Sceptical History and the Myth of the Historical Revolution

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Malgré que la question ait été souvent réévaluée attentivement, l'idée que l'écriture de l'histoire ait changé de manière drastique et irréversible au XVI^e siècle demeure courante parmi les chercheurs en sciences humaines. Les historiens sont devenus plus sceptiques, ont développé des concepts plus adéquats de temps et d'anachronismes et ont appris à travailler plus prudemment avec les sources. Cet article remet ce point de vue en question, en montrant que les historiens de la fin du Moyen Âge faisaient preuve d'autant de scepticisme et de pensée critique que leurs homologues de l'autre versant de cette frontière médiévale / moderne de l'histoire, et cela même s'ils étaient limités par leur ressources, en particulier par l'absence de services systématiques d'archives et du medium imprimé. En examinant les œuvres de Henri de Huntington, Guillaume de Newburgh, Gérard de Galles, Geoffroi de Monmouth, Polydore Vergil, et d'autres auteurs, cet article cherche à savoir si nous devrions réévaluer nos conceptions au sujet du progrès vers la modernité.

There has been a wealth of significant research into the writing and use of historical narrative from the late middle ages to the seventeenth century in the last decade. This work has provided us with a more carefully nuanced understanding of the ways in which the “historical revolution” changed how historians approached their subject and readers consumed what they had written.¹ John Curran Jr. has shown how the British Galfridian history survived well beyond its apparent sell-by date, stubbornly championed by a host of Protestant patriots who were, in most other ways, sophisticated historians with a critical attitude to the sources they used.² Andrew Escobedo has explored how historical writing after the Reformation was haunted by a series of paradoxes and conflicting impulses. There was a need to look both forwards

and backwards, to use a historical narrative to justify a future point at which history would end, which had the effect of secularizing a mode of thinking inspired by religion. The work of John Foxe, Edmund Spenser, and John Dee reveals that a nation only exists when it forgets what has gone before as well as remembers.³ Daniel Woolf, in three extensive, scholarly studies, has shown how a series of innovative methods, techniques, and habits of mind imported from Europe helped to transform English history writing. The work of Jean Bodin, Niccolo Machiavelli, and Francesco Guicciardini in particular, established the basis for a political history that had a practical purpose, providing its readers with political insight that could be applied to a variety of situations. History became secular in focus rather than possessing a religious framework, and a coherent historical culture developed as a defining aspect of modernity in the wake of the transformation of medieval culture.⁴

Nevertheless, can we legitimately think of a “historical revolution” in the sixteenth century at all? Is such a notion of a radical transformation of historical writing justified? The writing of history did undoubtedly change significantly in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as the studies mentioned above all demonstrate. But did history writing actually change fundamentally as is generally assumed, even in the most careful and nuanced studies of early modern historiography? Did historians really become more sceptical of unverified facts, start to write more cogent narratives that attempted to explain the past to their readers, and produce what we recognize as modern history? A study of the relationship between modern history and anthropology, Marshall Sahlins’s *Apologies to Thucydides*, indicates that there are clear and obvious connections between ancient and modern history. The problem is that we read certain sets of facts as historical and others as anthropological, dividing up subjects and so failing to see how our methods and ways of reading create the barriers that we want to perceive.⁵ Such claims cut across familiar narratives of the triumphant march of intellectual progress and the onset of “modernity” and modern consciousness.⁶ Just as the grand narrative of the rise and rise of early modern science is threatened by the realization that superstition and faith in alchemy were actually enhanced by the birth of scientific experimentation, so might the more local story of the rise of modern English history be undermined by the rebirth of interest in the problematic cluster of legends that constitute the “matter of Britain” and the Arthurian legends.⁷ We should always be wary of tales of unfettered—or slightly restrained—historical progress.

These conflicting tendencies would seem to indicate that the “historical revolution” was as much Janus-faced as straightforward, looking to the past as well as the future. In this essay I want to think about this particular issue

in two interrelated ways. First, I shall re-examine some sixteenth and seventeenth-century historians and see whether they are as “modern” as we have imagined them to be. Secondly, and, I think, more importantly, I shall re-read some of the most prominent British historians of the Middle Ages and see whether they are as different from their early modern counterparts as the latter claim that they are to see whether we have—yet again—placed too much faith in the story of the re-birth of learning in the Renaissance, which was, in the main, a nineteenth-century concept.⁸

I

William Camden (1551–1623) is routinely given the title of the first British historian. Few could dispute that Camden was an exceptionally innovative and pioneering historian, and that his work exhibits all the qualities that a serious historian ought to have: hard-headed scepticism, a thorough analysis of sources available, the ability to understand causation, a desire to tell the truth and not to adhere to pre-determined judgements.⁹ Nevertheless, Camden’s eminence signals a number of problematic, interrelated issues that have helped distort our understanding of the history of historiography. Camden is rightly sceptical of much Galfridian history in his *Britannia* (Latin 1586; English translation 1610), pointing out that Geoffrey has “little authority amongst men of learning.”¹⁰ Camden is also critical of other aspects of British history, pointing out that the round table discovered in Glastonbury that was assumed to have been Arthur’s is of a later date (p. 120). Camden makes more extensive use of Gildas and other classical authorities such as Strabo and Tacitus, carefully weighing up the surviving remains and scraps of evidence in order to produce a careful and accurate description of Britain and its history up to the late sixteenth century.

However, it does not follow that he was therefore of a different order to many historians who tried to construct very different historical narratives and placed their faith in different authorities. Humphrey Llwyd’s (1527–68) *Commentarioli Britannicae Descriptionis Fragmentum* (1568), later translated by Thomas Twyne as *The Breviary of Britayne* (1573), is also an intelligent, diligent work that argues a case carefully, uses its sources judiciously, and exhibits reasonable scepticism.¹¹ The fact that he was attempting to prove the truth of ancient British histories, and so was making the same case as hack writers, such as Thomas Churchyard (1520?–1604) in works such as *The Worthines of Wales* (1587), does not mean that Llwyd was a naive historian belonging to an older tradition that was swept away by the tide of humanism. Llwyd’s aim is to defeat his opponents at their own game,

and show that he has searched the historical record more carefully than they have in order to prove the antiquity of the matter of Britain. Early on in the history Llwyd argues for the existence of an ancient British language, claiming that “those that understande the tongue, may easily gather, that our *Britaynes* called this Iland *Prydian* in their language, which the Latines for the hardnesse, and evill sounde thereof, have rejected, and have called the country *Britannia*, and the people *Britanni*.”¹² The point about the language is that Llwyd’s rivals are shown to be too limited to access the real sources and have to rely instead on Latin, which means that they are unable to comprehend the true history of Britain, a standard tactic of humanist argument.¹³ Elsewhere Llwyd explicitly attacks Bede and Polydore Vergil (fo. 10) for what he sees as their shameful scholarly limitations and inability to find the earliest sources. Near the end of his work, Llwyd reflects on the value of his historical investigations:

Thus much when I had written of the true, antique, and now accustomed names of the Regions, and cities of *Britayne*: I determined here to have ended, least by this my unpolished, and barbarous writing: I should become tedious to the impatient Reader. But when I called to my remembrance, how *Polydorus Virgilius*, whose workes be in all mens handes, doth in all places nippe, & gyrd at the *Britaynes*, endeavourynge in woordes, to extenuate the glory of the British name, and to obscure them with a perpetuall blot, in his history often termynge them a cowardly, and false generation: I thought it worth the travell, to brynge forth a few authorities, out of bookes of famous writers, and approved Hystoriographers. Whereby the indifferent Reader, may easely judge, what credite is to be given to the said *Polydor*. And that such as are of the learnedst writers, of the state of *Britayne*: either he read them not, or else (yt is more like) beyng incensed with envie, and hate of the British name: passed them over with silence (fo. 84).

Llwyd makes clear that he is fighting the defence of the matter of Britain on proper humanist principles, searching out the oldest sources and defeating other historians at their own game and on their terms. According to Llwyd, Polydore has distorted British history either out of incompetence or, more likely, malice. Llwyd appeals to an “indifferent” reader to compare their histories, as he is confident that he will win any battle based on objective comparison.

The same is true of the great Scottish polymath, George Buchanan (1506–82) who was undoubtedly a humanist historian, one of the most eminent in Europe.¹⁴ Buchanan, like Humphrey Llwyd, certainly inclined much more to a native island history than contemporary writers sceptical of British history, most notably, of course, Polydore Vergil (1470?–1555?), who “made strenuous efforts to perceive the historical truth from the standpoint of an unpatriotic foreigner with no vested interest at stake.”¹⁵ Buchanan was

keen, again like Llwyd, to prove that ancient traditions of learning, political practice, and government were superior to imported scholarly and intellectual practices that many claimed were of more value than their home-grown counterparts. Unlike Llwyd, Buchanan is scathing about the authenticity of the British legends, amazed at the credulity of those who believe that Brutus was the eponymous founder of Britain.¹⁶ He is equally critical of myths of Scottish origin and their supposed founder, Gathelus, judging both to be the clever forgeries of monks (pp. 43–46). Buchanan's main concern is to prove that the Scots and Picts were ancient peoples, known collectively as Caledonians, who had their own native political traditions of controlling their monarchs, a history that is probably just as dubious and unfounded as the ones he attacked (pp. 74, 103).

A variety of intellectual positions were therefore possible for historians working in Britain in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. A historian could clearly be a good historian and wrong; a prominent humanist and an opponent of other humanists; a humanist and a defender of a native tradition; and, of course, a bad, non-humanist historian and right. The method of some historians has been found wanting, most notably, perhaps, in Hugh Trevor Roper's attack on Buchanan for his partiality towards the ancient constitution of Scotland as a means of undermining a monarchical tradition.¹⁷ But this argument, if correct, only undermines Buchanan's method and good faith as a historian, not his adherence to a belief in objectivity.

These examples should make us even more sceptical of narratives that proclaim the birth of modern history than many historians of the "historical revolution" have been in recent years. The writing of history clearly did change in the sixteenth century, but it may be that this was due as much to technological advances and means of information retrieval and storage—the advent of the printed book, the growth of private and public libraries, the strenuous efforts made to preserve the wealth of learning after the dissolution of the monasteries threatened to break up and lose the nation's manuscript collections, all contributing towards a general awareness of the need to think about historical preservation and historical loss—as to a new "modern" belief in objectivity and a concomitant sense of historical difference.¹⁸ Perhaps that had always been an accepted goal of historians, even if it had been harder to maintain in the Middle Ages. It is clear that a variety of arguments and positions could be maintained among sixteenth-century historians, all of whom assumed—not always correctly—that they were involved in congruent enterprises.

A counter-argument to this line of reasoning, one frequently made, is that the importation of humanism, the careful study of the classical past,

transformed an existing, rather backward, native British intellectual tradition and forced the parochial Britons to think more carefully about their heritage and place in the world.¹⁹ But is this actually true? Hadn't historians always had an acute sense of the past, and the difference between past and present, as well as an understanding of the problem of reading source material? Indeed, might we not see the influence of humanist thought as potentially diminishing certain aspects of historicism? The excitement generated by the re-discovery of ancient writings meant that Roman and Greek writers and historical figures could be more easily cited as examples to be copied and learned from, rather as the English translator of Suetonius saw fit to compare the campaigns of ancient Roman generals to those of Henry V.²⁰ A twelfth-century historian, such as Henry of Huntingdon (c.1088–late 1150s), cited such classical authorities as Sallust, Juvenal, and Lucan in his *History of the English People*, drawing general lessons from history exactly as humanist historians did 300 years later. Writing about the increase of taxes in England in 1087, Henry comments: "Thus in England they increased in those times unjust tolls and very evil customs. All the leaders had been so blinded by desire for gold and silver that it might truly have been said of them, 'Whence it may be had, no one enquires, but have it they must'," a reference to a line in Juvenal's fourth satire.²¹ There is, arguably, a certain diminishment of historical distance through such comparisons as well as a sharpening of historical focus. In the sixteenth century, there were certainly more classical texts available to the historian, but it is not clear that the process of historical comparison and sense of distance were radically transformed.²²

Henry of Huntingdon has a clear faith in the explanatory value of truthful history:

Yes, indeed, in the recorded deeds of all peoples and nations, which are the very judgements of God, clemency, generosity, honesty, caution, and the like, and their opposites, not only provoke men of the spirit to what is good and deter them from evil, but even encourage worldly men to good deeds and reduce their wickedness. History therefore brings the past into view as though it were present, and allows judgement of the future by representing the past. The knowledge of past events has further virtues, especially in that it distinguishes rational creatures from brutes, for brutes, whether men or beasts, do not know – nor, indeed, do they wish to know – about their origins, their race, and the events and the happenings in their native land (p. 4).

Such a manifesto could easily have been taken from the pages of a number of Renaissance humanist historians with the demand that history be truthful, teach lessons, and help to separate men from animals.²³ Henry is a vivid and often brilliant historian, his *History* full of startling short descriptions and colourful *vignettes* which link together the episodes in the chronicle struc-

ture. Most provide a clear sense of cause and effect with the appropriate moral lesson. During the bloody civil wars that characterize the extended conflict of Matilda and Stephen, who disputed the English throne after the death of Henry I (1135), Henry describes how the Scots are drawn into the civil war:

The king of the Scots, under cover of piety, on account of the oath he had sworn to King Henry's daughter [Matilda], commanded his men in barbarous deeds. For they ripped open pregnant women and tore out the unborn foetuses. They tossed children on the points of their lances. They dismembered priests on their altars. They put on to the bodies of the slain the heads cut off crucifixes, and changing them round, they put back on the crucifixes the heads of the dead. Everywhere the Scots attacked would be filled with horror and barbarity, accompanied by the cries of women, the wailing of the aged, the groans of the dying, the despair of the living. So King Stephen invaded, burned, and laid waste the southern areas of King David's kingdom, but David himself did not dare come and fight him (pp. 70–1).

This passage places the reader in the position of Stephen so that we understand his reaction and empathize with his subsequent actions, making us understand the historical causes of the event and justify the effects of the king's invasion. Again, this could be shown to be in line with good humanist historical practice, as well as bearing a distinct resemblance to passages in works such as Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland* (1577, 1587), notably the description of the mutilation of the English soldiers by the Welsh women that forms the basis for a passage in Shakespeare's *Henry IV, part one*.²⁴ The point is not that Henry is a good humanist historian *avant la lettre*, but that humanist historical practice often codified and followed what had been accepted practice among earlier historians.

The argument can be made in other ways. Even the work of earlier historians who are not thought to be the most sophisticated and insightful annalists of past events would appear to disrupt a faith in the triumph of a sceptical modernity. Gerald of Wales's (c.1146–c.1223) *History and Topography of Ireland* (c.1185) has long been regarded as a propagandist work of bad faith, designed to show that the Irish are a people without culture who need to be invaded and civilized by their more sophisticated English neighbours if they wish to escape from their long-standing condition of barbarism.²⁵ Gerald, however, boasts about his fidelity to the historical record, noting at one point that "The careful reader will know that history does not spare the truth, and recounts rather what is in fact true than that which seems like the truth," an aphorism that seems to be quite at odds with his historical practice.²⁶ Such comments bear comparison with those of Henry on the purpose of his historical explorations, as well as later humanists.

Many readers, however, have suspected that Gerald's evidence is not always carefully acquired and analyzed.²⁷ Gerald is quite properly interested in Irish customs and social practices, but it is easy to see why his readers thought that his history looked more like fiction than truth at times. He claims that

Shortly before the coming of the English into the island a cow from a man's intercourse with her—a particular vice of that people—gave birth to a man-calf in the mountains near Glendalough. From this you may believe that once again a man that was half an ox, and an ox that was half a man was produced. It spent nearly half a year with the other calves following its mother and feeding on her milk, and then, because it had more of the man than the beast, was transferred to the society of men (p. 74).

This mention of bestiality leads Gerald on to a long denigration of the Irish and a series of moralistic comments on the evils of inter-breeding between species. Gerald's examples are all notably prurient. There is the cow that was partly a stag; a goat that had intercourse with a woman; and the case of a lion "that used to make beastly love to a foolish woman called Johanna," who was able to calm him down from one of his many violent rages by "[s]oothing him with a woman's tricks" (pp. 75–76).

Such writing suggests that Gerald was a naive and bad historian, marshalling evidence to support his claim that the Irish "are so barbarous that they cannot be said to have any culture" and that "They live on beasts only, and live like beasts" (p. 101). And, of course, he was attempting to prove precisely this point. However, Gerald may well have been rather more self-conscious about his designs than has often been suggested. A few pages after his systematic denigration of Irish savagery, Gerald includes what he terms a "sly reply of the archbishop of Cashel." Gerald admits that the archbishop's remarks are a direct response to his complaint that the Irish clergy have neither the ability nor the right to administer to their flock. This was the central claim made in the papal grant, the "Laudabiliter," as to why the English had the right to invade Ireland, a document only extant in Gerald's other work on Ireland, the *Expugnatio Hibernica* (*The Conquest of Ireland*).²⁸ Gerald also acknowledges that the archbishop is a "learned and discrete man," thus granting the significance and value of his comments:

[I] was blaming the prelates especially for the terrible enormities of that country, using the very strong argument that no one had ever in that kingdom won the crown of martyrdom in defence of the church of God, the archbishop gave a reply which cleverly got home – although it did not rebut my point: "It is true," he said, "that although our people are very barbarous, uncivilized, and savage, nevertheless they have always paid great honour and reverence to churchmen, and they have never put out their hands against

the saints of God. But now a people has come to the kingdom which knows how, and is accustomed, to make martyrs. From now on Ireland will have its martyrs, just as other countries" (pp. 115–16).

How should we read this passage? It indicates that Gerald is not as credulous as he claims he is elsewhere in the text and that he has a firm grasp of the problems involved in assessing evidence, using sources, and recording history. He may well believe that the Irish are barbarous—and, perhaps, judging by the criteria he employs, he has at least half a case. But Gerald is also aware that reality is more complicated than it first appears to observers, his own perceptions included, and he adds a warning to the reader that appears to suggest that even he thought that elements of his narrative were problematic. The Archbishop of Cashel warns Gerald that Ireland is not what he thinks it is, a lesson he passes on to his audience. The Irish are capable of answering back and need to be taken more seriously than the passages describing their barbarous and filthy habits indicate if the work is read superficially (which, it has to be admitted, is how *The History and Topography of Ireland* was generally read, certainly in the centuries after Gerald's death).²⁹ A case can be made that it is an early modern tradition that has reduced Gerald to a level of simplicity, and has denied him his own slyness, reading him as straightforward when he should be afforded more respect. Sixteenth-century historians were invariably keen to represent their predecessors as limited, capable only of writing chronicles not proper history, and later writers have often taken such claims at face value.

Gerald's *History and Topography* is clearly much more sophisticated than it seems to be on first reading and a number of issues need to be taken into account when we read this apparently simple text. When Gerald records the problematic progress of the conquest of Ireland he is aware of his need to defend the Geraldines, his family, as well as the legitimacy of the church, and not simply to celebrate the power of the king, who, after all, did not really have that much to do with the conquest.³⁰ Moreover, Gerald was Welsh, not English, and he was keen to defend the independence of the See of St. David's from being subsumed by that of Canterbury.³¹ That he had axes to grind on these issues, which provide a sequence of complex sub-texts, suggests that the same might be said of other issues, perhaps even his view of the Irish.

More significantly, although Gerald was not without his limitations as a historian, he was capable of writing complex narrative history, as he demonstrated in his *Expugnatio Hibernica* (*The Conquest of Ireland*). Again, Gerald tries to represent the Irish as barbarous—the king, Diarmait Mac Murchada, is represented as a savage cannibal capable of devouring the head of a defeated opponent.³² He is also keen to stress, against much surviving evidence,

that the Irish chieftains and kings surrendered voluntarily to Henry II, and that Ireland became a land of universal peace immediately after the English conquest (pp. 91, 97–99). But, like Henry, he shows himself committed to a plausible history that provides moral examples (p. 233). Most important of all, his history is based on an understanding of causation and fidelity to the truth. As Gerald admits, Ireland could have been conquered completely if the invading army had not been weakened by internal conspiracies and poor tactics (p. 231). When appropriate, Gerald could write like other historians.

II

Were Renaissance historians aware of what medieval historians had achieved? Did they dismiss their work in order to exaggerate the importance and novelty of their own histories? These are questions worth pursuing, given the standard narrative of historiographical progress. A key case in point, of course, is that of Polydore Vergil, who caused something of a scandal when he dismissed the efforts of his contemporaries to verify the historical reality of Arthur and the matter of Britain. However, Polydore makes clear in his controversial history that his target is bad rather than medieval history and he is careful to praise earlier historians who he sees as judicious and scrupulous in their treatment of evidence.³³

Polydore aimed most of his anger at Geoffrey of Monmouth (?–1155) who he regarded as a fake, misleading generations of credulous British historians and their readers with his fantastic tales of British and Arthurian legends. Polydore was well aware that his comments were going to cause offence and that he would need to defend himself if he wished to emulate the ancient historians, such as Sallust, who he admired, and so distinguish his genuine history from the vulgar Galfridian tradition. Polydore cites Gildas (c.516–c.570), the scholarly monk who wrote *De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae*, one of the few useful sources for the history of that century. Polydore regarded Gildas as a far more reliable source than Geoffrey because he was prepared to criticize his fellow countrymen, a pointed contrast to what he saw as Geoffrey's vulgar quest for popularity: "It is noe smalle argumente of his [Gildas's] synceritee that in uttering the trewth he spareth not his owne nation, and, wheare as he speaketh the littell good of his cuntrymenne, he bee-waileth the manie eevells in them, never doth he feare in revealing the troth though he were a Briton, to write of Brittons that thei nether weare stoute in battayle nor faithfull in peace."³⁴ Gildas's boldness stands out in pointed contrast to the intellectual cowardice of Geoffrey whose lying complements the lack of bravery shown in battle by the Britons:

[O]n the other side there hath appeared a writer in owre time which, to purge these defaultes of Brittaines, feining of them thinges to be laughed at, hathe extolled them aboove the noblenes of Romaines and Macedonians, enhauncinge them with moste impudent lyeing. This man is called Geffray ... bie cause that oute of the olde lesings of Brittons, being somewhat augmented bie him, hee hathe recited manie things of this King Arthure, taking unto him bothe the coloure of Latin speeche and the honest pretext of an Historie ... there is noe man which justlie can be angrie with mee for this sainge (that thei were neither valiaunte in battaile nether true in leage), which was a reproche to the owld Britons. Nether was Salluste reprehended of the Romaines bie cause he writte that filthie deade don to the cittie of Rome bie Jugurtha ... for it is a lawe in historie that the writer shoulde never be soe bolde as to open enie fallse thinge, nor soe demisse as not to utter enie trewthe (pp. 29–30).

As this passage demonstrates, Polydore's attack on Geoffrey is not one of a modern historian dismissing the historians of the Middle Ages. He is criticizing Geoffrey and those English/British readers foolish enough to believe his lies about Arthur's mighty deeds for bad, patriotic reasons. Not only is Polydore extremely positive about Gildas, he also praises other medieval historians, contemporaries of Geoffrey, such as the highly sophisticated Henry of Huntingdon, the first writer to link Henry I's death to his excessive fondness for lampreys (against the advice of his doctor), and Ranulph Higden's (d. 1364) ambitious *Polychronicon*, written in the fourteenth century (p. 31).³⁵ His attack is not on his predecessors as such, but simply one strain of English/British history. It is certainly not clear that Polydore thought that he was inaugurating a revolution in history.

Furthermore, we might wonder about the case of Geoffrey, who, because of the way that his work has been read, has been even more widely regarded as a historian of bad faith than Gerald. Many did indeed praise him as the authentic voice of the English/British past, often keen to dismiss the objections of Polydore.³⁶ The "robust defence" of Geoffrey that Humphrey Llwyd provided, for example, was based on the belief that Geoffrey's *Historia* is a proper, authentic source for the recovery of British history, an argument that was sound in terms of principles of humanist scholarship, and, more to the point, the general precepts of historical study.³⁷ However, it needs to be noted that Geoffrey had always been a controversial figure. He was indeed praised by other historians such as Henry of Huntingdon, in many ways an astute judge of sources and authorities.³⁸ But he was also the subject of a savage attack by William of Newburgh (1136–98), one that bears a close resemblance to that made later by Polydore.³⁹ Furthermore, William makes exactly the same point as Polydore: that Geoffrey overrates the Britons for bad patriotic motives, a striking contrast to the objective history of Bede, a proper historian committed to the pursuit of truth:

For the purpose of washing out those stains from the character of the Britons, a writer in our times has started up and invented the most ridiculous fictions concerning them, and with unblushing effrontery, extols them far above the Macedonians [Greeks] and Romans. He is called Geoffrey, surnamed Arthur, from having given, in a Latin version, the fabulous exploits of the Britons, with additions of his own), and endeavoured to dignify them with the name of authentic history; moreover, he has unscrupulously promulgated the mendacious predictions of one Merlin, as if they were genuine prophecies, corroborated to indubitable truth, to which he has himself considerably added during the process of translating them into Latin.⁴⁰

Given that these comments appear in the preface to William's *History*, it is clear that his history of the English nation is designed to return English history to the spirit of Bede's objectivity, and lead the deluded away from the false pleasures of Geoffrey's comforting lies. William's narrative begins properly after the Norman Conquest, but the importance he places upon events before he begins, and the contrast he draws between good and bad history, indicate how keen he is to define himself as a proper historian who can use sources correctly and distinguish truth from falsehood (just as Gerald of Wales was).

William does his best to destroy Geoffrey's claims about the origins of the success of the Britons. He points out that Bede has attested the dominance of the Saxon kings after Vortigern allowed them into his kingdoms. Geoffrey makes no mention of the triumphs of Oswald, Edwin, and Alfred. Instead he invents the figure of Arthur, the fourth in line after Vortigern, which by William's calculation means that Arthur would have been king when Augustine arrived to convert the Britons. This is, however, a relatively minor matter. The most seriously misleading aspect of Geoffrey's account is his claim that Arthur established a European empire. Geoffrey claims that Arthur first conquered the Angles, Picts, and Scots, then subdued Ireland, the Orkneys, Gothland, Norway, Denmark, and Iceland, making him as mighty a ruler as Augustus, as William duly notes. But there is more. Arthur expands the territories under his control when he attacks and defeats Gaul, "a nation which Julius Caesar, with infinite peril and labour, was scarcely able to subjugate in ten years," before turning his attentions to Rome

having, however, first vanquished a giant of surprising magnitude in single combat, though since the times of David we never read of giants. Then, with a wider licence of fabrication, he brings all the kings of the world in league with the Romans against him; that is to say, the kings of Greece, Africa, Spain, Parthia, Media, Iturea, Libya, Egypt, Babylon, Bithynia, Phrygia, Syria, Boethia, and Crete, and he relates that all of them were conquered by him in a single battle; whereas even Alexander the Great, renowned throughout all ages, was engaged for twelve years in vanquishing only a few of the potentates of these mighty kingdoms. Indeed, he makes the little finger of his Arthur more powerful than the lions of Alexander the Great (p. 400).

William's withering sarcasm is undoubtedly more appropriate than he could possibly have realized. The list of Arthur's conquests was revived with a vengeance in sixteenth-century England. Not only were they cited to justify the re-conquest of Ireland, vital after the Reformation when the *Laudabiliter* could no longer be used as justification for English rule.⁴¹ More significantly still, they formed the very basis for John Dee's claims that there was a serious historical precedent for the establishment of a British Empire, a claim that made its way into Hakluyt's *Principal Navigations*.⁴² Dee was, arguably, a credulous man and a bad historian. On the other hand many would dispute this judgment and would also point to his importance as a collector of manuscripts and to the fact that he was taken very seriously by a number of influential courtiers and intellectuals close to the monarch.⁴³ No such charge could be levelled at Richard Hakluyt the younger (1552–1616). He had enough wit to exclude Mandeville's *Travels* from the second edition of the *Principal Navigations* and fell out with his appointed successor, Samuel Purchas, because he felt that he was not a careful enough scholar to carry on his work.⁴⁴ The point is that Geoffrey was probably read even more naively by many sixteenth-century readers than he had been by many of his twelfth-century audience.

III

What conclusions can be drawn from this brief overview of the problematic and complex divide between medieval and early modern history? What do we need to think about if we wish to write a history of historiography? We might start by noting that such histories are discontinuous and we should not assume that movement is all in one direction. William of Newburgh, for example, concedes less to Polydore Vergil as a historian than might be imagined. William has a clear sense of the historical record, lamenting at one point that unless events are recorded they are not thought to have happened (p. 401). He also has an understanding of historical change and development, seeing William the Conqueror as a man inspired either by a "lawless desire of dominion" or by a desire to avenge injuries done to him (p. 402), because he has emerged from the heroic world of the dark ages to establish a Christian tradition that transforms behaviour and culture as it becomes more prevalent. William of Newburgh employs clear and sophisticated notions of historical causation, both at the level of interpersonal rivalry, as when Geoffrey of Anjou challenges his brother, Henry I, because he has been deprived of what he regards as his proper birthright (p. 450), and in view of a wider world beyond the British Isles, through his analysis of the crusades.

The same values inform the historical writing of Polydore Vergil. He also understood the need to establish the authenticity of proper sources, as his edition of Gildas, the first critical edition of an English historical text, indicates.⁴⁵ Polydore has a clear sense of historical development over time, as is illustrated in his early books on Britain, and later ones on the reigns of the late medieval kings, building up to his account of the reign of Henry VIII, which provides a fascinating picture of the complexity of the different forces, issues, and problems that were at work during his rule. Of course, like William, he has an understanding of causation, from the personal, such as Cardinal Wolsey's pomposity and unpopularity stemming from his desire to be feared rather than loved, and the earl of Kildare's rebellion, which resulted from his deep-seated and irrational hatred of the English and the Scots, to the general, as in the widespread outbreaks of xenophobia which prevented the English from understanding the arguments of foreign preachers before the Reformation (*Anglica Historia*, pp.255, 311, 243). And, like William, Polydore very clearly had a conception of the wider world beyond the country whose history he was narrating.

William and Polydore are good historians with sceptical approaches to their sources and a keen sense of narrative and causation. They may be wrong about certain issues—indeed, undoubtedly are—or even fundamentally mistaken. But they are trying to explain complex and diverse issues that may not be obviously related, and are keen to avoid any charge of naive propaganda in the service of a master. The same may not be true of Geoffrey, whose work was of great benefit to the dynasty of Anglo-Norman rulers of England. Nevertheless, it has also been seen as a genuine attempt to write a secular history of a nation.⁴⁶

We need to note that such divisions and debates among historians happen on either side of the medieval/early modern divide. Later writers who had had the benefit of an advanced training in European humanist thought and culture were not necessarily impartial or more properly sceptical of the problematic nature of their sources. George Buchanan, as has often been noted, certainly had his axes to grind when he attempted to write a definitive history of Scotland.⁴⁷ The same is true of Henry of Huntingdon.⁴⁸ There are good and bad medieval and early modern historians and it is not always clear that those who are right are good and those who are wrong are bad. We should also be very careful not to read what Renaissance writers claimed was the case in the Middle Ages at face value, or to assume that we know what Medieval writers really thought before reading the evidence. Of course, many Renaissance historians argued that they were innovators and their predecessors were less sophisticated than they were (although we should note

that Polydore Vergil makes less grand claims than many). But, on this issue, as in their historical narratives, they were not always right.⁴⁹

My second point is also an obvious one. One of the changes from the world that medieval historians inhabited to that of their early modern counterparts is the invention of printing and the rise of the book as an object. We should not lose sight of the vast bibliographical changes that took place between the world that William inhabited—and Geoffrey—and that of Polydore. Diligent scholars such as John Leland (c.1502–52) and John Bale (1495–1563) tried to preserve all the manuscripts that were in danger of disappearing forever when the monasteries were dissolved. Bale printed a massive history of British literature in Latin to help others find their national heritage.⁵⁰ Archives were created by scholars such as John Stow (1525?–1605), who started to collect manuscripts and make them available to fellow Londoners interested in the history of England, and of London in particular.⁵¹ Books gathered vast quantities of information and made it available to other readers, such as Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles* (1577, 1587) and Richard Hakluyt's *Principal Navigations* (1589, 1598–1600), to say nothing of the chronicles of Edmund Hall, Richard Grafton, and Stow himself. Of course, all this is well known and we have works such as Elizabeth Eisenstein's history of the printing press and Adrian Johns's revisionary study of the printed book, as well as numerous other works to explain to us what the changes were and what they meant.⁵² But perhaps we need to bear in mind that the advent and rise of the printed book, while it inaugurated numerous significant changes, did not necessarily transform the ways in which subjects like history were fundamentally conceived, but simply gave historians more to work with. The writing of history was undoubtedly changed by the coming of the printed book—as is well known.⁵³ Even so, we can be lured into paying too much attention to the material form and not enough to the content of the book. Printing may not have transformed quite as much as is sometimes assumed, and manuscripts can, on occasion, be read like books.⁵⁴

The study of history has come a long way since F. Smith Fussner declared that humanist historians “were ... the first who broke with the theological world history of the medieval chroniclers” and Peter Burke asserted that “Medieval men lacked a sense of the past being different in quality from the present.”⁵⁵ Nevertheless, even so sophisticated a study as Daniel Woolf's *Social Circulation of the Past*, which recognizes that there was no straightforward transformation of historical writing in fifteenth or sixteenth century England, argues that “during the modern era, from roughly 1500 to the early decades of the eighteenth century, the English developed a more or less coherent—which does not mean ‘uncontested’—historical sense of a *national*

past” [Woolf’s emphasis].⁵⁶ The argument, despite its numerous qualifications, is in danger of being circular: the nation and modernity serve to define each other. If the term “modern” is removed, the claim seems somewhat less controversial. It seems even less controversial if it is also noted that whatever developments took place between 1500 and 1800, there was actually a sense of the nation before this date.⁵⁷ Professor Woolf’s work does indeed chart a number of important changes in history and consciousness, but our sense of historical change will be improved if we also remember what went before and refuse to think that the label “medieval” automatically excludes what we think of as “modern.”

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Notes

1. For the standard accounts, see F. Smith Fussner, *The Historical Revolution: English Historical Writing and Thought, 1580–1640* (London: Routledge, 1962); Peter Burke, *The Renaissance Sense of the Past* (London: Arnold, 1969); F. J. Levy, *Tudor Historical Thought* (San Marino: Huntington Library, 1967); Herschel Baker, *Race of Time: Three Lectures on Renaissance Historiography* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1967). A second wave of books includes: Keith Thomas, *The Perception of the Past in Early Modern England* (London: University of London, 1983); Joseph M. Levine, *Humanism and History: Origins of Modern English Historiography* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987); Arthur B. Ferguson, *Clio Unbound: Perception of the Social and Cultural Past in Renaissance England* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1982); and the magisterial overview by Antonia Gransden, *Historical Writing in England c.1307 to the early sixteenth century*, 2 vols. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983).
2. John E. Curran, Jr., *Roman Invasions: The British History, Protestant Anti-Romanism, and the Historical Imagination in England, 1530–1660* (Delaware: University of Delaware Press, 2002).
3. Andrew Escobedo, *Nationalism and Historical Loss in Renaissance England: Foxe, Dee, Spenser, Milton* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004).
4. Daniel R. Woolf, *The Idea of History in Early Stuart England: Erudition, Ideology and ‘the Light of Truth’ from the Accession of James I to the Civil War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), *Reading History in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) and *The Social Circulation of the Past: English Historical Consciousness, 1500–1700* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). For a complimentary review that nevertheless points out the teleological assumptions of the last work, see Alexandra Walsham, “Revising the Past,” *History Workshop Journal* 59 (2001), pp. 246–51. See also J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975).
5. Marshall Sahlins, *Apologies to Thucydides: Understanding History as Culture and Vice Versa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

6. For a recent restatement of this familiar argument see Robert Koselleck, "Modernity and the Planes of Historicity," in *Futures Past: On the semantics of historical time*, trans. Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), pp. 9–25.
7. See Stanton J. Linden, *Darke Heirolphickes: Alchemy in English Literature from Chaucer to the Restoration* (Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 1997); T. D. Kendrick, *British Antiquity* (London: Methuen, 1997); Curran, ch. 3.
8. The two classic works are Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, trans. S. G. C. Middlemore, rev. Irene Gordon (New York: Signet, 1960); Walter Pater, *The Renaissance*, ed. Lawrence Evans (Chicago: Pandora, 1977). For analysis, see J. B. Bullen, *The Myth of the Renaissance in Nineteenth-Century Writing* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994); John E. Law and Lene Østermark-Johansen, ed., *Victorian and Edwardian Responses to the Italian Renaissance* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005).
9. Hugh Trevor-Roper, *Queen Elizabeth's First Historian: William Camden and the Beginnings of English 'Civil History'* (London: Cape, 1971); Fussner, ch. 9. See also Alan B. Cobban, "Polydore Vergil Reconsidered: The *Anglica Historia* and the English Universities Reconsidered," *Viator* 34 (2003), pp. 364–91, pp.364–7, 390; Graham Parry, *The Trophies of Time: English Antiquarians of the Seventeenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), ch. 1.
10. William Camden, *Britannia*, trans. Edmund Gibson (London, 1695), preface. Subsequent references to this edition in parentheses in the text.
11. See Burke, ch. 3.
12. Humphrey Llwyd, *The Breviary of Britayne*, trans. Thomas Twyne (London, 1573), fo. 8. Subsequent references to this edition in parentheses in the text.
13. See Donald R. Kelley, "The Theory of History," in Charles B. Schmitt and Quentin Skinner, ed., *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp.746–61. On Humphrey Llwyd as a historian, see Philip Schwyzer, *Literature, Nationalism and Memory in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 76–9, *passim*.
14. On Buchanan's reputation as a pre-eminent humanist scholar, see Rebecca W. Bushnell, "George Buchanan, James VI and neo-classicism," Roger A. Mason, ed., *Scots and Britons: Scottish political thought and the union of 1603* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp.91–111; I. D. McFarlane, *Buchanan* (London: Duckworth, 1981), ch. 12.
15. Cobban, p.365.
16. George Buchanan, *The History of Scotland written in Latin by George Buchanan; faithfully rendered into English* (London, 1690), pp. 41–42. All subsequent references to this edition in parentheses in the text.
17. Hugh Trevor-Roper, "George Buchanan and the Ancient Scottish Constitution," *English Historical Review* Supplement 3 (1966).
18. David N. Bell, "Monastic Libraries: 1400–1557," in Lotte Hellinga and J. B. Trapp, ed., *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain, Volume III, 1400–1557* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 229–54; Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), ch. 2; Adrian

- Johns, *The Nature of the Book: Print and Knowledge in the Making* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), *passim*.
19. Burke, ch. 1; Fussner, ch. 1; Woolf, *Reading History*, ch. 1; Cobban, p. 365.
20. *The Hystories of the most famous and worthy Cronographer Polybius... Englished by C. W. [Christopher Warton] Whereunto is annexed an Abstract, compendiously coercted out of the life & wothy actes, perpetrate by oure puissant Prince king Henry the fift* (London, 1568).
21. Henry of Huntingdon, *The History of the English People, 1000–1154*, trans. Diana Greenway (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 31; Juvenal, *The Sixteen Satires*, trans. Peter Green (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), XIV, line 207 (pp. 270–71). On Henry as a historian, see Gransden, vol. 1, pp. 193–201.
22. Erwin Panofsky argued that the discovery of perspective in Renaissance art developed a sense of historical distance and so transformed more than just the history of art itself, a claim that still has an important influence in the study of the humanities: see Keith Moxey, “Perspective, Panofsky, and the Philosophy of History,” *New Literary History* 26 (1995), pp. 775–86.
23. Gransden, vol. 2, ch. 14.
24. William Shakespeare, *Henry IV, Part One*, ed. David Bevington (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 1.1.43–6, appendix 1, p. 288.
25. See, for example, D. B. Quinn, *The Elizabethans and the Irish* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1966).
26. Gerald of Wales, *The History and Topography of Ireland*, trans. J. J. O’Meara (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982, rpt. of 1951), p. 58. All subsequent references to this edition in parentheses in the text. On Gerald as a historian, see Michael Richter, *Giraldus Cambrensis and the Growth of the Welsh Nation* (Aberystwyth: National Library of Wales, 1972), pp. 62–70, 113–14, *passim*.
27. See, for example, the scathing attack by Geoffrey Keating, who sees all subsequent English historians and observers of Ireland as in thrall to Geoffrey’s lies: Bernadette Cunningham, *The World of Geoffrey Keating: History, Myth and Religion in Seventeenth-Century Ireland* (Dublin: Four Courts, 2000), pp. 68–996, 114–16, *passim*.
28. F. X. Martin, “Diarmait Mac Murchada and the coming of the Anglo-Normans,” in Art Cosgrove, ed., *A New History of Ireland: II, Medieval Ireland, 1169–1534* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), pp. 43–66, at pp. 57–60.
29. See Andrew Hadfield, “Briton and Scythian: Tudor Representations of Irish Origins,” *Irish Historical Studies* 112 (1993), pp. 390–408.
30. On Gerald’s complex allegiances see Robert Bartlett, *Gerald of Wales, 1146–1223* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), *passim*.
31. Gerald of Wales, *The Journey Through Wales/The Description of Wales*, ed. and trans. Lewis Thorpe (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978); Michael Richter, *Giraldus Cambrensis and the Growth of the Welsh Nation* (Aberystwyth: National Library of Wales, 1972).
32. Giraldus Cambrensis, *Expugnatio Hibernica: The Conquest of Ireland*, ed. and trans. A. B. Scott and F. X. Martin (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1978), p. 37. All subsequent references to this edition in parentheses in the text.

33. On Polydore, see Denys Hay, *Polydore Vergil: Renaissance Historian and Man of Letters* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952); Beno Weiss, "Polydore Vergil: A man for all seasons," Rolando Bacchielli, ed., *Polidoro Virgili E La Cultura Umanistica Europa* (Urbino: Accademia Raffaello, 2000), pp. 77–94.
34. Sir Henry Ellis, ed., *Polydore Vergil's English History from an early translation preserved among the manuscripts of the old royal library in the British Museum: Vol. 1, containing the first eight books comprising the period prior to the Norman Conquest* (London: Camden Society, 1846), p. 29. All subsequent references to this edition in parentheses in the text.
35. Henry of Huntingdon, *History of the English People*, p. 64; Ranulph Higden, *Polychronicon Ranulphi Higden, monachi cestrensis, together with the English translations of John Trevisa and of an unknown writer of the fifteenth century*, edited by C. Babington, 9 vols. (London: Longman, 1865).
36. See T. D. Kendrick, *British Antiquity* (London: Methuen, 1950); Alan MacColl, "The Construction of England as a Protestant 'British' Nation in the Sixteenth Century," *Renaissance Studies* 18 (2004), pp. 582–608. It is even possible that Geoffrey was a self-conscious fake: see Valerie Flint, "The *Historia Regum Britanniae* of Geoffrey of Monmouth: Parody and its Purpose: A Suggestion," *Speculum* 54 (1979), pp. 447–68.
37. See Schwyzer, p. 76.
38. Henry of Huntingdon, introduction, pp. xxvi–xxix.
39. Schwyzer, pp. 33–34.
40. William of Newburgh, *The History of William of Newburgh*, translated from the Latin with a preface and notes by Joseph Stevenson (London: Camden Society, 1856), p. 398. Subsequent references to this edition in parentheses in the text. On William as a historian, see Gransden, vol. I, pp. 263–68.
41. Hadfield, "Briton and Scythian"; David Armitage, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), ch. 2.
42. David Armitage, "Literature and Empire," in Nicholas Canny, ed., *The Oxford History of the British Empire: Vol. 1, The Origins of Empire: British Overseas Enterprise to the Close of the Seventeenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 99–123, at pp. 114–15.
43. See William H. Sherman, *John Dee: The Politics of Reading and Writing in the English Renaissance* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995).
44. J. H. Parry, "Hakluyt's view of British history," in D. B. Quinn, ed., *The Hakluyt Handbook*, 2 vols. (London: Hakluyt Society, 1974), vol. 1, pp. 1–7, at pp. 5–7.; C. R. Steele, "From Hakluyt to Purchas," in Quinn, ed., vol. 1, pp. 74–96.
45. Gildas, *Opus nouum. Gildas Britannus monachus cui sapientis cognome[n]tu[m] est inditum, de calamitate excidio, & conquestu Britanniae* (London, 1525); Polydore Vergil, *The Anglica Historia, A.D. 1485–1537*, ed. Denys Hay (London: Camden Society, 1950), introduction, p.xiii (subsequent references to this edition in parentheses in the text); Hay, *Polydore Vergil*, pp. 29–31.
46. On Geoffrey's purpose, see John Gillingham, "The Context and Purposes of Geoffrey of Monmouth's History of the Kings of Britain," *Anglo-Norman Studies* 13 (1991), pp. 99–118; Francis Ingeldew, "The Book of Troy and the Genealogical Construction of History:

- The Case of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia regum Britaniae*," *Speculum* 69 (1994), pp. 665–704, pp. 699, 703, *passim*; Christopher Brooke, "Geoffrey of Monmouth as a Historian," in David N. Dumville and Christopher Brooke, ed., *The Church and the Welsh Border in the Central Middle Ages* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1986), pp. 95–106.
47. See Trevor-Roper, "George Buchanan."
 48. Gransden, vol. 1, pp. 198–99.
 49. See Andrew Hadfield, *The English Renaissance, 1500–1620* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), pp. 3–8. See also Philippa Berry, "Renewing the concept of Renaissance: the cultural influence of paganism reconsidered," Philippa Berry and Margaret Tudeau-Clayton, ed., *Textures of Renaissance Knowledge* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), pp. 17–34.
 50. John Bale, *Illustrium Maioris Britanniae scriptorum* (London, 1548); William Leland, *Leland's Itinerary in England and Wales*, ed. Lucy Toulmin Smith, 5 vols. (London: Centaur, 1964); May McKisack, *Medieval History in the Tudor Age* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), ch. 1.
 51. Ian Gadd and Alexandra Gillespie, ed., *John Stow (1525–1605) and the Making of the English Past* (London: British Library, 2004).
 52. Eisenstein, *Printing Press as an Agent of Change*; Johns, *Nature of the Book*, ch. 2; Lucien Febvre and Henri Jean Martin, *The Coming of the Book: the impact of printing, 1450–1800*, translated by David Gerard (London, New Left Books, 1976).
 53. See, for example, Adam Fox, *Oral and Literate Culture in England, 1500–1700* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), ch. 4; Tessa Watt, *Cheap Print and Popular Piety, 1550–1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Alfred Hiatt, "Stow, Grafton, and Fifteenth-Century Historiography," in Gadd and Gillespie, ed., *John Stow*, pp. 45–56.
 54. For the classic study that argues that the advent of print fundamentally changed consciousness, see Walter J. Ong, S. J., *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue: From the Art of Discourse to the Art of Reason* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2006, rev. ed. of 1958).
 55. Fussner, p.9; Burke, p.2.
 56. Woolf, *Social Circulation of the Past*, pp. 12–13.
 57. Simon Forde, Lesley Johnson and Alan V. Murray, ed., *Concepts of National Identity in the Middle Ages* (Leeds: Leeds Studies in English, 1995).