

Afterword: Shadows of the Past in Early Modern England

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ABSTRACT In this brief afterword, Daniel Woolf discusses some of the many ways—some addressed in the volume’s other essays—in which the past interacted with the present in the form of what are here called “shadows.” He compares modern and early modern notions of past, present, and future. He examines the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century ideas of history (as articulated by historians as well as their readers). He also offers observations on the more tangible elements of the past (antiquities, archaeological remains, and documents) that allowed contemporaries more direct access to their own and England’s past. The changing importance of temporal precision is also addressed. **KEYWORDS:** chronology; early modern understandings of the past, present, and future; material remains of the past; diaries and memoirs

☞ **SHADOWS OF THE PAST** crept through and across most aspects of life in early modern England. It was in this respect no different generally from societies in other times, from antiquity to the present. However, the nature of the shadows, their extent, and the scope of their influence were quite specific to place and period. The essays in this volume illustrate some of the variety of both the shadows and their impact. There were natural shadows, cast by trees that for generations had marked out boundaries and thus became sites of customary knowledge and practice. There were the shadows of ancestors, commemorated visibly in monuments, in household decorations such as tapestries and portraiture, in family monuments, and, increasingly, in memoirs. There were shadows of speech and language, conscious or unconscious throwbacks to an “antick” style. Some shadows were warm, inviting, benign, and comforting; the past as a whole provided an illusion of stability, a sense of order, and a set of standards (often more imputed or imagined than real) by which events of the present could be measured. Other shadows, particularly those not palliated by the balm of temporal distance, could be cold, dark, disturbing, and even painful—those cast by the grief occasioned by death, disappointment at a downward turn of fortune’s wheel, or the

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sorrow of lost love; or by the urge to seek vengeance for slights and wounds suffered. Past violence, in particular, cast a long and odious shadow—that of the civil wars more than any other event in English history, such was the extent of that violence, and of public knowledge of it (even among those left personally unscathed by bodily injury, property loss, or financial ruination), readily disseminated in an age with a nascent public sphere and cheap print.

The past was, thus, not *passive*. It was much more than a constant but near-silent element in early modern life, a background noise that was always present but that, with effort, could be overlooked. The past also served as a tool, as a shield, and often as a weapon. It was a tool for casting light on the present, through precedent, custom, and explanation, not least in the oral traditions and memories that turn up in depositions of various sorts in both local and central courts. It was a shield against unwanted change and innovation, though even the agents of change often appealed to the past as providing a lost touchstone that must be returned to—as for example in the Puritan pursuit of an “ancient” and “primitive” church; or the Leveller adherence to Anglo-Saxon liberties predating the “Norman yoke” (studied in the present volume by Philip Baker with special reference to its metropolitan, London context); or Digger and radical-religious imaginings of a more bucolic—and even more antique—Edenic and unpropertied world. And it was a weapon, in the hands of Parliamentarians and army propagandists attacking the incursions of royal power, of Stuart adherents defending that power, and of churchmen and religious enthusiasts of all stripes. The past also had its argumentative and polemical uses in the hands of its self-appointed custodians, the historians of the day, for whom a broad, monarchist consensus on the main elements and general trajectory of medieval and Tudor history—based on a century of chronicling and on the humanist historiography, or “politic history,” of the first part of the seventeenth century—very quickly dissolved in the cauldron of ideological and literal conflict that erupted in the 1640s and 1650s.¹ The principal challenge for the historians and memorialists of recent events—such as Thomas May, erstwhile classicizing poet turned Parliamentary propagandist, or those behind the timely translation of Davila’s paradigmatic account of a previous century’s wars of religion (addressed in the present volume by Gary Rivett)—was less the *recovery* of the past than its reshaping, the forging of its still hot metal into a politically pointed sword. This remained true even if, as Rivett observes, the hope was to beat that sword back into a pacific ploughshare.

But what exactly was “the past” (a construction of noun and definite article that rarely occurs in contemporary discourse—“past” was used much more commonly as an adjective)? And why did it have such influence, given that contemporaries understood, in the main, that it was gone—that it did not, in fact, exist anywhere save in the mind of God? Time had consumed the past, negating it and reducing it to a field of

1. For fuller treatment of this argument, see my book *The Idea of History in Early Stuart England* (Toronto, 1990); and “From Hystories to the Historical: Five Transitions in Thinking about the Past, 1500–1700,” in *The Uses of History in Early Modern England*, ed. Paulina Kewes (San Marino, Calif., 2006), 31–67.

thought and discourse, its sole tangible remains the physical objects that straddled human generations, frail filaments across the chasm between ages. It could be “accessed” (to use our modern jargon) only via these objects and through other less tangible shadows: memories, traditions, knowledge, and customs.



To understand the place of the past in early modern life we must first understand what people thought it was, and wasn't, and its relation to time, comments on the ravages of which were commonplace. Insofar as they thought about the collective “past” at all (as opposed to making use of its tools, shields, and swords), early modern men and women understood very well that they could not, as the Earl of Salisbury in *Richard II* (3.2.69) wanted to do, “call back yesterday, bid time return.” They had a more categorical sense of the past's non-existence in part because they lacked (writing, print, and the visual arts aside) nearly all of our technological means of preserving the present-soon-to-be-past by deliberate intent.² Although time itself was conventionally understood to be a *product* of motion, it was not imagined in itself as a spatialized fourth dimension. There is similarly no idea, in early modern thought, of the past continuing to be, as it were, “back there.” Furthermore, although it was almost universally agreed that time, like space, was a finite entity with a beginning and an end, contemporary discussions did not extend this notion so far as to depict the span of time from Creation to Apocalypse as a place to and through which a person might flit—as characters do in works of science fiction, from H. G. Wells to Stephen King. Only the ephemeral, momentary present, and the eternity of heaven or hell, could be said to “exist” in a strict sense.

Nor could the present be said to contain *all* the elements of the past within it. One looks in vain in Renaissance and Reformation thought for a timeless and ever-forward-moving “now” in which, to quote the anthropologist Maurice Bloch, “the present and the past are so fused that the present is a mere manifestation of the past.”³ By the later seventeenth century, however, this situation was beginning to alter in response to social, economic, and political change, the speed of which was accelerating (if still very slowly by our twenty-first-century standards). Not only had the present become, by then, a temporal zone independent from the past—leading Bishop Sprat to chide those who insisted on “the conformity of our actions to times past, and not the present”—it had also become a definable space within which events could both occur and be discussed before receding into the historical past.⁴ The “news culture” that

2. Tape recordings, film, and photographs, as philosophers remind us, are strictly speaking not the past but images or sounds of that past, therefore analogous to memory. If I hear a bang and want to hear it again, the best I can do is to make a recording that will provide an electronic imitation of the original bang. On this point, see G. E. M. Anscombe, “The Reality of the Past,” in *Philosophical Analysis: A Collection of Essays*, ed. Max Black (Ithaca, N.Y., 1950), 38–59 at 52.

3. Maurice Bloch, “The Past and the Present in the Present,” *Man* 12 (1977): 278–92 at 288.

4. For Sprat's comment, see T. Sprat, *The History of the Royal Society*, ed. J. I. Cope and H. W. Jones (St. Louis, Mo., 1958), 337.

began to emerge in the mid-seventeenth century was built upon this perception of a distinctive “present,”⁵ a perception that in turn allowed a reconceptualization of the past as the sum of all things, an emulsion of contingencies that had occasioned this specific present and were still immanent within it. Other intellectual shifts would follow in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, including the modern concept of “history” as a collective forward movement rather than just the record or recounting of discrete events (in Reinhart Koselleck’s famous formulation of the distinction),⁶ along with historicist revaluations of the past and its individual episodes and entities.

Through most of the period covered in this volume, however, the past remained a discursive field of abstract icons, or virtues and vices in human form, that could be fleshed out and offered rhetorically for the didactic purpose of providing examples of effective or ethical action. The modern conception of the present as emerging from all that went before of course depends upon a very different view of the past. To the historian and the casual compiler of commonplaces alike, the past was a convenient and nearly boundless *lake*, full of examples and anecdotes that were mobile and extractable from that lake’s varying depths into the boat of present usage: it was not yet a *river* emptying at the estuary of presentness before dispersing into the uncharitable sea of the future, and it was not yet the *stream* that created modernity and that itself had to be mapped through all its bends, tributaries, and dead-end offshoots.⁷

Paradoxically, this sense of the past as fully and episodically useful set up an impenetrable distance or barrier between past and present. The humanist historians of the Renaissance—so often praised as the ancestors of modern historical *writing* because of their apparent sensitivity to the political and to human vicissitude—look more rather than less remote from us, and oddly retrogressive by modern standards, in comparison with their oft-maligned chronicler predecessors. The annalists of the Middle Ages and the sixteenth century may have lacked a sense of cumulative development, and they were criticized by their successors on both stylistic and intellectual grounds (above all for their failure to address “causes” or to inquire into the motives of men), but they were obliged by the very nature of the annalistic framework to record the past as a series of contiguous presents (the expanse of a single “present” being a year). It was this neglect of the distinction between “is” and “was,” this apparent lack of any sense of difference between past and present—which carried with it a tendency to ignore long-term change between antiquity and their own age—that so perplexed the historians and philologists of the ensuing era.

But the humanists’ approach to history was not necessarily “more modern” than that of the chroniclers. It fetishized both real and intellectual pieces of the past, lifting famous personages from the depths of time and “re-presenting” them in speech or

5. See D. Woolf, “News, History, and the Construction of the Present in Early Modern England,” in *The Politics of Information in Early Modern Europe*, ed. B. Dooley and S. Baron (London and New York, 2001), 80–118.

6. Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (Cambridge, 1985), 92–93.

7. I repeat here a metaphor explored at greater length in my recent book, *A Global History of History* (Cambridge, 2011).

writing rather than attempting an empathetic, holistic, and imaginative re-creation of the past in the present, the historicist *Verstehen* referred to by the late nineteenth-century German philosopher of history Wilhelm Dilthey, which R. G. Collingwood would restate as the historian's ability to enter into the mind of historical agents and "re-enact" events.⁸ Although antiquaries and poets alike boasted enthusiastically that their labors had rescued the dead from time's maw, bridged the gap of ages, and allowed historical personages to "speak" to readers (often poetically through prosopopeia or dramatically in history plays), they knew at the very same time that this was a literary pose, a chant of denial repeated vainly in the face of inescapable and capricious death. (The conscious linguistic archaisms explored in Lucy Munro's essay in this volume are a variant of this phenomenon.) This re-presentation of the past was a rhetorical and poetical device rather than a perception of reality, and it ultimately served only to reconfirm the absence of the dead and the inaccessibility of the past. For historians of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the past's relation to the present was properly that of analogue rather than efficient cause, which is exactly what made examples from history so usefully malleable, what lent history its primarily educative, rather than explicative, function: Cyrus, Caesar, and St. Paul alike were, as once-living beings, forever gone, no longer existent in this world, their shades departed to whatever classical or Christian afterlife awaits us all, or to oblivion.

The humanist topos of the "deadness" of the past was taken up by a number of writers in England. It built on a tradition going back to Aristotle, and to the Roman writer Censorinus, who divided time into past, present, and future, remarking that "of these, the past is without entrance, the future without exit, while the intermediary present is so short and incomprehensible that it seems to be nothing but the conjunction of past and future."⁹ This is by and large the philosophical position taken by early modern writers. "The *present* only has a being in nature; things *past* have a being in the memory only," observed Thomas Hobbes, "but things to come have no being at all." It was a commonplace in sermons that "[d]ayes past, and future, are as no dayes," as remarked the celebrated preacher Humphrey Sydenham: "Yesterday was; and tomorrow will be; and so, now, are not." Such a view of the three phases of time distinguished the human understanding of temporality from that of God, to whom all time was a *nunc stans*, an eternal now. To men, the past once gone "is nothing," wrote Elnathan Parr: "were it a thousand yeeres, it is but a thought."¹⁰ Yet even the present was only a "conceit," said the pastor of Bloxham, in Oxfordshire, for "who can say of any time present, now it is, sith it out-runs thy thoughts?"¹¹

8. R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford, 1946); for a study of Collingwood's concept of "re-enactment," see William H. Dray, *History as Re-enactment: R. G. Collingwood's Idea of History* (Oxford, 1995).

9. Censorinus, *De Die Natali*, quoted in Norbert Elias, *Time: An Essay*, trans. E. Jephcott (Oxford, 1992), 79.

10. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, I.iii, ed. M. Oakeshott (Oxford, 1946), 16, emphasis in original text; Humphrey Sydenham, *The Royall Passing-Bell* (London, 1630), 12; Elnathan Parr, *Abba Father; or, a plaine and short direction concerning priuate prayer* (London, 1618), 27.

11. Roger Matthew, *The Flight of Time* (London, 1634), 8.

The future was no more real, but even if it did not exist ontologically, people had certainly long learned to act as if it did. For example, the church courts distinguished between contracts or promises (to marry, for instance) *per verba de praesenti* and those *de futuro*; while the former had much more force, both were recognized.¹² Intellectually, the Boethian *nunc stans* was in decline by the mid-seventeenth century, seen increasingly as a semantic invention that was neither necessary nor helpful in explaining the relationship between God and human time. Hobbes, wielding his own version of Ockham's razor, dismissed it, along with figures of speech in general, as a term inherited from scholasticism that signified nothing, a characteristic of post-Babel discourse.¹³ Half a century later, Joseph Addison, too, thought it an archaism. "In our speculations of eternity, we consider the time which is present to us as the middle, which divides the whole line into two equal parts," he wrote in the *Spectator*. "For this reason, many witty authors compare the present time to an isthmus or narrow neck of land, that rises in the midst of an ocean, immeasurably diffused on either side of it."¹⁴



As the essays in this volume show, the vanished past had nonetheless left tendrils, footprints, traces, and signs of its earlier being—or as I have called them here, shadows. Because a sense of anachronism and a mental map of time were developing only slowly,¹⁵ and because the sense of change was for all but the most astute and subtle minds devoid of chronological sophistication (the capacity to place that change within a specific temporal frame—in short, to periodize), the "dead" past could become, through its shadows, as alive to contemporaries as the present. And, since the present was in a constant state of becoming the past, there was a natural continuity, almost a sympathy, between the two. Against the impenetrable fog enveloping, and the unbridgeable remoteness of, an exemplary Caesar, King Arthur, or even more modern figures—their conceded non-presence—must be weighed the countervailing fact that England was already in the seventeenth century (and unlike its nascent overseas colonies) quite an old country. A different, enduring face of the past was therefore inescapable: the past as experienced individually by the unlettered, and collectively by local communities, for whom it figured in daily life as custom, belief, legend, and tradition (sometimes invented tradition that ploughmen and tavern-keepers were as capable of creating as the most skilled among Jan Broadway's gentry authors of fraudulent genealogies, as described in this volume). The trees and woods studied in

12. Charles Donahue Jr., "Proof by Witnesses in the Church Courts of Medieval England: An Imperfect Reception of the Learned Law," in *On the Laws and Customs of England*, ed. M. S. Arnold et al. (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1981), 127–58 at 154; Martin Ingram, *Church Courts, Sex, and Marriage in England, 1570–1640* (Cambridge, 1987), 132.

13. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, IV.xlvi, ed. Oakeshott, 443; Lennard J. Davis, *Factual Fictions: The Origins of the English Novel* (New York, 1983), 81.

14. Addison, *Spectator*, no. 590 (September 6, 1714), in *The Spectator*, ed. D. F. Bond, 5 vols. (Oxford, 1965), 5:18, 21; see also Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 15.179–85, for a locus classicus on the flow of time.

15. For this argument, see Woolf, "From Hystories to the Historical," 37–41.

Nicola Whyte's essay, often ancient, were uniquely long-lived organic survivors of time's ravages; as a feature of the landscape that Alexandra Walsham has recently explored in the context of Reformation beliefs and attitudes, the arboreal occupied a distinctive space, older than the human or animal, if not as ancient as the megalith or ancient barrow.¹⁶

If the memorable characters that populated the past in writing, whether remote family ancestors, predecessors in office, or celebrated historical personages, could not be resurrected except discursively and imaginatively, the past still survived into the present in other ways. Its physical remains could be observed and touched, smelled and tasted; via tradition, they could even be indirectly heard. Just as natural features of the landscape—rivers, forests, and hills—survived largely unchanged or were by their nature continuous, so the artificial human-made detritus of the remotest antiquity survived, as either fossilized artifact, for purely aesthetic and curious contemplation, or adapted into present use, and sometimes as both. We can never speak with Henry VIII, but we may hold in our hands the actual physical documents that he signed and vicariously hear him speak. If it was not possible in the seventeenth century to converse with the medieval dead, it yet remained easier than it has become in more recent times to touch objects they had touched, read documents they had written, and live in houses they had built.¹⁷

The tangible remains of the man-made past (whether the relatively ordinary, such as old but inhabitable buildings, ancient walls and ruins, furniture, and books, or the more exotic, such as heirlooms, archaeological artifacts, fossils, and old coins) are the most obvious manifestations of the past's continued existence in the present—shadows with, in this case, actual physical substance. Writers between the Renaissance and the early eighteenth century, in the process of developing their much-praised senses of change, anachronism, and period,¹⁸ needed to square this environmental fact with their learned conceptualization of history as a sequence of discrete episodes detachable both from the present and from their actual chronological setting, hence also “portable” and likely to be extracted from a rhetorical copia of exempla into a variety of discourses aimed at a didactic present.

Apart from physical objects and surroundings, a second strand connecting past and present, the dead and the living—one of which early modern writers were aware—

16. Some trees, however, were regarded as very ancient indeed, and submerged stumps in marshland were held to have been of pre-Deluge origins; Alexandra Walsham, *The Reformation of the Landscape: Religion, Identity, and Memory in Early Modern Britain and Ireland* (Oxford, 2011), 378–79 and passim. See also Adam Fox, *Oral and Literate Culture in England, 1500–1700* (Oxford, 2002). I have not been able to take into account Andy Wood's book *The Memory of the People: Custom and Popular Senses of the Past in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2013), which appeared as the present volume went to press.

17. Were one to borrow the language of structuralism, one might say that the relation of Renaissance readers to the historical past was metaphorical, to the architectural and archaeological past, metonymical: the one constructing a discourse filled with analogues to the present, the other appropriating the contiguous physical remains of bygone times to present uses, intellectual or non-intellectual.

18. For the development of consciousness of change at this time, see the first chapter of my book *The Social Circulation of the Past: English Historical Culture, 1500–1730* (Oxford, 2003).

was that between generations. The central importance of one's consciousness of predecessors and forebears in stimulating gentry and noble thought about the past and a sense of identity in the present (and not just, as Jan Broadway observes here, among the recently ennobled) went beyond the familial to embrace the ethnic and the social. Early modern commentators were conscious of their ties to past and future generations, ties to an expanded human collectivity (in this pre-Linnaean, long pre-Darwinian, and still-Creationist age, they did not yet consider their own animal kind to be a mere biological "species") that transcended the decaying power of time, the most fundamental connection of which was to the initial act of man's disobedience to God. Sin, said John Donne, connected the living equally with men unborn and with the remotest of scriptural progenitors, Noah and ultimately Adam. Gerrard Winstanley reiterated the point by reminding his readers that they possessed in sin an unwelcome bequest from "Adam, or first man, that went astray from his Maker, which lived upon earth many thousand yeares agoe."¹⁹ These formulations suggest, in a theological and spiritual sense, a diachronic commonality of human interest; secularized, nationalized, and restated in the language of law, custom, and politics, it would evolve by the end of the eighteenth century into Edmund Burke's conservative vision of the "pact between the dead, the living, and the yet unborn."

As is well known, the early modern era sat on the cusp between an age of low literacy and manuscript/oral communication, and an age of much higher literacy and nearly ubiquitous print. Aside from very specific contexts—judicial decisions based on dated documents, or the work of historians and antiquaries—a certain slapdashness in chronological record-keeping (at least by our meticulous standards) can be observed throughout the early modern era. That had implications for the sense of the past, and for the ability to make use of it. There was a relative dearth, until print generated a reasonable supply of fact-bearing books, of the means for any individual, save those stocked with a good library, to verify dates or even years of events known or believed to have occurred in the past. If one is now unsure of the date that a particular event occurred—the last coronation, or the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.—there is no shortage of printed sources of information to consult, to say nothing of the world's Wiki ways. In the early modern period, the vast majority of the population was unlikely to have such information close at hand, and just as likely not to be terribly disconcerted by this. Diurnal precision, in most (though not all) contexts, mattered very little, even to interested observers. The Suffolk Puritan John Rous had an open ear to news of events outside his parish but paid little attention to the dates at which they occurred: he records dates as "about Michaelmas," "in October," "during Michaelmas terme," or "about August 2."²⁰ Even testimonies in early modern legal proceedings are routinely vague about exact days and times.

19. *Sermons of John Donne*, ed. G. R. Potter and E. M. Simpson, 10 vols. (Berkeley, Calif., 1953–), 2:2, 88. Gerrard Winstanley, *Truth Lifting up Its Head above Scandal* (1649), in *The Works of Gerrard Winstanley*, ed. George Sabine (Ithaca, N.Y., 1941), 120.

20. *The Diary of John Rous*, ed. M. A. E. Green, Camden Society, orig. ser., no. 56 (London, 1856), 7 and passim.

Dictums about the need for absolute calendrical accuracy in the writing of history were increasingly insisted on by historians and antiquaries in the seventeenth century, but such rules were rarely observed in practice by the large majority of the population, since a variety of coexisting calendars and a dearth of information often made establishing a date for an event difficult, if not impossible. British chronologers from Robert Pont and John Napier through Thomas Lydiat and John Marsham, a few of them inspired by the rigorous Continental methodologies of Scaliger and Petavius, strove to correct these inaccuracies as a prerequisite for the rewriting of ancient history—Isaac Newton, for example, spent his final years using the laws of universal motion to assist him in providing a chronology of the ancient world—but they were not always successful, and just as often were ignored.²¹ Archbishop James Ussher's precise dating of the beginning of the world to a specific time and day in 4004 B.C. was a much-cited (and eventually ridiculed) synthesis of a century's worth of philological and astronomical scholarship, but it never gained acceptance as the "last word" on the subject, even in an age that accepted the premise that the world was less than six thousand years old: there was no agreement on precisely how old. Sir Walter Raleigh went to the trouble of providing chronological charts for his popular *Historie of the World* (1614), but he was quick to equivocate that any date not based directly on the Old Testament was at best vague human speculation; and his contemporary, the poet Samuel Daniel, asserted that the exact date of an event was irrelevant to establishing either its veracity or its historical significance.²²

One and the same individual could be very precise or very vague about the date of an event, depending not only on the fullness of pertinent information but on more elusive factors as well. John Evelyn's methodical diary entries had given him a sharpened sense of historical time, yet when he recorded that his close friend Robert Boyle had died "aged about 65," it apparently did not occur to him to be more accurate.²³ A fellow diarist and antiquary, Anthony Wood, despised narratives with weak chronologies, condemning the published account of the execution of an Irish brigand for failing to record times, nor even mentioning "the day or year of his death." But when Wood himself recorded the death of the celebrated Anglo-Saxon scholar William Somner, he failed to meet his own high standard, noting only that Somner had died "about Easter.

21. For Newton's endeavors in chronology, see Frank E. Manuel, *Isaac Newton: Historian* (Cambridge, Mass., 1963), passim, and the revised treatment in Manuel, *The Religion of Isaac Newton* (Oxford, 1974).

22. For background on English and European chronology in the early modern period, the work of Anthony Grafton is indispensable; see his "Joseph Scaliger and Historical Chronology: The Rise and Fall of a Discipline," *History and Theory* 14 (1975): 156–85; *Joseph Scaliger*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1983–93), vol. 2, passim; and "Chronology and Its Discontents in Renaissance Europe: The Vicissitudes of a Tradition," in *Time: History and Ethnologies*, ed. D. O. Hughes and T. R. Trautmann (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1995), 139–66.

23. John Evelyn, *Diary*, ed. E. S. de Beer, 6 vols. (Oxford, 1959), 5:81. The use of "thereabouts" in private as well as public records illustrates further the phenomenon that David Fischer referred to as "age-heaping," the deliberate rounding up of ages to the nearest decade—rather the opposite of the modern pattern of rounding down to emphasize youth; Fischer, *Growing Old in America* (New York, 1977), 82–86.

[He] died 1668 (so his son [says]), about the latter end. I remember he told me he died before Easter 1669—rather the latter end of 1668.”²⁴ It was this sort of pedantic attention to temporal precision that amused one antiquary, who commented of a funeral monument giving the person’s time and date of death that “they were so punctual in relating the very hour of his exit, that they forgot to insert the year.”²⁵

Dates of birth, and even years of birth, were not always known to the individuals in question, particularly at the start of the early modern period, and even at the upper end of the social ladder. A soap-maker named Nicholas Bishop, giving a deposition in January 1592, said he was thirty-two; two months later, deposing in a different case, on behalf of the Burbage family, he gave his age as thirty.²⁶ When in 1623 Anthony Blagrave wanted a legacy paid out to his kinsman Thomas Blagrave, he had first to prove to local authorities that Thomas was “nowe of the age of 26 yeres,” according to a term in Thomas’s father’s will.²⁷ Such examples reveal the increasing importance of establishing age with reference to a contemporary written record, public or private, of the year of birth. Until about 1500, however, people’s ages were established almost solely by eyewitness testimony, with the memories of dates sharpened by reference to feast days, coincidental historical events, and incidents in the witnesses’ own lives. These ways of determining age were “final products of . . . the interaction of local knowledge and memory” and were intended as social rites rather than statistical exercises. Such means, though imprecise by later standards, “were deemed sufficiently accurate and detailed for the legal, social, and economic needs of the matter and the moment,” as one medievalist has noted.²⁸

Those needs, however, were themselves changing in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and individuals’ knowledge of their own age changed with them. As Sir Keith Thomas has pointed out in his much-cited essay on the subject, the proportion of those who knew their age *was* steadily increasing during this period, and even as early as John Fitzherbert, the Tudor agrarian writer, an “idiot” could be defined as someone incapable of telling his or her own age, or of counting to twenty.²⁹ Beginning in the fourteenth century, it was a relatively common practice among the literate classes across Europe to keep notes of their children’s births,³⁰ though even by the later seven-

24. See Wood’s notes on his copy of *The Life and Death of Major Clancie, the grandest cheat of this age* (London, 1680), Bodleian Library, MS Wood 173(6), printed in Wood, *The Life and Times of Anthony Wood, Antiquary, of Oxford, 1632–1695*, 5 vols. (Oxford, 1891–1900), 2:48; for Somner’s death, see 2:155. He may, of course, have heard a bell ring out the hour, since he embarked at All Souls.

25. Bodleian Library, MS Top. gen. e. 79, Edward Steele’s parish notes, 1714, vol. 1, fol. 171r.

26. TNA C.24/228/10, 11; cited in W. Ingram, *The Business of Playing: The Beginnings of the Adult Professional Theater in Elizabethan London* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1992), 184.

27. *Reading Records: Diary of the Corporation, 1431–1654*, ed. J. M. Guilding, 4 vols. (London and Oxford, 1892–96), 2:131.

28. Joel T. Rosenthal, *Old Age in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia, 1996), 10–11, 16, 33; see also Sue Sheridan Walker, “Proof of Age of Feudal Heirs in Medieval England,” *Medieval Studies* 35 (1973): 306–23.

29. Keith Thomas, “Age and Authority in Early Modern England,” *Proceedings of the British Academy* 62 (1976): 205–48 at 206–7.

30. Leon Battista, in Alberti’s *Libri Della Famiglia* (1434), stresses the usefulness of recording such information; cited in Gerhard Dohrn-van Rossum, *History of the Hour: Clocks and Modern Temporal Orders*, trans. T. Dunlap (Chicago and London, 1996), 228.

teenth century this could not be taken for granted. In an era of frequent birth and equally frequent infantile death, people could not (or saw no need to) commit birthdays to memory. It was almost literally true that if a person's date of birth were not immediately written down somewhere, his or her age could not be established with any certainty. Adam Martindale knew that he had been born in September 1623, "but upon what particular day of that month I could never learn."³¹ By the end of the seventeenth century, with the credibility of oral sources of information increasingly falling into doubt, especially when voiced by the socially inferior, greater precision was expected from a state and culture now grown much more accustomed to the written record.

The seventeenth century's greatest contributions to the modern sense of self were arguably the diary and the personal memoir, or autobiography, the latter not infrequently beginning with a recitation of family ancestry, whether legitimate or constructed. The private recollection and the public event often merged in the leaves of these volumes: the boundary between personal and family history on the one hand and the wider world on the other was not recognized by most diarists and autobiographers, though the degree to which contemporary public events were integrated with personal memories varied widely. The unpublished chronological *Pandectae* of Sir John Marsham include much material on his family, inserted on loose sheets.³² Somewhat earlier, Sir Roger Twysden's notebook as a Justice of the Peace contains a number of personal memories and attempts to integrate his business and personal life with historical events, referring, for instance, to "the tyme of Oliver (or at leaste while we were under an anarchy)." Elsewhere Twysden recalls, "What I was assessed during the troublesome tymes from 1642 to 1660 when our gracious king returned I shall not need remember, it shall suffice to say the assessments of those tymes were so immense," and he refers to "those men at Westminster which began the wars." Twysden's present was consistently interpreted through his past and vice versa—and it was a past in which the public and private are virtually indistinguishable.³³ But in keeping with the pain of recent events, there is in this passage as much effort expended in forgetting as in remembering. This further exemplifies the tension explored in Fiona McCall's essay between those such as John Walker, who felt an imperative to capture recollections of the recent past before they faded and then vanished, and those for whom the process of recollection was no catharsis but rather a painful reopening of old wounds.

31. Adam Martindale eventually discovered his date of baptism from the parish register at Prescott, yet he omitted this information from his autobiography; *The Life of Adam Martindale written by himself*, ed. R. Parkinson, Chetham Society, original ser., 4 (1845): 1.


32. Marsham, *Pandectae nostri temporis*, Bodleian Library, MS Don. c. 60 at fols. 238r and 243v. This manuscript was composed at several different periods. Marsham must have anticipated continuing it, since he had ruled pages as far as 1689. No mere enthusiast for the past, Marsham also covers events from 1660 to just before his own death in 1685, listing such occurrences as the first meeting of "the fatall parliament" on November 3, 1640, together with personal events such as the births and deaths of his children.

33. Kent Archives Office (now Kent History and Library Centre), U47/47/01, pp. 22, 50, 59. Twysden similarly applauds the 1663 subsidy as a return to "auntient liberties" and a contrast to illegal impositions and levies of the last twenty years (p. 59); on p. 64 he refers in 1664 to "the tyme of the late long Parlyament (whose memory was so odious)."



This brief afterword has explored a very few aspects of the way that the past was viewed in early modern England, a subject that despite much attention from both historians and literary scholars still provides ample room for further research. I would suggest that the time has come for us to leave behind, for a while, the study of past ideas and practices of “history” narrowly framed as the ancestor of the modern discipline, and instead turn to a detailed excavation of the various forms and modes in which the past manifested itself in daily life. The potential sources for such study are nearly limitless, and they lie in records and archives as much or more than in the texts modern historiographers have habitually examined. The essays in this special issue, together with Matthew Neufeld’s introduction, have raised some intriguing possibilities in this regard, illuminating several types of shadows of the past so that we can see at least their outlines more clearly.

In memory of Kevin Sharpe,
historian, writer, and generous friend to scholars

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