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REMEMBERING THE PAST IN EARLY MODERN ENGLAND: ORAL AND WRITTEN TRADITION

By Adam Fox

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FOR students of the interaction between oral and written forms of communication the early modern period provides an important case study. England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was far from being an oral society; and yet it was not a completely literate one either. On the one hand, old vernacular traditions had long been infused and supplemented, or corrupted and destroyed, by the written word; on the other hand, only a certain part of the population could read and write or ever relied on the products of literacy. Indeed, as Keith Thomas has suggested, 'it is the interaction between contrasting forms of culture, literate and illiterate, oral and written, which gives this period its particular fascination'.¹

Long before the early modern period, records, documents and literary productions of all kinds were structuring the mental world of English people at all social levels. Written texts were commonplace in recording economic transactions, in providing witness and proof at law and in conveying the fruits of artistic and imaginative achievement. If the spoken word remained the principal mode of communication and cultural transmission, it was inextricably and increasingly intertwined with the written. And yet oral exchange and tradition, however derivative from textual sources, remained a vital and innovative force throughout these centuries and beyond. For that majority of men and women who could not read, and for all people in certain contexts, information was learned by listening and stored in memory.

In this paper I want to focus on the relationship between oral and written tradition in the formation of memories and perceptions of the past in early modern England. In this sphere, too, the mutual infusion of the oral and the written was thorough and of long standing. Whatever the provenance of historical tales or traditions, however, there is no doubt that the majority of people received their knowledge of the past

¹ Keith Thomas, 'The Meaning of Literacy in Early Modern England', in *The Written Word: Literacy in Transition*, ed. Gerd Baumann (Oxford, 1986), 97.

knowledge from which people derived a sense of identity and pride based upon place. They provided an imagined heritage which helped to underscore the emotional solidarity of the community and they were expressed in the 'common voice', 'common fame' or 'common report' of the inhabitants which antiquaries and travellers frequently encountered as they toured the country.⁵

The fanciful fables which some small towns or villages liked to cherish about their former greatness, for example, were often sustained by local memory and by the physical evidence all around rather than by any written documents. In the 1530s the 'commune voyce' at Billericay in Essex informed the passing John Leland that the town had once been much greater, and they could show had a fine ceremonial horn and mace to prove it. The Elizabethan inhabitants of Overburrow in Lancashire were equally keen to tell visitors that their 'small country village' had been 'formerly a great city', as they knew 'by a tradition handed down from their ancestors' and a variety of Roman remains confirmed. By the same token, large foundations uncovered in the village of Coggs, Oxfordshire, made the 'vulgar people that live here think that in old time here was a castle', but there was seemingly no documentary evidence to support this idea.⁶

Just as the survival of such physical evidence could be crucial in the preservation of local tradition, so it was likely to die out if the landmarks or monuments which kept it in mind once faded. 'Notwithstanding the eagerness of the vulgar in harkening to stories relating to parochial churches to which themselves particularly belong', observed the Oxford antiquary Thomas Hearne, 'when such churches fall or are destroyed, they soon forget what they had been, or even what benefactions had been made to them.'⁷ A good example of this is provided by the case of the statue of Our Lady of Gillingham and the Rood of Chatham which stood in the churchyard of this Kentish village. They were described in the 1570s by the local antiquary, William Lambarde, who also recorded the legendary miracle associated with them 'as I have often heard (and that constantly reported)', and he thought it 'not amisse to commit faithfully to writing, what I have received credibly by hearing'. But when John Weever came to the same monuments

⁵ D. R. Woolf, 'The "Common Voice": History, Folklore and Oral Tradition in Early Modern England', *Past and Present*, 120 (1988), 26–52.

⁶ *The Itinerary of John Leland in or About the Years 1535–1543*, ed. Lucy Toulmin Smith (5 vols, 1906–10), IV, 67; William Camden, *Britannia*, ed. Edmund Gibson (1695), 794; British Library (hereafter BL) Sloane MS., 241, fo. 35v; *Parochial Collections (First Part) made by Anthony a Wood, M.A. and Richard Rawlinson, D.C.L., F.R.S.*, ed. F.N. Davis (Oxfordshire Record Society, Oxford, 1920), 100; Anthony Wood, *The Life and Times of Anthony Wood, Antiquary, of Oxford, 1632–1695, Described by Himself*, ed. Andrew Clark (5 vols, Oxford Historical Society, xix, xxi, xxvi, xxx, xl, Oxford, 1891–1900), I, 253.

⁷ *The History and Antiquities of Glastonbury*, ed. Thomas Hearne (Oxford, 1722), xiv.

over half a century later he found the images 'now many yeares sithence defaced' and thus the legend, although 'received by tradition . . . from the elders', and 'long since both comonly reported and faithfully credited by the vulgar sort', was now not to be 'learne[d] at man's mouth'. Yet, Weeever conceded, 'many of the aged number remember it well'.⁸

As this comment suggests, the memories of aged inhabitants could be crucial in the retention of local tradition. The evidence here confirms the picture given of other societies with strong oral traditions that older people are of vital importance in the preservation and transmission of customary practice and intellectual capital. They provide a direct human link with the past and are often revered as the repositories of ancient wisdom and the custodians of communal memory.⁹ 'We old men are old chronicles', says the 'countryman' in a dialogue of 1608, 'and when our tongues go they are not only clocks to tell only the time present, but large books unclasped; and our speeches, like leaves turned over and over, discover wonders long since passed.'¹⁰ The importance of long memories in early modern England was no more evident than in the many disputes which arose during these centuries over customary law. For the customs of manors, towns and parishes were very often unwritten, retained only in the memories of the eldest inhabitants, and it was thus of crucial importance to the preservation of economic rights and the maintenance of livelihoods to be able to remember exactly what had gone on in the community 'within the memory of those yet living' and beyond.¹¹

Customs were just one of the pieces of local information for which there was no alternative but to rely upon the recollection of ancients. Where transmission was relatively shallow, spanning no more than one or two generations, it might remain a reasonably accurate guide to past practice. Thus, when the vicar of Radwinter in Essex, William Harrison, wanted to learn of the changes in domestic comfort which had taken place during the sixteenth century, it was the 'old men yet dwelling in the village' to whom he turned. In 1630 Thomas Westcote reported the innovations in agricultural practice in Devon, 'begun within the memory

⁸ William Lambarde, *A Perambulation of Kent: Conteyning the Description, Hystorie, and Customes of that Shyre* (1576), 287; John Weeever, *Ancient Funerall Monuments* (1631), 343-4.

⁹ Jack Goody, *The Interface Between the Written and the Oral* (Cambridge, 1987), 150, 164; M. T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England 1066-1307* (2nd edn, Oxford, 1993), 25-6; Keith Thomas, 'Age and Authority in Early Modern England', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, lxii (1976), 233-4.

¹⁰ *The Great Frost* (1608), in *Social England Illustrated: A Collection of XVIIth-Century Tracts*, ed. Andrew Lang (1903), 166.

¹¹ For recent discussions, see *The Experience of Authority in Early Modern England*, ed. Paul Griffiths, Adam Fox and Steve Hindle (Basingstoke, 1996), 96-9, 266-73.

of old men'.¹² As a young boy growing up in Wiltshire before the Civil Wars, John Aubrey 'did ever love to converse with old men, as living histories'. Among many gleanings from such sources, he picked up local customs and anecdotes from his grandfather Isaac Lite who had heard them, in turn, from his own father; he listened to reminiscences of notable events past from old Mr Jacob, of Wootton Bassett who was eighty years of age in 1648; and he lapped up the stories of other ancients, like his 'old cosen' Ambrose Brown of Winterbourne Bassett 'who lived to 103', 'old Jaquez' of Kington St Michael and old Bartholomew of Malmesbury.¹³

The length of this memory could thus be reliable at least for the period of a long life. In the mid-seventeenth century the Lancashire clergyman Henry Newcome learned of the last great famine to afflict the county from old aunt Key of Bury who told him that it 'was then sixty years past'. A curious visitor to Skenegrave on the Cleveland coast sometime before had heard 'ould men, that would be loath to have their credytes crackt by a tale of a stale date, reporte confidently' an incident said to have taken place 'sixty years since, or perhaps eighty or more'. Aubrey talked to Goodwife Dew of Broad Chalke in south Wiltshire who died in 1649, also at the age of 103, and remembered Edward VI visiting the county almost a century before. And when more than one generation was involved, inherited memory could reach back with some reliability for far longer. John Smyth of Nibley, estate steward to the earls of Berkeley in Gloucestershire, lived between 1567 and 1640 and during this period he 'often heard many old men and weomen' of the neighbourhood, born in the reign of Henry VII, 'relate the report of their parents, kinsfolks and neighbours' who as children themselves had witnessed the great local battle of 1469 between William, marquis of Berkeley, and Thomas Talbot, Viscount Lisle, over land rights. Smyth heard in vivid detail how Lisle had been slain by the arrow of one 'Black Will' and carried from the field, together with 'many other perticularyties . . . not possible almost by such plaine country people to be fained'. Old Mr Charles Hiet was able to tell the same story in 1603, as 'delivered from the relation of his father and grandfather as if the same had been but yesterday'. The inherited

¹² William Harrison, *The Description of England*, ed. Georges Edelen (Ithaca, NY, 1968), 200; Thomas Westcote, *A View of Devonshire in 1630*, ed. George Oliver and Pitman Jones (Exeter, 1845), 56.

¹³ John Aubrey, *Brief Lives*, ed. Andrew Clark (2 vols, Oxford, 1898), 1, 43; John Aubrey, *The Natural History of Wiltshire*, ed. John Britton (1847), 76; Bodleian Library (hereafter Bod Lib) MS. Aubrey 3, fos 3, 25v, 57v, 59, 76v, 80v, 92, 97, 98, 185v; Aubrey, *Three Prose Works*, ed. Buchanan-Brown, 162, 353; Michael Hunter, *John Aubrey and the Realm of Learning* (1975), 168-9.

memory here, then, spanned at least a century and a half.¹⁴

In many of the reminiscences of eldest inhabitants is a nostalgia for the old days which can be characteristic of any age. It had been, after all, a much 'merrier world' in the past: hospitality was greater and life was simpler, there were fewer lawyers and all things were cheap.¹⁵ To this extent there could be something inherently subversive about popular perceptions of the past. What ordinary men and women remembered was not usually the stuff of learned or officially approved versions of the past but instead interpretations of events which attempted to make sense of and justify the world as they saw it. As such their memories could be irreverent and even seditious in the details which they chose to retain, or forget, and the way in which they chose to construe them. Thus at the time of the Civil War the inhabitants of Evesham in Worcestershire were eager to relate the exploits of Simon de Montfort, earl of Leicester, who had fallen there while leading the baronial revolt against Henry III, for such tales sat well with their view of the present monarchy. 'It is reported the dead body of the earl of Leicester being foully and barbarously deformed with wounds was there discovered, whom nevertheless the vulgar sort reverence as a martir, because as they said he suffered all this for the Commonwealth, but not for the King, who forbad this the people's cannonizacion. . . .'¹⁶

Just as the versions of manorial custom remembered by the tenants could differ completely from those understood by their landlords, so too other popular traditions might bear little relationship to the significant historical events as recorded by antiquarian scholarship in this period. Take, for example, the disafforestation, drainage and enclosure of Hatfield Chase on the Yorkshire-Lincolnshire border in the reign of Charles I. This was apparently consented to by the 'better sort' of the inhabitants of the area at the time and, after initial protests by some of the dispossessed, occasioned no further contention. Sir William Dugdale was to write up this history of 'improvement' in 1662 and no other verdict on the issue would be recorded were it not for the enquiries of Abraham de la Pryme who became vicar of Hatfield in November 1696. De la Pryme was a great collector of local traditions and here, as elsewhere, he was always 'examining and talking with . . .

¹⁴ *The Autobiography of Henry Newcome, M.A.*, ed. Richard Parkinson (2 vols, Chetham Society, xxvi-xxvii, Manchester, 1852), I, 82; *The Topographer and Genealogist*, ed. John Gough Nichols (3 vols, 1846-58), II, 416; Aubrey, *The Natural History of Wiltshire*, ed. Britton, 69; John Smyth, *The Berkeley Manuscripts*, ed. Sir John Maclean (3 vols, Gloucester, 1883-5), II, 114-15.

¹⁵ Keith Thomas, *The Perception of the Past in Early Modern England* (Creighton Trust Lecture, 1984), 11-22.

¹⁶ Thomas Habington, *A Survey of Worcestershire*, ed. John Amphlett (2 vols, Worcestershire Historical Society, Oxford, 1895-9), II, 82.

my eldest parishioners . . . about what was memorable relating thereto'. He found that the 'old men' of Hatfield would often talk nostalgically of the days before the destruction of the chase when 'the poor people got a good living out of the same and venison was no greater a rarity then in a poor man's kitchen than mutton is now'. They also related in loving detail the intricacies of their poaching technique, seeming to delight in its skill and craft as well as in its defiance of authority. Moreover, they had a popular hero in Sir Robert Swift, the last Bowbearer to the king in the chase, whose responsibility it was to protect the game but whose loveable incompetence seems to have endeared him to all and occasioned 'many traditional stories'.¹⁷

Exactly the same kind of discrepancy in interpretations of the past may be detected in the rather different versions of an eventually famous tale collected at Tilney Smeath in Norfolk. In the churchyard there stood a monument commemorating the deeds of one Hikifricke. In 1631 John Weever recorded the tale, 'as it hath gone by tradition from father to son', of how 'upon a time (no man knowes how long since)', Hikifricke had saved the rights of the seven villages in the parish over the large common which they surrounded from the encroachments of the local landlord.¹⁸ When, however, the heralds Elias Ashmole and William Dugdale were touring the fenlands in the early summer of 1657, they both seem to have derived different versions of events from the locals at Tilney. Ashmole understood their hero to have 'killed a gyant and recovered marshland from him', while Dugdale believed that Hikifricke himself had been the lord of Tilney and had fought not for but against the inhabitants over the bounds of the common.¹⁹ Such variance provides signal evidence of the way in which interpretations of a tale might depend upon the disposition of both tellers and recipients. In the minds of some Hikifricke was a champion of the common cause of the people, while in the view of others he was invoked as a defender of the rights of property and lordly authority.

¹⁷ Sir William Dugdale, *The History of Imbanking and Drayning* (1662), 145-9; Keith Lindley, *Fenland Riots and the English Revolution* (1982), 13-14, 23-4, 64, 71-2; *The Diary of Abraham de la Pryme, the Yorkshire Antiquary*, ed. Charles Jackson (Surtees Society, liv, Durham, 1869-70), 71; BL Lansdowne MS., 897, fos 50-1, 55r.

¹⁸ Weever, *Ancient Funerall Monuments*, 866; and cf. Sir Henry Spelman, 'Incenia: Sive Norfolciae Descriptio Topographica', in *Reliquiae Spelmannianae* (Oxford, 1698), 138; Francis Blomefield and Charles Parkin, *An Essay towards a Topographical History of the County of Norfolk* (5 vols, Fersfield and Lynn, 1735-75), iv, 691-2. Equally, local tenants might seek to deface or destroy such monuments when there were traditions associated with them which were prejudicial to their land rights and usages: Sampson Erdeswicke, *A Survey of Staffordshire* (1723), 192.

¹⁹ Elias Ashmole (1617-1692). *His Autobiographical and Historical Notes, his Correspondence, and other Contemporary Sources Relating to his Life and Work*, ed. C. H. Josten (Oxford, 1966), 708-9; Dugdale, *History of Imbanking and Drayning*, 244.

Many communities seem to have cherished hero figures such as Hikifricke who had at some time defended the rights of the common people or flouted authority. Outlaws, in particular, were the epitome of those who spurned the conventions of society and appeared to live a life of freedom outside the bounds and burdens which usually kept people in their place. Theirs were deeds of daring and adventure, romantic and exceptional. To hear of them was to be transported momentarily to a time and a place in which the powerful might be defied and even conquered. Such had been the appeal of Hereward the Wake in the centuries after the Norman Conquest and then of Robin Hood who by the thirteenth century seems to have taken his place in the popular imagination.²⁰

Ubiquitous as Robin was in popular legend, he had plenty of local equivalents who may have been unknown other than in the parochial context and were probably remembered only in oral tradition. Thus, the people living around the Forest of Exmoor in Devon would tell of one Symon, 'another Robin Hood', who 'standing in outlary, kept this forest'. Among the trees was 'a large deep pool which they name Symon's Bath ... and in the moors of Somerset there is a burrow or fort called, by the inhabitants, Symon's Burrow, which he made his winter strength to retire unto'. Such tales suggest all the swashbuckling elements of the conventional Robin Hood narratives and many seem to have adopted the motif of man of high birth forced to live on the margins of society. At Myddle in Shropshire, for example, they had a local hero in 'wild Humphry' Kinaston, a knight-errant turned fugitive of whom 'the people tell almost as many romantick storyes, as of the great outlawe Robin Whood'. Among these was the tale of how 'wild Humphry' had escaped from the ambush of the sheriff and 'a considerable company of men' by leaping over the river Severn. He sought shelter in a cave near Nescliffe 'which, to this day, is called Kinaston's Cave'. Such also was the history of Poole's Hole, an underground cave by Buxton in Derbyshire, the refuge of 'one Pool, of Pool's Hall in Staffordshire, a man of great valour who, being outlawed, resided here for his own security', and yet to be seen were his stone table, bed and shelf. Likewise, at Bristol in the years before the Civil War one could still hear tell 'as fresh as but of yesterday' of the exploits of 'black Will' Herbert, the first earl of Pembroke, 'a mad fighting young fellow' who in the reign of Henry VIII had killed one of the sheriffs and escaped through the city gates to France.²¹

²⁰ On this aspect of Robin Hood's appeal, see Christopher Hill, 'Robin Hood', in his *Liberty Against the Law: Some Seventeenth-Century Controversies* (1996), 71–82.

²¹ Westcote, *A View of Devonshire in 1630*, ed. Oliver and Jones, 95; Richard Gough, *The History of Myddle*, ed. David Hey (Harmondsworth, 1981), 56–7; Ralph Thoresby, *The Diary of Ralph Thoresby, F.R.S.*, ed. Joseph Hunter (2 vols, 1830), 1, 91–2; Edward Browne,

Thus, the memories of ancient inhabitants could provide a strong and relatively reliable link with the recent past. Knowledge of events stretching back for a century or more might be passed down the generations with some degree of consistency. The further away from the incidents or individuals in question that oral transmission took an historical tradition, however, the more prone to distortion it might become. Moreover, there was a large gap in the terms of factual accuracy between what was inherited directly at first or second hand from elders and ancestors and what was believed to have taken place in the very distant past. When the short limits of memory were exhausted, myth began.²²

For most people their understanding of long ago was vague and episodic: theirs was a past with little sense of chronology, in which names and places, dates and events could be hopelessly compressed and confused. Certain great historical figures loomed so large as to explain almost any landmark or occurrence of note. There was a tendency to 'telescope', to shorten or omit entire portions of the past, which is familiar in many societies with strong oral traditions.²³ A vivid example of conflation would be uncovered by John Byng in his travels around England in the late eighteenth century. He found that wherever he went the people attributed the destruction of any ruined building to Oliver Cromwell. Moreover, they tended to muddle the Lord Protector with his namesake, Henry VIII's first minister. Thus at Wingfield manor in Derbyshire his guide 'spake of the seige it sustain'd in the civil wars; shew'd every rent in the walls as if made by cannon balls; and was puzzled, as all countrymen are, about the two Cromwells; the destroyer of monasteries, and the destroyer of castles'.²⁴ Such observations indicate the importance of great events such as the Reformation or the Civil

'Journal of a Tour in Derbyshire', in *Sir Thomas Browne's Works*, ed. Simon Wilkin (4 vols, 1833-4), 1, 35; Aubrey, *Brief Lives*, ed. Clark, 1, 314-15; Anthony Powell, *John Aubrey and his Friends* (1948), 31-2. The celebrated escape of the border reiver Kinmont Willie from Carlisle Castle in April 1596 continued to be remembered in Cumberland: Edmund Sansford, *A Cursory Relation of all the Antiquities and Families in Cumberland*, ed. R. S. Ferguson (Cumberland and Westmorland Ant. and Arch. Soc., 4, Kendal, 1890), 49. Sir Walter Scott was later to transcribe from oral tradition and immortalise in print the ballad of this triumphant episode: *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, ed. Thomas Henderson (1931), 179-90.

²² On the large gap between what is personally remembered and some imagined mythical past, see Johnson, *Folk Memory: or the Continuity of British Archaeology*, 13; M. T. Clanchy, 'Remembering the Past and the Good Old Law', *History*, 55 (1970), 167; Thomas, *The Perception of the Past in Early Modern England*, 8-9; Rosalind Thomas, *Oral Tradition and Written Record in Classical Athens* (Cambridge, 1989), 283.

²³ On this 'telescoping' of the past, see Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition: a Study in Historical Methodology*, transl. H. M. Wright (1965), 101-2; David Henige, *Oral Historiography* (1982), 100-1.

²⁴ John Byng, *The Torrington Diaries*, ed. C. Bruyn Andrews (4 vols, 1970), II, 199.

War as dating tools in popular perceptions of the past, even if they failed to engender any firm sense of chronology.²⁵

This vague sense of date was no less evident among 'the country people' of Lincolnshire who were reported to labour under the 'notion that the Foss road is the oldest in England, and that it was made by William the Conqueror'. Ethelbert's Tower in Canterbury was not in fact built by Ethelbert himself, 'as vulgar tradition will fabulously tell you it was', but merely in his honour in about 1047. Castles seemed particularly prone to this kind of fanciful dating. Some were post-dated, like Reigate in Surrey, actually built by the Saxons, 'tho a vulgar error has generally given credit of it to one of the Warrens, earls of Surrey'. Most, however, were dignified with a more or less bogus antiquity, as was Bamburgh Castle on the Northumbrian coast, built, so the local people affirmed, 'before our Saviour's time'.²⁶

Julius Caesar seems to have impressed himself on the popular imagination as the natural builder of fortifications, whatever age they may have been. 'Vulgar chronology will have Norwich Castle as old as Julius Caesar', it was said, while the castles at Chepstow, Exeter, Canterbury and Dover, where visitors could inspect his 'old brass trumpet', were among those similarly attributed.²⁷ Patrons in an alehouse at Woodstock, Oxfordshire, boasted to one Elizabethan tourist that the Roman conqueror had been responsible for a 'palace' there; nor were such notions mere village fancy, for even in the capital city 'common opinion' erroneously ascribed the Tower of London to his offices.²⁸ Small wonder, then, that 'the vulgar' were thought to be 'generally incapable of judging of antiquities'.²⁹

²⁵ On great events as dating tools, see Fentress and Wickham, *Social Memory*, 99, 110–12.

²⁶ William Stukeley, *Itinerarium Curiosum* (1722), 99; William Somner, *The Antiquities of Canterbury* (1640), 40; John Aubrey, *The Natural History and Antiquities of the County of Surrey* (5 vols, 1718), iv, 189; 'Journeyings through Northumberland and Durham Anno Dom. 1677', in *Reprints of Rare Tracts and Imprints of Antient Manuscripts*, ed. M. A. Richardson (7 vols, Newcastle, 1843–9), vii, 11.

²⁷ Sir Thomas Browne, *Hydriotaphia Urne-Burial* (1658), in *The Works of Sir Thomas Browne*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (4 vols, 1928), 1, 142; Marmaduke Rawdon, *The Life of Marmaduke Rawdon of York*, ed. Robert Davies (Camden Society, 1st series, lxxxv, 1863), 187; James Brome, *Travels Over England, Scotland and Wales* (1700), 21; John Hooker, *The Description of the Citie of Excester*, ed. W. J. Harte, J. W. Schopp and H. Tapley-Soper (Devon and Cornwall Record Society, Exeter, 1919), 31; Camden, *Britannia*, ed. Gibson, 205; 'A Relation of a Short Survey of the Western Counties', ed. L. G. Wickham Legg, in *Camden Miscellany Vol. XVI* (Camden Society, 3rd series, lii, 1936), 19, 24; BL Sloane MS., 1911–13, fo. 195r.

²⁸ *Thomas Platter's Travels in England, 1599*, ed. Clare Williams (1937), 223; John Stow, *A Survey of London*, ed. C. L. Kingsford (2 vols, Oxford, 1908), 1, 44, 136.

²⁹ *The History and Antiquities of Glastonbury*, ed. Hearne, vii.

This confused sense of chronology was not merely the product of popular ignorance or the distortion caused by oral transmission, however, but was in essence the fruit of learned fiction and often derived from written sources. At a time when studious historical scholarship was only just beginning to develop standards of documentary reference and corroboration and to question many of the long-established legends, inherited from the medieval chronicles, which continued to dominate the learned view of the past, ignorance was by no means confined to 'the vulgar'. Moreover, new and spurious versions of the past were being written in the early modern period which did as much to generate error. It was the arriviste gentry of Tudor England, with the aid of the heralds, who were as responsible as anyone for the creation of bogus versions of history in the fantastic genealogies which they fabricated in an attempt to dignify family lines with spurious longevity.³⁰

This can be seen, for example, in the elaborate 'charter myths' fabricated and cherished by many towns and institutions in support of their antiquity and venerability. In the late fifteenth century the Warwickshire antiquary John Rous had claimed the foundation of Cambridge, both town and university, for Cantaber, a Spaniard who came to Britain in the time of King Gurguntius, about 375 BC. This was the view endorsed by John Caius in the 1570s, among others, so that the Duke of Wurttemberg, visiting the town in 1592, was rightly told that this was the orthodoxy 'as affirmed by the principal historians'.³¹ At Oxford, meanwhile, it was possible for the curious enquirer to choose from a number of contending hypotheses about origins, all of them derived from learned written authorities. Some attributed its provenance to one Mempric 'who was king of the Britannes in the year of the world 2954 and before Christ 1009'; others gave the plaudits to his son Ebranc; while still others preferred the claims of Olenus Calenus

³⁰ On these bogus genealogies, see Michael Maclagan, 'Genealogy and Heraldry in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries', in *English Historical Scholarship in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, ed. Levi Fox (1956), 41-2; Lawrence Stone, *The Crisis of the Aristocracy, 1558-1641* (Oxford, 1965), 23-5; A.R. Wagner, *English Genealogy* (2nd edn, Oxford, 1972), 358-66; Felicity Heal and Clive Holmes, *The Gentry in England and Wales, 1500-1700* (Basingstoke, 1994), 34-7.

³¹ John Rous, *Historia Regum Angliae*, ed. Thomas Hearne (2nd edn, Oxford, 1745), 25-6; John Caius, *De Antiquitate Cantebrigiensis Academiae* (1574), in *The Works of John Caius, M.D.*, ed. E. S. Roberts (Cambridge, 1912), 11-14; *England as seen by Foreigners in the Days of Elizabeth and James the First*, ed. William Brenchley Rye (1865), 33; T. D. Kendrick, *British Antiquity* (1950), 25-6. Cf. 'Diary of the Journey of Philip Julius, Duke of Stettin-Pomerania, through England in the Year 1602', ed. Gottfried von Bulow', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, n.s., vi (1892), 33; 'Thomas Baskerville's Journeys in England, Temp. Car. II', in Historical Manuscripts Commission, *Thirteenth Report, Appendix, Part II* (1893), 284.

'a Roman, about 70 years before Christ'. But it was equally possible to find support for the view that it had been the creation of 'certain philosophers out of Graece', a theory which the existence of 'Aristotle's well' near Walton did much to confirm; 'that Cassisbullan, king of the Britaines about 58 years before Christ, built it; as he did Exeter, Colchester and Norwich'; that it was 'originally founded by a British king called Avizagus about 70 years after our Saviour's nativity'; that it had been 'built or at least restored' by King Voritgen in 474; or, finally, that it was the work of King Alfred ('as some, and these not mean historians, assert) in the year 872'.³²

Such myths were hardly mere 'vulgar errors', therefore, but learned fictions endorsed in the universities and supported by the most respected antiquarian opinion. Many of them derived from Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* or else from the elaborations and imaginings of subsequent monastic writers. Scholarly opinion in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries did little to dispel, and often much to encourage, such legend. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the majority should have accepted and rehearsed what were no more than long-established commonplaces of historical understanding. Thus, when the 'old attendant' at the Angel Inn in Leicester assured three soldiers resting there in 1634 that the town had been 'built by the British King Leir, neare 1000 yeeres before Christ', he was doing no more than repeating the testimony of Geoffrey. And his *Historia* was also the source of the tale which these same three travellers found in York, 'as tradition and story tells', that the town was founded by King Ebraucus 'in the reign of K[ing] David' of Judaea.³³

This sense of learned fiction feeding into popular lore is evident in much of what can be recovered of generally held versions of the past. In practice few historical narratives which circulated orally were completely 'pure', in the sense of owing nothing to the written word. A number of recent studies drawing upon evidence gathered from societies around the world and over time have demonstrated the interaction and reciprocal infusion of written and unwritten sources in the communication of information about the past, whether in story or

³² Rous, *Historia Regum Angliae*, ed. Hearne, 21-2; Anthony Wood, 'Survey of the Antiquities of the City of Oxford', composed in 1661-6, by Anthony Wood, ed. Andrew Clark (3 vols, Oxford Historical Society, xv, xvii, xxxvii, Oxford, 1889-99), 1, 41-3, 354-5. Cf. *England as seen by Foreigners*, ed. Rye, 21; Charles Deering, *Nottingham Velus et Nova* (Nottingham, 1751), 12.

³³ *A Relation of a Short Survey of 26 Counties*, ed. L. G. Wickham Legg (1904), 14, 64, deriving directly from Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Historia Regum Britanniae*, ii. 11, ii. 7. Touring the south of England in 1478-80, William Worcestre discovered chronicles in a number of abbeys and libraries which detailed the fabulous origins of British towns: William Worcestre, *Itineraries*, ed. John H. Harvey (Oxford, 1969), 94, 96, 278.

song.³⁴ So, too, in Tudor and Stuart England, much of the historical tradition which circulated among ordinary people had some basis in literary and learned culture even if the embellishment and corruption effected by generations of transmission had taken it far from its origins. By the early modern period, centuries of chronicle and hagiographic writing, of chivalric romance, sermon exempla, poetry and drama, had been providing a variety of written sources of knowledge about the past and they provide the key to understanding the genesis of a large part of popular tradition.³⁵ Time and again, the kind of local anecdote which was increasingly coming to be dismissed as erroneous by antiquarian scholarship in the seventeenth century can be found to derive from some written source, perhaps long forgotten. As Sir Thomas Browne put it in the 1640s with characteristic acuity: 'there is scarce any tradition or popular error but stands also delivered by some good author'.³⁶

In addition to initiating much of what subsequently passed into oral circulation, the written word was also responsible for augmenting and enhancing it; for reviving an oral narrative which might otherwise have died out were it not for its preservation, elaboration and dissemination in text. Again, written culture was probably more culpable than oral in the fabrication and perpetuation of distorted, exaggerated and spurious versions of the past. Thomas Westcote commented perceptively in the 1630s that 'some things seem more fabulous, interposed by some augmenting transcribers' than many others 'left unto us as tradition . . . from mouth to mouth'. By the same token, it was said of the tales told of the miraculous deeds of St William of Lindholm in south Yorkshire, that they remained purely local and rather muted as a consequence of never having been written down: 'the pitty is that this worthy saint has not had any one to set forth his strang works or else perhaps they might have been as great, wonderfull and fabulous as K[ing] Arthur's are'.³⁷

Even contemporaries who believed that they were witnessing pure

³⁴ See the evidence reviewed in Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Poetry: its Nature, Significance and Social Context* (Cambridge, 1977), ch. 5; Ruth Finnegan, *Literacy and Orality: Studies in the Technology of Communication* (Oxford, 1988), ch. 6. The point is made with regard to early modern England in Thomas, *The Perception of the Past*, 7–8.

³⁵ See, for example, G. R. Owst, *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England* (2nd edn, Oxford, 1961), esp. 126–34, 158–61; P. R. Coss, 'Aspects of Cultural Diffusion in Medieval England: the Early Romances, Local Society and Robin Hood', *Past and Present*, 108 (1985), 35–79; C. L. Kingsford, *English Historical Literature in the Fifteenth Century* (Oxford, 1913); E. K. Chambers, *English Literature at the Close of the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1945).

³⁶ Sir Thomas Browne, *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* (1646), in *The Works*, ed. Keynes, II, 52.

³⁷ Westcote, *A View of Devonshire*, ed. Oliver and Jones, 30; BL Lansdowne MS., 897, fo. 73r. On the way in which writing can infuse and augment oral traditions, see Henige, *Oral Historiography*, 81–7.

oral tradition passing down the generations unadulterated by the infiltration of writing were usually mistaken in this. Elias Ashmole seems to have thought that the legend of St Joseph of Arimathea and the Holy Thorn of Glastonbury Abbey provided an example of one such tradition, for until the work of a few recent writers he could 'not remember to have read any author who hath taken notice of this thorne in print'. Otherwise, 'all the remembrance we have of it, hath past along among us by tradition only, which I have often heard spoken of...'. In reality, however, the monks at Glastonbury had been fabricating miraculous stories of St Joseph since the twelfth century and they had enjoyed wide manuscript circulation long before the Tudor herbalists popularised the legend of the Thorn.³⁸

Many such legends of saints and their miracles which still enjoyed widespread currency in the early modern period probably had their origins in this kind of monastic fabrication. Accounts of their lives had been written by chroniclers since the early Middle Ages and by the twelfth and thirteenth centuries had assumed a standard format. In this guise they became a staple of manuscript culture and sermon exempla and represented some of the most widely known of all traditional tales in late medieval England. Given that they were, in Gerald Owst's words, 'definitely presented as true history, not to be confused in the popular mind with lighter forms of pulpit illustration', it is hardly surprising that they were widely and faithfully believed by the majority. Many of them were included in compilations such as the famous *Golden Legend*, the thirteenth-century continental collection which was to be translated and printed by Caxton in 1483 and reissued seven times by 1527. There were scores of individual lives, too, especially of English martyrs like St Thomas of Canterbury, St Oswald and St Edmund.³⁹

Thus the origin of a tradition in Canterbury that the devil had once tried to prevent St Augustine preaching at the chapel of St Pancrace, was, according to William Somner, the work of some monastic chronicler which he had seen. But it had passed subsequently into popular tradition and 'of latter time ... became vulgarly received'. Similarly, the tales which travellers often encountered from the mouths of local people at Crowland Abbey in Lincolnshire, of the torments once inflicted by frightful devils upon St Guthlac and the monks, could be

³⁸ *Elias Ashmole (1617-1692)*, ed. Josten, 1286-7; and cf. *The History and Antiquities of Glastonbury*, ed. Hearne, 302. Antonia Gransden, 'The Growth of the Glastonbury Traditions and Legends in the Twelfth Century', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 27 (1976), 358; C. E. Raven, *English Naturalists from Neckam to Ray* (Cambridge, 1947), 21.

³⁹ Owst, *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England*, 126-6; Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (1971), 26; *The Golden Legend*, transl. William Grainger Ryan (2 vols, Princeton, 1993); G. H. Gerould, *Saints' Legends* (Boston, 1916).

traced back, so it was said, to 'the chronicler Felix'.⁴⁰ The scores of other local saints' legends to which communities loyally adhered were all just as likely to be the products of written hagiographic tradition. This was to end at the Reformation, of course, but the continuation of such stories throughout the eighteenth century and beyond in some cases is testimony to their survival in oral tradition.⁴¹

The large role played by the devil in so many popular traditions was also a product of centuries of preaching and didactic writing which had played upon the notion of a malevolent fiend active in the temporal world who tempted mankind and whose evil projects to wreak havoc explained the shape of so much of the landscape. Rocky outcrops, stone circles, caves, ditches and gorges were all likely to be attributed to the work of 'old nick'. 'It is a strange taste which our ancestors had', William Cobbett could later muse, 'to ascribe no inconsiderable part of these wonders of nature to the devil'.⁴² Equally, large man-made structures such as dykes, causeways or Roman roads were just as likely to be explained in these terms: 'for the vulgar', observed William Stukeley, 'generally think these extraordinary works made by the help of the devil'.⁴³

Another prominent theme in popular tradition was tales about dragons. These, too, had a long lineage in the bestiaries and emblematic writings of the Middle Ages, but many owed their popularity in the early modern period to another series of spurious charter myths. From an early date it had been common for noble or gentle families, and

⁴⁰ Somner, *The Antiquities of Canterbury*, 61–2; Camden, *Britannia*, ed. Gibson, 460–1; Daniel Defoe, *A Tour Thro' the Whole Island of Great Britain*, ed. G. D. H. Cole (2 vols, 1968), II, 495.

⁴¹ For the continued vibrance of saints' legends in the eighteenth century, see, for example, Defoe, *A Tour Thro' the Whole Island of Great Britain*, ed. Cole, I, 49, II, 480, 682, 694; Richard Pococke, *The Travels through England of Dr Richard Pococke*, ed. James Joel Cartwright (2 vols, Camden Society, n.s., xlii–xliv, 1888–9), I, 136; Francis Grose, *The Antiquarian Repertory* (4 vols, 1775–84), II, 76–7; William Hutchinson, *A View of Northumberland* (2 vols, Newcastle, 1778), II, 23.

⁴² William Cobbett, *Rural Rides* (2 vols, Everyman edn, n.d.), I, 205. For a selection of examples, see Fynes Morrison, *An Itinerary Containing His Ten Yeeres Travell* (4 vols, Glasgow, 1907–8), IV, 152, 154; BL Additional MS., 38599, fo. 98v; *The Topographer and Genealogist*, ed. Nichols, II, 409, 425; Camden, *Britannia*, ed. Gibson, 495, 716; John Aubrey, *Monumenta Britannica*, ed. John Fowles and Rodney Legg (Sherborne, 1982), 95, 107, 109–12, 823; Robert Plot, *The Natural History of Oxford-shire* (Oxford, 1677), 343; Robert Plot, *The Natural History of Staffordshire* (Oxford, 1686), 398; Defoe, *A Tour Thro' the Whole Island of Great Britain*, ed. Cole, I, 461–2, II, 627–8; Pococke, *Travels through England*, ed. Cartwright, II, 52.

⁴³ Stukeley, *Itinerarium Curiosum*, 171. For examples, see Camden, *Britannia*, ed. Gibson, 85; Aubrey, *Monumenta Britannica*, ed. Fowles and Legg, 273, 381, 881, 891, 923, 925; Aubrey, *The Natural History and Antiquities of the County of Surrey*, IV, 187; Defoe, *A Tour Thro' the Whole Island of Great Britain*, ed. Cole, II, 592; Hutchinson, *A View of Northumberland*, I, 80.

institutions or corporations, to try to explain their origins, justify their ownership of a piece of land, or account for the heraldic dragon on their coat of arms, by claiming for an ancient forbear some feat of heroism or conquest. Such inventions might then pass into the popular lore and become generally believed in the locality. The Lordship of Moston in Cheshire, for example, had been in the possession of the Venables family for many generations when it was recorded in 1560 that their ancestor, Thomas, had earned the inheritance by slaying 'a terrible dragon' which had once terrorised the neighbourhood, piercing it with an arrow while in the very act of devouring a child. The dragon on the Berkeley family crest derived, so an early seventeenth-century document explains, from the dragon-slaying exploits of Sir John Berkeley at Bisterne in Hampshire, where a Dragon Field can be seen to this day. At Sockburn, in County Durham, a monument in the church commemorated the valiant deeds of Sir John Conyers, who 'before the Conquest', tradition told, had fought and slain the dragon, 'a monstrous venom'd and poison'd wiverne, ask or worme, which overthrew and devour'd many people in fight, for the scent of the poyson was so strong that noe person was able to abide it'. In the reign of Charles I people were still showing the spot known as Graystone where the dragon had fallen, and the deeds of Sir John were commemorated in local ceremonial into the nineteenth century.⁴⁴

Finally, together with the legends of saints and the fabulous exploits of devils and dragons, tales of giants also occupied a central place in English folk tradition. Once again, the literary origins of these are well attested. It was Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia* which popularised notions, probably much older, that the island of Albion had been populated by giants before the conquest of the Trojan Brutus. The belief that giants had once inhabited the earth had Old Testament authority, of course, and these ideas were taken up again by the historians of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. In 1610 the astrologer Simon Forman wrote a genealogy of all the giants from the days of Noah, while at the same time the antiquary William Burton could invoke a variety of scriptural and other authorities to prove their former existence.⁴⁵ Gigantic figures adorned the frescoes and murals in palaces, cathedrals and great houses.⁴⁶ And, naturally enough, images

⁴⁴ BL Harleian MS., 2119, fo. 40. Jennifer Westwood, *Albion: A Guide to Legendary Britain* (1985), 45, and cf. 250-1, 341-2; BL Harleian MS., 2118, fo. 39r; W.C. Hazlitt, *Tenures of Land and Customs of Manors* (1874), 285n.

⁴⁵ Genesis, vi, 4; Bod Lib MS. Ashmole, 244, fos 192-9; William Burton, *The Description of Leicestershire* (1622), 277.

⁴⁶ See, for example, *Itinerary of John Leland*, ed. Smith, 1, 95; *Thomas Platter's Travels in England*, ed. Williams, 165-6; Aubrey, *Monumenta Britannica*, ed. Fowles and Legg, 477; *The Diary of Henry Machyn*, ed. John Gough Nichols (Camden Society, 1st series, xlii, 1848), 186.

of giants and the legendary stories of Albion found their way into the great poetry and literature of the day.⁴⁷

Once again, then, it is hardly surprising to find this weight of written tradition feeding into popular historical consciousness. Camden believed that the many tales told by Cornish folk of the giants who occupied St Michael's Mount, still much talked of in the late nineteenth century, owed their creation to verses penned in the reign of Henry II.⁴⁸ As with the devil, giants provided an explanation for much that was gargantuan or unusual in the landscape. Stonehenge had been known as 'the Giant's Dance' since Saxon times.⁴⁹ The lone boulder next to the stone circle at Stanton Drew in Somerset was believed to be the quoit of the giant Hakewell, while Wookey Hole was designated, in typical fashion, 'the gyant's table'.⁵⁰ Large man-made structures were similarly explained. Oxfordshire had a number of Grim's ditches, for example, and 'the country people will tell you that this Grymes was a gyant', while the Roman road on Wheeldale Moor in the North Riding was known as Wade's causeway after the giant and his wife who were said to have built it in an instant.⁵¹

In general, Roman buildings were 'so very stately', observed Camden, that 'the common people will have these . . . to be the work of gyants'. That giants lived in castles was something which readers of *Pilgrim's Progress* would have accepted without a second thought. Typically enough, of the great ruins above Aldridge in Staffordshire the locals

⁴⁷ Among the most famous examples are Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene* (1596), in *Spenser: Poetical Works*, ed. J. C. Smith and E. De Selincourt (Oxford, 1912); Michael Drayton, *Poly-Olbion* (1613), in *The Works of Michael Drayton*, ed. J. William Hebel (5 vols, Oxford, 1961), iv, 26. For discussion, see C. B. Millican, *Spenser and the Round Table* (Cambridge, Mass., 1932); Ernest Jones, *Geoffrey of Monmouth 1640-1800* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1944), 406-17.

⁴⁸ Camden, *Britannia*, ed. Gibson, 4. For legends of Cornish giants, as they were recorded in the mid-nineteenth century, see Robert Hunt, *Popular Romances of the West of England* (1865), 44-75.

⁴⁹ L. V. Grinsell, 'The Legendary History and Folklore of Stonehenge', *Folklore*, 87 (1976), 5-20.

⁵⁰ Aubrey, *Monumenta Britannica*, ed. Fowles and Legg, 46. 68; Rawdon, *The Life of Marmaduke Rawdon of York*, ed. Davies, 178. For other examples of giants' boulders, see Plot, *The Natural History of Staffordshire*, 397-8; Martin Martin, *A Description of the Western Islands of Scotland circa 1695* (Glasgow, 1884), 152-3, 220, 364; Joseph Taylor, *A Journey to Edenborough in Scotland*, ed. William Cowan (Edinburgh, 1903), 19-20; Ralph Thoresby, *Ducatus Leodiensis: or, the Topography of the Ancient and Populous Town and Parish of Leedes* (1715), 194; Sir Robert Atkyns, *The Ancient and Present State of Gloucestershire* (2nd edn, 1768), 188; James Hardy (ed.), *The Denham Tracts* (2 vols, Folklore Society, 1892-5), II, 217. There was another 'giant's table' outside Penrith: Celia Fiennes, *The Journeys of Celia Fiennes*, ed. Christopher Morris (1947), 201. There were also numerous giants' caves, chairs and gravestones.

⁵¹ *The Remains of Thomas Hearne*, ed. John Buchanan-Brown (1966), 199, 205; Westwood, *Albion: A Guide to Legendary Britain*, 344-5.

had 'a tradition that there lived a gyant . . . and another att a castle in Wall[sall] and that when either went from home he used to throwe the key to the other'. Once upon a time, the story went, a throw fell short and the key plummeted into a pit of water below where it was found by a poor man who used it as 'a share and coulter for a plow'.⁵² The benign and friendly, almost comical, character evidenced by the giants in this tale, as in so many similar anecdotes, attests to the way in which they had been adopted and absorbed to fit local needs. Frequently they milked cows, fought on behalf of the community or bequeathed some enormous gift. At Brent Pelham in Hertfordshire there was a monument in the church to their particular giant, Shonk. An 'old farmer . . . who valued himself for being born in the air that Shonk breathed', explained to Nathaniel Salmon in the 1720s how 'Shonk was a giant that dwelt in this parish, who fought with a giant of Barkway, named Cadmus, and worsted him; upon which Barkway hath paid a quit rent to Pelham ever since'.⁵³

To the manuscript culture of the Middle Ages, then, can be traced the foundation of much of what passed into oral tradition, where it was to take on a life of its own. Moreover, by the early modern period these written sources were being enhanced by printed ones which would, in turn, enormously stimulate the creation and augmentation of the legendary repertoire. In particular, the tremendous growth of antiquarian writings in the form of chronicles, county histories and itineraries from the sixteenth century was responsible not only for recording much popular belief but also for helping to create and sustain it. Once again, this cautions against the notion that writing necessarily destroys memory and undermines oral tradition. Rather, it is more instructive

⁵² Camden, *Britannia*, ed. Gibson, lxxv; John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, ed. J. B. Wharey and Roger Sharrock (Oxford, 1960), 113–19, 281–3; Aubrey, *Monumenta Britannica*, ed. Fowles and Legg, 387–9. Among other examples of giants' castles, see *Itinerary of John Leland*, ed. Smith, I, 59, v, 57; Habington, *A Survey of Worcestershire*, ed. Amphlett, I, 187; Pococke, *Travels through England*, ed. Cartwright, I, 6, 31. The castle of Abergavenny in Monmouthshire was built after the Norman Conquest, 'as auncient monuments and writings make mencion', on the same spot 'where before time, a gyant called Ayres had builded a stronge forte or holde': Public Record Office, SP12/219/17.

⁵³ Nathaniel Salmon, *The History of Hertfordshire* (1728), 289–90, and cf. 184. For other examples of giants or men of extraordinary stature, said to have performed heroic deeds for the community, see Camden, *Britannia*, ed. Gibson, 126; Thomas Machell, *Antiquary on Horseback*, ed. Jane M. Ewbank (Cumberland and Westmorland Ant. and Arch. Soc., extra series, 19, Kendal, 1963), 126–7; Sir Daniel Fleming, *Description of the County of Cumberland*, ed. R. S. Ferguson (Cumberland and Westmorland Ant. and Arch. Soc., 3, Kendal, 1889); 18; Sandford, *A Cursory Relation of all the Antiquities and Families in Cumberland*, ed. Ferguson, 37; Westwood, *Albion: A Guide to Legendary Britain*, 258.

to view it in many cases as an agent of invigoration and recreation.

A number of examples of printed history infusing oral culture are discernible. Thus local tradition in London knew the great building in Basing Lane as 'Gerrards Hall' after its supposed one-time inhabitant Gerard the Giant. When the curious John Stow went to investigate in the 1590s he was assured by the master of the house that the story was true and was advised to 'reade the great chronicles, for there he heard it'. This was a reference to the mention of Gerard in Harrison's *Historicall Description of the Iland of Britaine* which in 1577 had been included in the first part of Holinshed's *Chronicles*.⁵⁴ In the late seventeenth century, the clergyman White Kennett discovered the view among the inhabitants around Ot Moor in Oxfordshire that the Roman road, Akeman Street, had run north-south across the county between Wallingford and Banbury, when it actually ran east-west through Thame and on to Bath. The origin of this error he attributed to William Camden, who had indeed published it in the sixth edition of his *Britannia* in 1607, and now the misapprehension had 'resolv'd into the oral tradition of the common people'.⁵⁵

A good example of this process of 'feedback' is also evident in the tradition of the 'Danish yoke'.⁵⁶ One of the most potent themes in the popular memories of the past in early modern England was a strong sense of the ravages and atrocities committed by the Danish armies during their occupation from the ninth century. Hundreds of communities up and down the country harboured traditions about battles once fought between local people and the brutal armies who oppressed them. Place-names and buildings, barrows and natural features of all sorts were explained in these terms.⁵⁷ But it is doubtful that there was much continuous folk memory of such events passing in oral tradition

⁵⁴ Stow, *A Survey of London*, ed. Kingsford, I, 348-9, II, 353; Raphael Holinshed, *Holinshed's Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland* (6 vols, 1807-8), I, 21.

⁵⁵ White Kennett, *Parochial Antiquities attempted in the History of Ambrosden, Burcester, and other adjacent parts in the Counties of Oxford and Bucks* (Oxford, 1695), 16; William Camden, *Britannia* (6th edn, 1607), 267.

⁵⁶ On the concept of 'the Danish yoke', see Thomas, *The Perception of the Past*, 26; D. R. Woolf, 'Of Danes and Giants: Popular Beliefs about the Past in Early Modern England', *Dalhousie Review*, 71 (1991), 193-7.

⁵⁷ For a selection of such traditions, see Bod Lib MS. Aubrey 3, fos 23-4, 25v, 35r, 104v, 151r; Aubrey, *Monumenta Britannica*, ed. Fowles and Legg, 807, 817; Aubrey, *The History and Antiquities of the County of Surrey*, IV, 217, 261; BL Additional MS., 6223, fos 111-13v; Camden, *Britannia*, ed. Gibson, 352, 747; *The Topographer and Genealogist*, ed. Nichols, II, 411; Tristram Risdon, *The Chorographical Description or Survey of the County of Devon* (1811), 143; Sir William Dugdale, *The Antiquities of Warwickshire* (1656), 299; Plot, *The Natural History of Stafford-shire*, 432; Salmon, *History of Hertfordshire*, 220; John Morton, *The Natural History of Northamptonshire* (1712), 530-48; Stukeley, *Itinerarium Curiosum*, 10, 22, 107; Defoe, *A Tour Thro' the Whole Island of Great Britain*, ed. Cole, I, 15; Pococke, *Travels through England*, ed. Cartwright, I, 46.

from the time of their occurrence down to the seventeenth century when they are most plentifully recorded. Instead, the demonisation of the Danes seems to be a product quite specifically of the late fifteenth century. The historian John Rous may have been responsible for initiating it in his influential *Historia Regum Angliæ*, which recounts the Danish conquest of Mercia. In the fields of his native Warwickshire he pointed to the red flowering dwarf elder (*Sambucus ebulus*), or walwort as it was popularly known, which marked the spots where blood had been shed. By the time that William Turner published his list of plant names in 1538, walwort was called for the first time danewort. By 1590 Camden was using the name 'danes-bloud' when he discovered it growing on the Bartlow Hills in Essex and found that the 'country people' knew it 'by no other name'. It has been suggested that the etymological derivation of walwort from the Old English *wealh* could imply the shedding of foreign, or specifically Welsh, blood. Could it be that Rous, whose *Historia* was fulsomely dedicated to Henry VII, replaced the association of battle grounds long regarded as the scenes of victory over the old Welsh enemy with that of a new foe in order to flatter, or not to offend, his new Tudor master? If so, he may have instigated a rich theme in English folklore which was to last for at least two centuries.⁵⁸ Credence to this theory is given by the fact that the famous Hocktide plays performed on the second Monday and Tuesday after Easter seem also to have become widely popular from the late fifteenth century. This drama, together with the processions led through towns, and symbolic fights enacted between men and women which commemorated the defeat of the Danes must have done much to create and keep alive these traditions.⁵⁹

Another equally ubiquitous series of traditions which the Tudor dynasty and the new technology of print did much to reinvent and nourish were those of King Arthur. The fabulous legends of Geoffrey

⁵⁸ Rous, *Historia Regum Angliæ*, ed. Hearne, 101–6; Wood, 'Survey of the Antiquities of the City of Oxford', ed. Clark, 1, 326; William Turner, *Libellus De Re Herbaria Nouis. In Quo Herbarum Aliquot Nomina Greca, Latina, & Anglica Habes* (1538), sig. A4r; William Camden, *Britannia* (3rd edn, 1590), 352; Westwood, *Albion: A Guide to Legendary Britain*, 103–4.

⁵⁹ Hockday is mentioned by Rous as commemorating the 'liberation of England from Danish servitude': *Historia Regum Angliæ*, ed. Hearne, 106. On these Hocktide ceremonies and plays, see John Brand, *Observations on the Popular Antiquities of Great Britain*, ed. Sir Henry Ellis (3 vols, 1849), 1, 186–91; E. K. Chambers, *The Mediaeval Stage* (2 vols, Oxford, 1903), 1, 154–6, 187, II, 264–6; Ronald Hutton, *The Stations of the Sun: A History of the Ritual Year in Britain* (Oxford, 1996), 207–13. They were staged in Coventry as early as 1416 but do not seem to have become widely popular until later in the century: Charles Phythian-Adams, 'Ceremony and the Citizen: the Communal Year at Coventry, 1450–1550', in *Crisis and Order in English Towns, 1500–1700*, ed. Peter Clark and Paul Slack (1972), 69. For a useful discussion of the mnemonic value of ceremony and ritual, see Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge, 1989), 41–71.

of Monmouth had been much popularised by the renaissance in chronicle and romance writing during the fifteenth century. Thomas Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, completed in 1469, was first printed by Caxton in 1485 and would be reprinted in a further six editions by the mid-seventeenth century. It was under the Tudors, for whom Geoffrey's Welsh Arthur had particular appeal, that his myth reached the status of cult with the help of an outpouring of poetry, prose and drama.⁶⁰ The dissemination of such literature was clearly widespread. The Elizabethan mason from Coventry, Captain Cox, was said to have a copy of 'king Arthurz book' in his remarkable little library of vernacular literature, while the 'book of king Arthures knights' was one that the 'poore husband-man' proposed to buy for his son in a tract of 1586. Whatever evidential basis there may have been for an historical Arthur figure, 'the many incredible stories that have been reported of this prince', lamented one contemporary, had long 'made his history little better than a romance'.⁶¹

The development of the broadside ballad must have been greatly influential in bringing the legend of Arthur to the widest possible audiences. *A pleasaunte history of an adventurus knighte of kynges Arthurs Couurte* was printed by Richard Jones in 1566. The great ballad-writer Thomas Deloney was responsible for *The noble Actes nowe newly found of Arthure of the round table* which was entered in the Stationers' register in June 1603. In 1598, Fynes Moryson was already describing the many monuments attributed to Arthur's name as 'famous among all ballad-makers'. 'Tis great pity', John Aubrey was later to lament, 'that so famous and great a worthie should have ever been abused, either by monkish verses, or vile painting in an alehouse'.⁶²

Despite this view, however, Aubrey, who still believed that 'anti-quaries, when they cannot meet with better authority, will not disdain to give an old ballad in evidence', borrowed Elias Ashmole's copy of Robert Laneham's *A Letter* (1575), which contained a song said to be taken from 'king Arthurz book', and transcribed it into his *Monumenta*

⁶⁰ Sir Thomas Malory, *Le Morte D'Arthur* (2 vols, Everyman edn, 1906), 1, viii; Kendrick, *British Antiquity*, ch. 3; Millican, *Spencer and the Round Table*; Irving Ribner, *The English History Play in the Age of Shakespeare* (2nd edn, 1965), ch. 8; Sydney Anglo, 'The British History in Early Tudor Propaganda', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, xlv (1961-2), 17-48; E. K. Chambers, *Arthur of Britain* (1927); R. F. Brinkley, *Arthurian Legend in the Seventeenth Century* (Baltimore, 1932).

⁶¹ Robert Laneham, *A Letter* (1575), 34; John Ferne, *The Blazon of Gentry* (1586), part ii, 23; *Antiquities of Glastonbury*, ed. Hearne, 145; and cf. Mathias Prideaux, *An Easy and Compendious Introduction for Reading All Sorts of Histories* (4th edn, Oxford, 1664), 292-3.

⁶² Hyder E. Rollins, 'An Analytical Index to the Ballad-Entries (1557-1709) in the Registers of the Company of Stationers of London', *Studies in Philology*, xxi (1924), 169, 183; Morrison, *An Itinerary Containing his Ten Yeeres Travell*, II, 118; Aubrey, *Monumenta Britannica*, ed. Fowles and Legg, 543.

Bell, and Clymme of the Clough, and such other old romances or historicall rimes'.⁶⁵

The most famous of these, the rhymes of Robin Hood, were again not born so much of popular oral tradition as of the literary romances written for performance among the social elite.⁶⁶ But it was probably the widespread dissemination of his story in the famous *Gest*, which was reprinted several times during the sixteenth century, together with broadsides such as *A ballett of Robyn Hod* (1562), and the play-books informing mummings and May games, which was responsible for fixing the legend in its present form.⁶⁷ It also ensured the place of Robin in local folklore. For Robin Hood's Bay is not known to have been so named before 1544 and his many 'strides', hills and mills, or the examples of his butts which are to be found in a least six counties of England, were probably attributed no earlier.⁶⁸ His famous well with accompanying chair at St Anne's, about a mile to the north of Nottingham, is of similar date, while there is no reference to that by the side of the Great North Road between Doncaster and Pontefract before the first quarter of the seventeenth century.⁶⁹ Robin Hood's grave at Kirklees in the West Riding was first noted by Richard Graffton in 1565. A generation later, the early fifteenth-century tomb of Elizabeth Fitz Walter in the church at Little Dunmow, Essex, was reinvented as the resting-place of Matilda the Fair, or Maid Marion, thanks to two plays by Anthony Munday, *The Downfall of Robert, Earl of Huntingdon* (1601) and its sequel *The Death* (1601), which ensured the currency of the fable well into the nineteenth century. It may also have been around

⁶⁵Nicholas Bownd, *The Doctrine of the Sabbath* (1595), 241-2; George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie*, ed. G. D. Willcock and A. Walker (Cambridge, 1936), 83-4. For a seemingly typical selection of these historical ballads, see the collection begun by John Selden and expanded by Samuel Pepys: *The Pety's Ballads*, ed. W. G. Day (5 vols, Cambridge, 1987), I, 63-104, II, 97-138.

⁶⁶Coss, 'Aspects of Cultural Diffusion in Medieval England', 38-40.

⁶⁷*Rymes of Robyn Hood: an Introduction to the English Outlaw*, ed. R. B. Dobson and J. Taylor (2nd edn, Gloucester, 1989); Rollins, 'An Analytical Index to the Ballad-Entries', 199-200; Stephen Knight, *Robin Hood: A Complete Study of the English Outlaw* (Oxford, 1994), chs 3-4; David Wiles, *The Early Plays of Robin Hood* (Cambridge, 1981); Hutton, *Stations of the Sun*, 270-4.

⁶⁸Westwood, *Albion: A Guide to Legendary Britain*, 206-8. For a variety of contemporary references to these topographical landmarks, see *Elias Ashmole (1617-1692)*, ed. Josten, 625, 961; Aubrey, *Monumenta Britannica*, ed. Fowles and Legg, 273; Brome, *Travels Over England, Scotland and Wales*, 160, 217; Pockocke, *Travels through England*, ed. Cartwright, II, 271; Byng, *The Torrington Diaries*, ed. Bruyn Andrews, II, 192.

⁶⁹Roger Dodsworth, *Yorkshire Church Notes 1619-1631*, ed. J. W. Clay (Yorkshire Archaeological Society Record Series, xxxiv, 1904), 12; *A Relation of a Short Survey of 26 Counties*, ed. Wickham Legg, 13; Brome, *Travels Over England, Scotland and Wales*, 85; Deering, *Nottingham Vetus et Nova*, 73; Robert Thoroton, *The Antiquities of Nottinghamshire*, ed. John Throsby (3 vols, Nottingham, 1790-6), II, 164-71; J. C. Holt, *Robin Hood* (2nd edn, 1989), 176-9.

this time that the huge grave in Hathersage churchyard, Derbyshire, ‘with one stone set up at his head, and another at his feete, but a large distance between them’, was first ascribed to Little John, whereafter local people would show part of his bow hanging up in the church.⁷⁰

Memories of the past in early modern England reflect the nature of this society as one in which oral and written tradition overlapped and interacted in reciprocal and mutually reinforcing ways. Verbal communication remained the medium through which knowledge was most often transmitted. A powerful quasi-autonomous oral tradition thrived at a time in which literacy levels were limited and popular culture could be highly parochial. And yet the influence of the written word, and increasingly of print, lay behind so much of this repertoire, informing it, structuring it and sustaining it. In this period, as for many centuries before, writing had supplemented and complemented the vernacular repertoire rather than necessarily undermining it. What began with the pen of a learned author could very quickly pass into the oral tradition of the people and even more quickly be assumed to be ancient. In 1812 Sir Walter Scott visited Rokeby. His guide, J. B. S. Morritt, observed that he ‘was but half satisfied with the most beautiful scenery when he could not connect it with some local legend, and when I was forced sometimes to confess ... “Story! God bless you! I have none to tell, sir” – he would laugh, and say, “then let us make one – nothing so easy to make as a tradition”’.⁷¹

⁷⁰ Holt, *Robin Hood*, 41; Westwood, *Albion: A Guide to Legendary Britain*, 118–19; Dodsworth, *Yorkshire Church Notes*, ed. Clay, 52; *Elias Ashmole*, ed. Josten, 625. Little John’s bow was later removed to Cannon Hall near Barnsley where it may still be seen: *Folklore; Myths and Legends of Britain* (1973), 294.

⁷¹ Quoted in Westwood, *Albion: A Guide to Legendary Britain*, 371.