
Sir William Drake was not one of the more spectacular figures of his day. He inherited land, acquired a baronetcy, and sat in the Long Parliament; during the Commonwealth he spent some time abroad; after the Restoration he sat in Parliament again; he endowed almshouses, and is commemorated by a large funerary monument in his local church. One thing, however, makes him extraordinary. Thirty-seven of his commonplace books, fifteen of which are holographs and the rest written by amanuenses, survive in a single collection, now at University College, London, together with seventeen other miscellaneous volumes of his; other commonplace books, a journal, and some of his annotated printed books are to be found elsewhere in England and the United States. This may well be, as Kevin Sharpe says, “the greatest archival resource we have to chart how an early modern English gentleman read, and how reading shaped his mental universe” (p. 73).

The three central chapters of *Reading Revolutions* constitute an account of Drake's reading and thinking, based on this archive. In order to understand Drake before Sharpe's book, one would have had not only to visit five repositories on two continents, but also to read manuscript books whose chronological relation to each other is not always clear, and whose internal structure is fragmentary. The reproductions here suggest that they are not always written in a clear or pleasant hand. The richly detailed picture which Sharpe presents is, then, the result of a monumental labour of reading and synthesis. The labour was worthwhile: Drake's intellectual life, as presented in this book, is of the highest interest. He can be seen reading and re-reading an enormous variety of texts, from antiquity to his own century, with particular attention to wisdom-compilations and historical writing: from Tacitus to the Koran, from Bacon to Aesop, with a particularly important interest in Machiavelli. Sharpe shows how he formed and developed his own understanding of the nature of humankind and of political life on the basis of these readings, and comments in particular on the radicalism of some of his thought, and on his anticipations of the language and ideas of Thomas Hobbes. Drake's attention to current affairs was as intense and sustained, and as interesting, as his engagement with books and abstract ideas. It is, he wrote, “more profitable for a civil life to read the discourses that attend upon history than any philosophy whatsoever, as those of Machiavel, Polybius, Comines, Guicciardini and the rest” (p. 123), and the emphasis on reading as profitable for “civil” — the sense here is of course “civic,” or political — life is fundamental. This is all fascinating. Drake's archive was known but more or less unexplored before Sharpe, and Drake himself seemed like a very minor historical figure. Henceforward, historians and literary scholars concerned with seventeenth-century England will ignore Drake, and this book, at their peril.

The distinction which I have just made between historians and literary scholars is a problematic one, and it accounts for the first and last chapters of *Reading Revolutions*. Sharpe is a historian of considerable eminence, who has
always been interested in texts and their readers. In his first chapter, he urges historians to read critically, attending to written texts as texts, thinking about their language and rhetoric, and remaining alert to the indeterminacy of their meaning, and concludes that they must learn in this respect from literary scholars. This advice is offered in a vigorously controversial tone. The heart of the chapter is reached in the suggestion that historians who speak of “documents” and “evidence” rather than “texts” believe in “the availability of the past to communicate to and be seen by the historian as a clear object or lesson unmediated by representations — or time” (p. 26).

This overstatement suggests the enthusiasm of the convert. Sharpe has discovered critical theory, and sees it as a means to attain subtlety and flexibility in the interpretation of the material which interests him. “To most early modern historians,” he says, “Lacan, Foucault, Derrida . . . form a gallery of unknowns or a litany of anathemas and demons” (p. 9). However, literary scholars are also increasingly unsure that reading translations of Sixties and Seventies French philosophy is the best way to attend to the texts written and read in early modern England. After all, understanding what it meant for Drake to read Polybius might be done better by reading Polybius oneself than by reading Lacan. It is in dealing with the texts which Drake read that Sharpe runs into his most serious problem. When, for instance, he writes that Drake read “on Aristotle's *Ethics* commentaries by Archbishop Eustratius, Andronicus of Rhodes, Ludovico Settala and Victorin Strigel” (p. 175), he makes at least four mistakes in fifteen words. The second work he mentions is a paraphrase, not a commentary, and it is not in fact by Andronicus; the third is a commentary on the pseudo-Aristotelian *Problemata*, not the *Ethics*; Strigel's first name was Victorinus, not Victorin. Sharpe cannot, in the accompanying footnote, identify the text by Strigel, which is in fact a translation of and commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics* published in 1572. These inaccuracies are characteristic, and their cumulative effect is disturbing. Elsewhere, Henri Estienne becomes Henry Stephens, Diogenes Laertius becomes Laertius Diogenes, and Victoria Kahn, consistently, V. Khan. Tertullian and Lactantius are described as secular classical authors, Cato the Censor and Dionysius Cato are confused — the list could be continued. Even if historians of reading cannot hope to read all the books their subjects read, they need more knowledge of their authors' names and their approximate contents than is suggested here.

The conclusion of *Reading Revolutions*, that the history of reading surely merits “at least a chapter in the history of politics,” is one with which it is difficult to disagree, and this is an absorbing, and in very many ways an admirable, case study in the history of reading. Sharpe has written an important book. But it is not the masterpiece which a scholar of his stature might have made from Drake's archive.

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