historians, beginning with Polydore Vergil, who denied the truth of such myths was in some measure a disagreement about the relative importance of oral and written sources for the ancient history of Britain.

[41] *Middlesex County Records*, ed. Jeaffreson, iii, p. 93.

of things does not prove that they were not more widespread: given
the strong emphasis on social inversion in various expressions of
popular culture, written, spoken and performed, as well as Tudor
and Stuart fears of popular prophecy, there is good reason to believe
that they were. Indeed it may only establish that the antiquaries were
themselves performing the function of unofficial censors by leaving
such unpleasantries out of their accounts. This filtration process was
most pronounced after the Interregnum, when memories of events
relatively recent shunted aside older, medieval traditions. It can be
seen at work in the writings of the late seventeenth-century rural
cleric, Abraham de la Pryme, whose close ties to the countryside
gave him an insatiable love of local lore. Pryme consistently edited,
censored and suppressed oral information from his diary for a variety
of reasons, omitting, for instance, several stories about the Cromwel-
lian preacher Hugh Peter: "tho' they were very memorable, yet,
because the[y] relate to such a rogue, they are not worthy of setting
down".[42]

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There are signs in the early 1600s of a growing reaction against the
use of traditional sources. John Stow makes surprisingly little use of
oral evidence in his *Survey of London*, probably because the London
environment provided a richer source of archaeological evidence than
rural parishes, and perhaps too because many local traditions —
thanks to a strong tradition of chronicle-writing and record-keep-
ing — had already found their way into script.[43] Robert Reyce found
no written evidence of mineral discoveries in old Suffolk. He had
heard "that in ancient time there was a mine of gold oare", but this
struck him as "an unprobable heare say". The people of Tottenham
High-Cross in Middlesex attributed the refusal of an old walnut-tree
to grow to the burning of a religious martyr on the site, but whether
this was a Marian or an earlier martyr remained unknown. The tale's
vagueness was too much for William Bedwell: "But who it was, and
when it should be done, they cannot tell, and I finde no such thing
in our stories upon record, and therfore I do not tell this for a

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[42] *Diary of Abraham de la Pryme*, pp. 50-1.
[43] John Stow, *The Survey of London*, 2nd edn. (London, 1603, S.T.C. 23343; repr.
1980). For a rare instance where Stow repeats a story told by his father and another
old man, see p. 176.

truthe".[44] Sampson Erdeswicke resorted half-heartedly to a local
tradition to explain the origins of a monument at Burton Abbey in
Staffordshire, "which monument, the common fame (of the unskill-
ful) reports to have been of the first founder Wilfricus [that is,
Ulfricus] Spot, and that cannot in any wise be so". Since the monu-
ment was made of alabaster, fashioned into armour of the post-
Conquest period, "something like to our new monuments", Erdes-
wicke thought it no older than the reign of Edward III, though he
admitted that it might be a fourteenth-century reconstruction of an
earlier monument to the founder or another benefactor.[45] Thomas
Habington, the Worcestershire recusant exiled to his county after the
Gunpowder Plot, believed that written sources such as heraldic
pedigrees were "often farced with untruthes", yet he consistently
preferred written evidence to traditions "reported by the vulgar" and
inveighed against those who relied upon them. Reginald Bainbrigg
praised his friend and fellow north-country antiquary, John Denton
of Cardew, for his study of the antiquities of Carlisle, which "goes
by no hearesaies, but by ancient recordes".[46]

An important influence on the declining interest in and growing
mistrust of oral sources was the work of legal philologists such as
John Selden, who actually said nothing at all about the use of such
evidence.[47] Common lawyers were well acquainted with the study
and criticism of oral testimony. It is true that the English judicial
system steadily relied upon — and generated — increasing quantities
of written evidence, case records and legal reports, but the transition
to a system dependent predominantly upon the written rather than
the spoken was neither sudden nor thorough, and oral testimony
remains at the centre of the trial system even today. Well into the
eighteenth century, human memory was accepted as valid evidence

[44] Robert Reyce, Suffolk in the XVIIth Century, ed. Lord Francis Hervey (London,
1902), pp. 26 f.; William Bedwell, A Brief Description of the Towne of Tottenham High-
Crosse (London, 1631, S.T.C. 1795), sig. E^v.
[45] Sampson Erdeswicke, A Survey of Staffordshire (London, 1717), pp. 169-70
(mispaginated as p. 180), 214.
[46] Thomas Habington, A Survey of Worcestershire, ed. J. Amphlett, 2 vols. (Worcs.
Hist. Soc., 1893-9), i, pp. 468-70; ii, pp. 34, 226-7, 242; British Library, London,
Add. MS. 28564, fo. 236^v, Habington to Symon Archer, 7 Dec. 1635; McKisack,
Medieval History in the Tudor Age, p. 150.
[47] Abraham de la Pryme noted from second-hand information, however, that Selden
had allegedly collected ballads because he felt "there was more truth in them than
there was in many of our historians": Diary of Abraham de la Pryme, p. 67. Selden's
own origins lay in precisely the popular culture he sought to distance himself from:
he is supposed to have been the son of one Chichester fiddler and the brother of
another.

in cases of property and land disputes, and in cases involving tenants' rights. The mechanics of a criminal jury system which still depended heavily upon verbal information and accusation, and on memory or even hearsay as evidence, ensured that those skilled in matters of the law developed critical attitudes to the spoken and written word alike: "all courts of justice", commented Bishop Burnet, "proceed upon the evidence given by witnesses; for the use of writings is but a thing more lately brought into the world".[48]

Nevertheless late in the sixteenth and throughout the seventeenth century the written word came into its own as the basis of law and of legal training. Lawyers wrote and studied the documentary, the visible, and came to rely on it to a greater degree than the spoken and remembered. Legal textbooks gradually supplanted the legal readings that had formed the basis of the law student's education for centuries (much to the grief of even prolific legal writers like Sir Edward Coke, who lamented the declining use of the readings).[49] Those lawyers who were influenced by the best of Continental learning and philological rigour, and turned from the practice of law to legal history, were even less likely than the majority of the profession to place great faith in, let alone actively pursue, oral evidence in their researches.

The heralds, too, were familiar with oral testimony and its hazards. Since the late fifteenth century the members of the College of Arms had been charged with enforcing a strict control over arms and pedigrees, the outward signs of gentility in a hierarchical society. The relatively great degree of social mobility under the Tudors and early Stuarts, the rise of some families into the ruling élite and the decay of others required that some order be imposed on claims of gentility and antiquity. The pedigree craze of the late Elizabethan and Jacobean

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[48] Gilbert Burnet, *Some Passages of the Life and Death of . . . John, Earl of Rochester* (London, 1680), p. 74; Barbara J. Shapiro, *Probability and Certainty in Seventeenth-Century England* (Princeton, 1983), pp. 173-93. The importance of precedent and oral testimony may have made English antiquaries with common-law training more open, at least initially, to oral historical sources than their Roman-law-trained European counterparts. I owe this point to John Crowley.

[49] Edward Coke, *The First Part of the Institutes of the Lawes of England* (London, 1628, S.T.C. 15784), fo. 280[r-v]; cf. George Buck's comments on lectures and readings, already in decline when he wrote in the 1610s: *The Third Universitie of England*, appended to John Stow, *Annales*, ed. Edmund Howes (London, 1631, S.T.C. 23340), p. 1074. On legal education at this time, see Louis A. Knafla, "The Law Studies of an Elizabethan Student", *Huntington Lib. Quart.*, xxxii (1969), pp. 221-40; Richard J. Schoeck, "Lawyers and Rhetoric in Sixteenth-Century England", in James J. Murphy (ed.), *Renaissance Eloquence: Studies in the Theory and Practice of Renaissance Rhetoric* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1983), pp. 274-91.

period exacerbated the difficulties facing the already overburdened, understaffed heralds, who relied on the co-operation of local gentry — precisely those people whose claims they were supposed to be verifying — for the success of their periodic visitations. Much of the evidence pored over by the heralds was, of course, written: they virtually invented the systematic study of family muniments in England. But as often as not such documents were fragmentary and required filling in, and here the element of human memory became important.

Like the lawyers, however, the heralds quickly came to prefer the document or artefact to personal testimony, and it is not surprising that a well-known "historical controversy" of Elizabeth's later reign revolved in large measure around the value of oral evidence in the verification of family genealogies. When Ralph Brooke, the able but aggressive York herald, attacked William Camden for a number of genealogical errors in the early editions of *Britannia*, he was attacking Camden's method as much as any specific factual errors. Brooke was concerned that Camden was insufficiently skilled in the study of such documents and that he took too much on "hearesay".[50] Camden was unquestionably the greater scholar of the two, and his attractive personality tempts us to defend him against the unlovable Brooke. Yet it is worth remembering that when this controversy began, in the 1590s, Brooke had been a herald for over a decade and had acquired a good deal of experience in sifting through genealogical evidence, oral and written: experience which Camden (who became a herald only in 1597, and was at this point still a London schoolmaster) manifestly lacked, for all his prodigious classical learning and Continental connections.

The Brooke-Camden dispute fumed on for several decades, leading finally to an attack by one of Camden's own protégés, Augustine Vincent, on Brooke's 1619 *Catalogue* of the nobility.[51] When Vincent published his own *Discoverie of Errours* in 1622, John Selden provided a commendatory epistle which amounted to a brief manifesto of historical research methodology, synthesizing the techniques of the legal philologist and the herald. Selden praised Vincent's industry

[50] Ralph Brooke, *A Discoverie of Certaine Errours Published in the Much-Commended Britannia* (London, 1594, S.T.C. 3834), "To Maister Camden". Camden replied in "Ad lectorem", appended to the 1600 edition of *Britannia*: Levy, *Tudor Historical Thought*, p. 157.

[51] Ralph Brooke, *A Catalogue and Succession of the Kings, Princes, Dukes, Marquesses, Earles and Viscounts of the Realme of England since the Norman Conquest to This Present Yeare 1619* (London, 1619, S.T.C. 3832).

and diligence in reading not only published authors, but also "the more abstruse parts of history which lie hid, either in private manuscripts, or in the publick records of the kingdom". He extolled the use of exchequer documents and of judicial records; he commended the great libraries of his day: the Royal, Cottonian, Bodleian and several others; but of oral sources, even the ones which Vincent must surely have encountered on his heraldic visitations, Selden said not a word.[52]

The influence of Selden's attitude — one which we ourselves instinctively wish to praise, but which in his day may have been naïvely idealistic — can be traced in the antiquarian writings of the middle and later seventeenth century, the authors of which were all acquainted with Selden's works. The great Anglo-Saxon scholar, William Somner, frequently cited oral tradition in his early work, *The Antiquities of Canterbury*. At one point he found that common tradition was so unequivocal that it rendered citations from the records unnecessary. "Because tradition keepes it yet in memory with some", he could afford to cite only one record as additional proof.[53] For Somner, however, oral tradition was to be used as a last resort, and even then it required further verification: "as a thing uncertaine I leave it with a *fides penes lectorem esto*, untill further enquiry shall inable me to give him better satisfaction".[54]

Similar examples of the new priority of written materials can be found throughout the remainder of the century. The Cheshire engraver, Daniel King, who wrote the introduction to a collective investigation of Cheshire antiquities entitled *The Vale-Royal of England*, thanked his friends for providing information "either of their own knowledge, or the relation of their elders"; but the actual authors of the book relied almost entirely on written sources (which by this

[52] John Selden, "To my Singular Good Friend, Mr. Augustine Vincent", in Augustine Vincent, *A Discoverie of Errours in the First Edition of the Catalogue of Nobility Published by Ralph Brooke, Yorke Herald, 1619* (London, 1622, S.T.C. 24756), sig. a-aᵛ; cf. the preface to the second, enlarged edition of Selden's *Titles of Honor* (London, 1631, S.T.C. 22178), for similar comments. Selden travelled fairly often, but always to libraries or easily accessible archives; his historical method is discussed in D. R. Woolf, "Erudition and the Idea of History in Renaissance England", *Renaissance Quart.*, xl (1987), pp. 11-48.

[53] William Somner, *The Antiquities of Canterbury* (London, 1640, S.T.C. 22918), pp. 34-5; Somner also notes (p. 62) that as reputable a medieval historian as Bede derived information from "tradition of his elders".

[54] *Ibid.*, pp. 21 f., 96; cf. pp. 25, 172, 369. In a slightly later work, *A Treatise of the Roman Ports and Forts in Kent*, ed. James Brome (Oxford, 1693), p. 5, Somner was much more critical of those who accepted "more upon fancy and fabulous traditions than good authority".

time increasingly included the works of earlier and contemporary scholars), clearly distinguishing between the questionable authority of "old tales" and the more convincing evidence in "writers both ancient and modern".[55] Richard Butcher corrected a number of traditions that he found in Stamford, many of which had been reported by Leland or Camden.[56] Sir William Dugdale seems to have believed that what did not survive in manuscript or inscription was lost for ever. In *The History of St. Paul's Cathedral*, he comments that "the dismall ruins" of some tombs in the cathedral "have put an end to any future discovery, that can be made of them". Dugdale's own *Antiquities of Warwickshire*, perhaps the greatest of all the county surveys for its minute detail and scrupulous accuracy, quotes from Selden's letter to Augustine Vincent and whole-heartedly adopts Selden's bias in favour of the written. Dugdale could report oral traditions for amusement, but he took a pedantic, almost malicious delight in correcting or disproving them from the manuscript sources which he knew so well. Tradition told him that Richard Boughton, sheriff of Warwick, had died at Bosworth field in 1485, but inquisitions *post mortem* revealed that Boughton had been killed two days before the battle, probably in a preliminary skirmish.[57]

Dugdale's attitude reveals a widening gap between scholarly and popular views of the past, in which oral sources were relegated to second-class evidence or were quoted only for interest. By the 1640s the document and the inscription had achieved an unquestionable priority over the tales of the common folk. The distance between a methodical student of records such as Dugdale and a talented amateur like Sir Thomas Browne is equally apparent. Browne's brief study of monuments in Norwich Cathedral, the *Repertorium*, owed a great deal to oral evidence, largely because Browne's documentary know-

[55] Daniel King, *The Vale-Royall of England: or, The County Palatine of Chester Illustrated*, 4 pts. (London, 1656), pt. 2, pp. 2, 118. Anthony Wood records (on information from Dugdale) that the true authors were William Webb, William Smith, Samuel Lee and James Chalmer: *Athenae Oxonienses*, ed. Philip Bliss, 4 vols. (Oxford, 1813-20), iii, p. 503; *D.N.B.*, s.v. "King, Daniel".

[56] Richard Butcher, *The Survey and Antiquitie of the Towne of Stamford, in the County of Lincolne* (London, 1646), pp. 26, 27; cf. Camden, *Britain*, p. 534; *Itinerary of John Leland*, iv, p. 89.

[57] Sir William Dugdale, *The History of St. Paul's Cathedral in London* (London, 1658), p. 48; Sir William Dugdale, *The Antiquities of Warwickshire* (London, 1656), preface and p. 66. Dugdale did, however, settle at least one pedigree dispute by reference to "divers aged people": Thomas, "Age and Authority", p. 234. For earlier examples of the use of oral evidence for family genealogy, see Thomas Westcote, *A View of Devonshire in 1630*, 1st edn. (Exeter, 1845), pp. xvi, 449; Richard Carew, *The Survey of Cornwall* (London, 1602, S.T.C. 4615), fo. 117.

ledge was thinner than that of a Dugdale or a Selden. Browne unhesitatingly reported information given him orally by two ancient cathedral officials. Some of this information was personal recollection; the rest was traditional. Sir Thomas thought that many bishops might have been buried in the cathedral, "and wee find it so asserted by some historicall accounts, butt there remaining no historie or tradition of the place of their enterrement, in vayne wee endeavor to designe and poynt out the same". Rather than let the memory of some vanished inscriptions perish, he "tooke the best account I could of them at the Kings returne from an understanding-singing-man of 91 yeares old and sett them downe in a booke". Yet even Browne distanced himself from his vulgar sources and devoted one of his most celebrated treatises to the repudiation of popular errors, believing the common people to be "the most deceptible part of mankind".[58]

Although oral sources never entirely vanished from the antiquaries' fishing-pond, references to them become steadily sparser as the seventeenth century wanes. Elias Ashmole relied very little on oral evidence for his *Antiquities of Berkshire*, but he could not resist repeating a graphic traditional tale, recorded in the writings of Anthony Wood, of the "murder" of Sir Robert Dudley's unfortunate wife, Amy Robsart, a century earlier.[59] Wood himself, though reluctant to lean too heavily on tradition, thought that it should not always be dismissed out of hand. At a rural Oxfordshire church he found, in 1659, an old monument, the inscription of which was "gone and quite out of remembrance". The "country people" told Wood that it commemorated "one, or three, daughters" who had been "antiently co-heires of this lordship". An air of willingness to believe hangs about his treatment of the traditions surrounding a sacred well near Seacourt:

> If I should tell you of the enriching of a towne herabouts by the continuall resort to this place, you would perhaps scarce beleive me; and yet it is a constant tradition among the good people here . . . All which, you'l say, *comming from the mouths of rusticks*, may be accounted noe truer then the tales of Robin Hood and Little John.

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[58] Sir Thomas Browne, *Repertorium: or, Some Account of the Tombs and Monuments in the Cathedrall Church of Norwich, 1680*, in *Works of Sir Thomas Browne*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes, 6 vols. (London, 1928-31), v, pp. 147, 151, 153, 156; *The Letters of Sir Thomas Browne, ibid.*, vi, p. 395, Browne to John Aubrey, 24 Aug. 1672; Sir Thomas Browne, *Pseudodoxia epidemica*, ed. Robin Robbins, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1981), i, p. 15 and *passim*; most of the "vulgar errors" Browne discusses are, however, errors of the educated, with classical and literary rather than popular origins.

[59] Elias Ashmole, *The Antiquities of Berkshire*, written *c.* 1666, 3 vols. (London, 1719), i, p. 52; ii, p. 486. For Wood's version of the story as told him by friends, see Bodleian Library, Oxford, Wood MS. D. 4, fos. 99-100ᵛ.

But, however, such constant tradition from each other among them may have
somthing in the bottome therof of truth; though much of it lost by the longinquity
of time since acted.[60]

Other writers, who avoided oral traditions as a general rule, cited
them incidentally on particular points. Sporadic references can be
found in the works of Robert Plot (Oxfordshire), Robert Thoroton
(Nottinghamshire), Sir Peter Leycester (Cheshire), Silas Taylor (Har-
wich and Dovercourt), James Wright (Rutland), Henry Chauncy
(Hertfordshire) and Robert Atkyns (Gloucestershire).[61] White Ken-
nett was prepared to accept a traditional story if he could find some
corroborating evidence in documents or ruins. The rigorous Ralph
Thoresby distrusted the yarns of the vulgar, but nevertheless turned
to tradition as an aid in reconstructing the state of the parish church
of Leeds on the eve of the Reformation, two centuries earlier. He
could even refer to a certain family's pedigree as "only conjectural
(though highly probable) from Tradition &c.".[62] The studious re-
visers of Camden's *Britannia* actually used traditions to clarify or
correct their great predecessor, and they were even able to exploit
the writings of European antiquaries, such as Olaus Wormius, to
bring a comparative approach to the study of rural folk-tales.[63] The
early eighteenth-century student of cathedral antiquities, Browne
Willis, also reported local traditions, some of which had originated
only in the preceding century.[64]

[60] Anthony Wood, "Survey of the Antiquities of the City of Oxford", written 1661-
6, in *Wood's City of Oxford*, ed. A. Clark, 3 vols. (Oxford Hist. Soc., xv, xvii, xxxvii,
1889-99), i, p. 325; cf. pp. 186, 215-16, 248-9, 426 (my italics).

[61] Robert Plot, *Natural History of Oxford-Shire* (Oxford, 1677), pp. 325-6, 337, 341,
351-2; Robert Thoroton, *The Antiquities of Nottinghamshire* (London, 1677), ed. John
Throsby, 3 vols. (Nottingham, 1790-6; repr. 1972), i, p. 103; ii, pp. 27, 167; Sir
Peter Leycester, *Historical Antiquities* (London, 1673), pp. 249-50; Silas Taylor (alias
Domville), *The History and Antiquities of Harwich and Dovercourt, Topographical,
Dynastical and Political*, written *c.* 1676, ed. Samuel Dale (London, 1730), pp. 16, 81;
James Wright, *The History and Antiquities of the County of Rutland* (London, 1684-7),
p. 1: William Stukeley, the annotator of the Bodleian Library copy (shelfmark Gough
Rutland 3), also noted (p. 62) traditions from the area as late as 1734; Sir Henry
Chauncy, *The Historical Antiquities of Hertfordshire* (London, 1700), p. 32; Sir Robert
Atkyns, *The Ancient and Present State of Glostershire* (London, 1712; repr. 1974), pp.
214, 248, 503.

[62] White Kennett, *Parochial Antiquities*, ed. B. Bandinel, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1818), i,
pp. 36, 56; ii, pp. 156, 284, 295; Ralph Thoresby, *Ducatus Leodiensis: or, The
Topography of the Ancient and Populous Town and Parish of Leedes* (London, 1715),
pp. 81, 106; cf. his *Vicaria Leodiensis: or, The History of the Church of Leedes in
Yorkshire* (London, 1724), p. 51; *The Diary of Ralph Thoresby, F.R.S.*, ed. Joseph
Hunter, 2 vols. (London, 1830), i, pp. 89-90.

[63] *Camden's Britannia*, ed. Edmund Gibson (London, 1695), pp. 355, 802, 814; cf.
Camden, *Britain*, p. 439.

[64] Browne Willis, *A Survey of the Cathedrals of York, Durham, Carlisle, Chester,
Man, Lichfield, Hereford, Worcester, Gloucester and Bristol*, 2 vols. (London, 1727), i,

Yet for all this, there can be no doubt that the faith of the learned in oral tradition had declined severely by 1700. A year earlier, a member of the Royal Society — possibly Edmund Halley — attempted to work out a mathematical formula with which to compare the reliability of oral and written testimony, and found that the written or printed document would "not lose half of its certainty" for seven thousand years; "oral tradition", he remarked, is "subject to much casuality" and would lose much of its reliability within two decades.[65] Less given to theorizing, but just as sceptical, was Charles Eyston (d. 1721), who determined to disprove the local traditions related by a Glastonbury innkeeper concerning Joseph of Arimathaea.[66] The remarks of Eyston's editor, the formidable Thomas Hearne, in themselves constitute a devastating critique of traditional evidence:

> Tho' the vulgar are generally uncapable of judging of antiquities, yet there are hardly any of them, but are very attentive, when things of this nature are talked of, especially if the discourse happens to be of the church which themselves are parishioners. Hence 'tis, that there are so many old stories of the original of some churches, and of their being translated from one place to another. Whatever foundation there might have been at first for such stories, they have, however, been mightily improved by the constant additions that have been made to them, as cannot otherwise but happen, when history is only convey'd by tradition. There is not the least probability in some of these stories; and yet the most incredible of them are often times listened to with greater attention, than to the most rational and solid discourses in divinity.

Hearne noted that the "vulgar" tended to forget the details surrounding churches when these fell or were destroyed, an interesting perception of the collective forgetting of irrelevant details of the past which modern oral historians call "structural amnesia". He himself had encountered many curious local tales, but these only reinforced his rigid distinction between "uncertain tradition" and the "authenticke chronicles" of which he was a tireless, if not always accurate, transcriber and editor.[67]

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(n. 64 cont.)
pp. 17, 22; ii, p. 694; cf. Willis's *A View of the Mitred Abbeys*, in *Joannis Lelandi antiquarii de rebus Britannicis collectanea*, ed. Hearne, appendix, ii, p. 166.

[65] Anon., "The Credibility of Human Testimony", *Philos. Trans. Roy. Soc.*, xxi (1699), pp. 359-65.

[66] [Charles Eyston], *A Little Monument to the Once Famous Abbey and Borough of Glastonbury*, in *The History and Antiquities of Glastonbury*, ed. Thomas Hearne (Oxford, 1722), pp. 1-2, 80, 104.

[67] *Ibid.*, pp. vii-viii, xiv, xxvi; Douglas, *English Scholars*, pp. 178-94. On structural amnesia, see J. A. Barnes, "The Collection of Genealogies", *Rhodes-Livingstone Jl.: Human Problems in British Central Africa*, v (1947), pp. 48-56; Jack Goody and Ian Watt, "The Consequences of Literacy", in Jack Goody (ed.), *Literacy in Traditional Societies* (Cambridge, 1968), pp. 32-3.

The comments of Augustan antiquaries, heralds and historians lend further weight to the impression that the written record had, by 1700, elbowed oral tradition aside, marginalizing it as an acceptable historical source. But there is more to the decline of oral tradition than this. The remarks of Hearne, Dugdale and others, and even of relatively sympathetic writers like Browne and Wood, suggest the emergence of a *social* — as distinct from a merely *intellectual* — bias against such sources.

To an extent, this had always been there: Leland himself had preferred priests to peasants, while at the end of the sixteenth century Sir William Wentworth advised his son, the future earl of Strafford, to beware the tales of servants, even "auncyentt honest servants", because "such men do mistake and misreport matters for wantt of lerning and sounder judgementt, though they be honest and meane truth".[68] But while specific traditions, as we have seen, were often questioned by Tudor antiquaries, there is little evidence, prior to 1600, of a more general hostility to "vulgar" traditions simply because they were vulgar. That situation had changed somewhat by 1650, and even more drastically by 1700. The England of the later seventeenth century had become much more radically stratified, economically, socially and culturally, than that of two centuries earlier. Elite forms of entertainment, literature and art had grown increasingly remote from popular forms throughout the seventeenth century, and although there remained considerable cross-fertilization between the two (the ballad-collections of Wood and Samuel Pepys, for example), the historical tastes of gentle and aristocratic readers had evolved sufficiently over two centuries to allow relatively little room to vulgar memories and tales.

There was a strong social element to this bias: perennial early modern concerns for order, felt even more acutely after the cataclysmic 1640s and 1650s, rendered popular discourse, complete with its occasional memories of local folk-heroes and even rebellions against authority, increasingly suspect. The association of oral traditions with socially marginal groups — ballad-singers and strolling players, for instance — and with the "gossip" of old women did nothing to endear them to the educated, who increasingly began to lump all such popular discourse under the same category which included superstitions and "vulgar errors".[69] Even the majority of harmless, amusing tales from

[68] *Wentworth Papers, 1597-1628*, ed. J. P. Cooper (Camden Soc., 4th ser., xii, 1973), p. 15.

[69] On the concept of vulgar error, see Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England, 1500-1800* (London, 1983), pp. 70-81.

the past, expressed in colourful rural language, could irritate refined Augustan sensibilities. What has been termed the "reformation of popular culture" undoubtedly contributed both to declining interest in traditions and in fact to their gradual disappearance at the grass roots, as popular literacy increased in the eighteenth century and a centralized state undermined localism. As print infested the country-side local communities were gradually caught up in a national histori-cal tradition which soon eclipsed, and in many places virtually obliterated, village lore.[70] In effect, the Restoration and eighteenth-century antiquaries who forswore oral tradition no longer wished to record it so much as to screen and control it by confining its impact on historical awareness to the margins and footnotes of learned texts built on written documents. This did not cause the decay of oral tradition; it merely isolated it by erecting a social barrier between "proper" history and mere legend — what we would now call folklore.

Perhaps no one better illustrates the changing relationship between history, folklore and tradition than John Aubrey. As a boy, he "did ever love to converse with old men, as living histories". Much of his *Brief Lives* derives from oral testimony, and his unfinished accounts of the antiquities of Surrey in some ways resemble earlier works such as *Britannia* in their mixture of the oral and the documentary. At Petersham he encountered the familiar tradition of a vanished re-ligious house, and at Streatham a recumbent figure in white marble, said by tradition to be John of Gaunt.[71] At Addington the inhabitants spoke much of their town's ancient prosperity; a similar nostalgia existed at Ewell, though "History being silent in this affair", Aubrey believed that "little can be depended on our weak conjectures".[72]

[70] A suggestive parallel may be drawn from the fate of traditional folk-carols which ceased to be created in the seventeenth century and were ultimately superseded by the text hymnbooks of Isaac Watts and others: A. L. Lloyd, *Folk Song in England*, rev. edn. (London, 1969), pp. 134-8; cf. Vic Gammon, " 'Babylonian Performances': The Rise and Suppression of Popular Church Music, 1660-1870", in Eileen and Stephen Yeo (eds.), *Popular Culture and Class Conflict, 1590-1914* (Brighton, 1981), pp. 62-88. On the reformation of popular culture and its separation from the culture of the élite, see Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, pt. 3; Robert Muchembled, *Popular Culture and Elite Culture in France, 1400-1750*, trans. Lydia Cochrane (Baton Rouge and London, 1985), pp. 280-300. The gap between élite and popular culture at the end of the seventeenth century, while obvious enough, may have been somewhat overstated: see Barry Reay, "Introduction: Popular Culture in Early Modern Eng-land", in Reay (ed.), *Popular Culture in Seventeenth-Century England*, pp. 1-30.
[71] John Aubrey, *The Natural History and Antiquities of the County of Surrey*, written 1673-92, 5 vols. (London, 1719; facsimile edn., Dorking, 1975), i, pp. 53, 82, 190, 201; Michael Hunter, *John Aubrey and the Realm of Learning* (London, 1975), pp. 39-40, 154-70.
[72] Aubrey, *Natural History and Antiquities of the County of Surrey*, ii, pp. 39, 219-20.

Aubrey's fascination with the supernatural, with prophecies, apparitions and ghosts, also made him rather more susceptible than most of his Restoration contemporaries to anecdotes and traditions which could not be documented. Recalling the thunder-clouds that he had seen gather minutes after the execution of Christopher Love, the Presbyterian conspirator, in 1651, Aubrey added the "report" of a similar incident in 1685.[73] A Tamworth physician had, on reading in Holinshed's *Chronicle* of an ancient battle between Britons and Saxons, been told by a mysterious voice that he would shortly see the bones of the men slain on the field; according to Aubrey's informant, a friend of the physician, the prediction was fulfilled soon after, as he watched a neighbour's servants happen upon bones and armour while digging for marl. The well-known story of how the ghost of Sir George Villiers had appeared in 1628 to its childhood friend and prophesied the assassination of the spectre's son, the duke of Buckingham, came to Aubrey "from two, or three" persons, and was confirmed for him by no less an authority than Dugdale. No less believable, because he had heard it from "persons of honour", was the tradition that Protector Somerset had observed "a bloody sword come out of the wall", prophesying his own decapitation, and the parishioners' tale, endorsed by Aubrey's friend Pepys, that the bells of St. Mary Overy had originated in the ruined abbey of Merton in Surrey.[74]

Yet the significant feature here is surely Aubrey's emphasis on the social status of his informants; he was much less credulous of the sayings of "vulgar people" than of educated friends. Vulgar tales were entertaining and therefore worth recording, but there is no suggestion that Aubrey believed all that he wrote down. Just as he disparaged the country folk of eastern Gloucestershire for calling St. Oswald "St. Twasole", so he remained sceptical of tales of fairies, elves and giants that issued from popular sources. "The vulgar have a tradition", he noted of Blechingley, "that I know not what duke of Buckingham was arrested by a royal precept in one of the galleries here".[75] In the vestry of Frensham Church he viewed a huge cauldron "which the inhabitants say, by tradition, was brought hither by the fairies, time out of mind" from a nearby hill. Aubrey believed the cauldron to be an ancient utensil from the era of pre-Christian

[73] John Aubrey, *Miscellanies, upon the Following Subjects* (London, 1721), p. 42.

[74] *Ibid.*, pp. 72, 77-8, 112-13; Aubrey, *Natural History and Antiquities of the County of Surrey*, i, p. 226.

[75] Aubrey, in *Anecdotes and Traditions*, ed. Thoms, pp. 83, 87; Aubrey, *Natural History and Antiquities of the County of Surrey*, iii, p. 87.

revels, and could scarcely conceal his amusement at the traditional explanation: "These stories are verily believ'd by most of the old women of this parish, and by many of their daughters, who can hardly be of any other opinion; so powerful a thing is custom, joyn'd with ignorance".[76]

Indeed Aubrey himself was convinced not just that traditional tales need not be believed, but that they had in fact declined in popularity even among the common people since his childhood. He even offered an explanation for this decline, which he associated with increasing literacy in the countryside (and especially with the growth in female literacy) occasioned by the mid-century turmoil. "In the old, ignorant times, before women were readers", he observed, "the history was handed down from mother to daughter". Aubrey's nurse had the history of England "from the Conquest down to Carl. I in ballad", and rural folk had told him many old fairy-tales as he grew up. Since then, however, such stories had been disappearing: "Before printing, old wives' tales were ingeniose; and since printing came in fashion, till a little before the civill warrs, the ordinary sort of people were not taught to reade". From the 1640s and 1650s, however, books had become more common, "and most of the poor people understand letters". Those that continued to weave tales of the past now devoted their attention to recent events, such as the Civil War, neglecting or forgetting the events and personalities of more remote times: memories of Oliver and chapbook histories had together "frighted away Robin-good-fellow and the fayries". Although Aubrey clearly exaggerated the extent to which rural literacy had improved in his lifetime, there is much to be said for his explanation; and the "variety of turnes of affaires" in the second half of the seventeenth century undoubtedly gave birth to a new stock of stories which may in fact have superseded traditions of longer standing.[77]

It was as folklore, not history, then, that a few men continued to garner oral traditions into the eighteenth century. Richard Gough's history of his beloved Myddle is replete with traditions and the recollections of "antient persons".[78] Abraham de la Pryme enjoyed talking with his parishioners as much as reading. His many informants

[76] Aubrey, *Natural History and Antiquities of the County of Surrey*, iii, pp. 366-7. Aubrey compared this belief to similar traditions about Camelot in Somerset.

[77] *Ibid.*, pp. 93, 99, 102, 106, 115-16; Aubrey also believed that the Civil War had caused the virtual disappearance of travelling fiddlers and rhymers everywhere but in Wales (pp. 107-8).

[78] Richard Gough, *The History of Myddle*, ed. David Hey (London, 1981), pp. 54, 56, 77, 81 and *passim*.

included other antiquaries and parsons as well as poorer folk. When noting the death of "Old Richard Baxter" in 1694 he added a character of the great Puritan "as far as my accounts can reach, as well oral as printed". His "oldest parishioners" in the village of Caistor gave him much information about an old Roman road "commonly call'd amongst them the High Street Way".[79] Yet Pryme was, despite his relative isolation, no country bumpkin himself but a fellow of the Royal Society and a promising young scholar in touch with the leading antiquaries of the turn of the century. He had one foot in the world of rural tradition and another in that of Augustan scholarship. With Daniel Defoe's *Tour thro' the Whole Island of Great Britain*, we have come almost full circle, for his frequent accounts of traditional tales and of the recollections of country folk connect him with Leland and Camden rather than with the documentary puritanism which by now fired the souls of historians and antiquaries: the difference is that no one regarded Defoe as a serious scholar, including himself. Defoe persistently denies any claim to the title of antiquary: his task is to describe Britain's towns, countryside and people as these appear in the present. It was precisely this lack of deep concern for the scholarly side of English antiquities, coupled with a boundless curiosity about everything he encountered, that allowed Defoe to adopt Leland's interest in local lore, and to share his caution towards specific points of tradition rather than the general scepticism and distaste of scholars from Thomas Habington to Thomas Hearne.[80]

A similar enthusiasm for provincial lore inspired sporadic essays in journals such as the *Gentleman's Magazine* throughout the eighteenth century, though as a rule these organs of gentle culture make no attempt to disguise their contempt for popular discourse. One essayist blamed the willingness of some men to believe tales such as that of Villiers's ghost on "a motley mixture of low and vulgar education" provided by nurses in infancy, "from whence we are gradually led to listen to the traditionary accounts of local ghosts, which like the genii of the ancients, have been reported to haunt certain family seats, and cities, famous for their antiquity and decays".[81] Yet by the end of the eighteenth century it had once again become fashionable to

[79] *Diary of Abraham de la Pryme*, pp. 47, 71, 79 ff.
[80] Defoe, *Tour thro' the Whole Island of Great Britain*, i, p. 116; ii, pp. 429-30; for other examples, cf. i, pp. 16, 188, 216, 243, 257, 278; ii, pp. 452, 463, 634, 662, 768.
[81] *Gentleman's Mag.*, ii (Oct. 1732), pp. 1001-2. Cf. the opinion of another writer that ballads were "the bane of all good manners and morals, a nursery for idlers, whores, and pickpockets, a school for scandal, smut and debauchery, and ought to be entirely suppressed, or reduced under proper restriction": *ibid.*, v (Feb. 1735), p. 93.

study popular traditions, superstitions and practices, if only for their quaintness, under the rubric of "popular antiquities"; John Brand's preliminary investigations into this subject, themselves based upon earlier work by Henry Bourne, pointed the way towards a more systematic study of folklore in the nineteenth century.[82]

★   ★   ★

While oral tradition had not utterly died out by 1700, it had ceased to provide an important historical source. It was the later seventeenth-century antiquaries, heralds and philologists themselves who exiled the oral from mainstream historiography by discounting its value, pushing local memory, in effect, outside the broader, national histori-cal tradition and into the graveyard of rural antiquarianism.

The intensive collection and study of folklore and tradition in the nineteenth century only emphasize the breadth of the chasm between students of rural lore and collectors of "popular antiquities" on the one hand, and practitioners of "legitimate" or "serious" history on the other. Though a Romantic historian such as Michelet was as content to converse about the past with the urban *petit bourgeois* as he was to collect old documents,[83] most historians from Ranke to the mid-twentieth century have opted unequivocally for the written record.

The neglect of oral sources from the middle of the seventeenth century was not the mark of methodological progress but a function of the increasing availability and reliability of written material. The visual may render the oral unnecessary, but where the past exists only in the mouths of the people, the modern folklorist, the student of African history and the recorder of working-class memories must still turn to the "common voice". If such evidence is now treated with a more rigorous degree of scepticism and is checked and re-checked against external sources, it is not simply becanse modern practitioners are free of medieval credulity, but because they often have more with which to work. The Tudor and early Stuart antiquar-ies deserve our thanks because they pioneered not one road to the past, but two.

Dalhousie University   *D. R. Woolf*

[82] Henry Bourne, *Antiquitates Vulgares: or, The Antiquities of the Common People* (Newcastle, 1725); John Brand, *Observations on Popular Antiquities, Chiefly Illustrating the Origins of our Vulgar Customs, Ceremonies and Superstitions*, ed. Henry Ellis, 2 vols. (London, 1813); see esp. ii, pp. 259-72, for beliefs connected with wells, fountains and other places of interest.

[83] Thompson, *Voice of the Past*, pp. 41 f.