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Of Danes and Giants: Popular Beliefs about the Past in Early Modern England¹

Among the popular beliefs that one is likely to find in any society, whether it be a largely oral culture of the sort studied in recent times by anthropologists, or a highly literate culture of the kind that predominates in the modern west, there is certain to be a large component which deals expressly with the past. A curiosity as to one's own origins, and the origins of one's material surroundings, is not the exclusive prerogative of literate societies, and still less of the educated elite in those societies; whether or not popular beliefs and traditions about the past actually reflect views held higher up the social ladder is thus in a certain sense a non-question. It is more important to come to terms with what a given group, class or community believed about its own past, local or national, mythic, legendary or "historical," than it is to categorize these beliefs rigidly as *either* "popular" *or* "elite," though the cultural historian should properly remain aware at all times of their social context.² The purpose of this essay is to offer a variety of examples illustrating several types of popular belief about the past, current in England between the end of the Middle Ages and the early eighteenth century. The word "popular" is here taken to mean "widely held" within a broad cross-section of society (even if only local society), a cross-section which generally included the middling and poorer elements of a community, but which might in some instances embrace members of an educated elite increasingly disposed to be critical of "vulgar error."³

The Structure and Function of Popular Beliefs

The study of popular beliefs in past times is fraught with difficulties. What sort of beliefs count as "popular?" Where can they be found? If a belief finds its way into the written, or even oral, mythologies of the elite, does it cease to be popular? To what degree can popular beliefs current today be projected back into more remote periods?⁴ Various historians have offered answers to these and related questions, but it is clear that the theory as much as the practice of the study of popular culture requires considerably more work.

In the world of popular culture, the American folklorist Phillips Barry has observed, "there are texts but no *text*; tunes but no *tune*."⁵ One might add that there are histories but no *history*, in the sense of a single, formally sanctioned rendering of past events. Beliefs about the past can be found in virtually any context, from urban rituals and ceremonies that mark observation of the calendar to writings on such subjects as agriculture and medicine. These will range from jocular or ribald anecdotes, sometimes attached to the name of a famous person, concerning the origins of certain customs,⁶ to cautionary tales (not unlike works such as the *Mirror for Magistrates* or Beard's *Theatre of Gods Judgment*, but generally having a derisive, humorous aspect lacking in those fundamentally serious works) involving the downfall of the greedy or the criminal, high or low. Since the overwhelming majority of those stories of which we are aware survive in written sources, the extent to which they were shared by those lower down the social scale remains questionable. Even if we accept that our literate informants (travellers, antiquaries, vicars and local worthies) are reporting tales truthfully as they heard them, there remains the possibility that any story may have been scrambled or distorted in the telling, by something so simple as differing language or dialect, by the listener's misunderstanding of the facial or bodily gestures of the teller, or by a failure to grasp the purpose that a belief might serve in a local community. The sense of an absence of chronology, and of a past conceived of and related according to place rather than date, which arises from many of the beliefs related below may derive in large measure from a bias in our learned sources. Furthermore, if the educated tended to record what they wished to hear, there is a very great likelihood that some of their humble informants were willing to tailor responses to the occasion, making up details on the spot even if the

general outlines of a story remained more widely accepted within the community. Divining the depth of actual popular *belief* in a tale, for instance, about the origins of a local well or the builder of a medieval church is a problem for which such sources as these will give us little help. As Paul Veyne has noted in a different context, the word "'believe' means so many things."⁷

Nevertheless, if persistence and repetition indicate a degree of conviction, there is still more than enough evidence to make the study of popular tales about the past both possible and worthwhile. Although there is some basis for the notion that learned and unlearned cultures began to grow apart between the late sixteenth and early eighteenth centuries, one cannot deny that many popular beliefs, like many beliefs of the educated, continued to be fostered, nurtured, revised and passed down, in either oral or written form, as a result of intercourse between various segments and levels of society. Certain types of belief remained popular at all levels of society long after others had been marginalized as the errors of the ignorant or "vulgar." Moreover, factors other than literacy or social status could intrude to encourage the creation and dissemination of certain kinds of belief within particular segments of society. Geography was one such influence. Urban popular beliefs are often distinguishable from rural ones in content and volatility (the speed at which they are spread and their geographical range). Even within a rural context, if David Underdown is correct, differing local agrarian economies will give rise to social arrangements that are more, or less, prone to the exchange of traditional tales and stories: these are more easily communicated in areas where populations labor in close proximity, or at least have common meeting places such as the common field, the mill or the alehouse, than in less densely populated pastoral communities.⁸ The local landowner with little experience of or interest in life outside manor or shire may, if eighteenth-century stereotypes of Squire Booby are to be believed, be more apt to listen to local beliefs than his more sophisticated London-going cousin. Gender, too, may be an overlooked factor in the creation and spread of stories. It is significant, for instance, that the tales told by male informants to learned listeners who were also predominantly male often involve notions of masculinity: great deeds, chivalric or military settings and the frequent presence of a pivotal hero or rogue, whether a community figure or a character derived from learned culture, like Arthur or Hercules. Where we know the sex of informants to have been female (a detail not

often specified by travellers), domestic themes of love, courtship or seduction, birth, family and death are more prominent.

Ghost stories offer a good example of a type of belief frequently associated principally with women at all social levels, not merely the village "old wife." Joseph Addison was only exaggerating a widespread perception among male literati when he wrote of having heard, one winter's night, "several young girls of the neighbourhood sitting about the fire with my land-lady's daughters, and telling stories of spirits and apparitions." While sitting and pretending to read, Addison overheard "several dreadful stories of ghosts as pale as ashes that had stood at the feet of a bed, or walked over a church-yard by moon-light . . . with many other old womens fables of the like nature."⁹ Ghost stories often had familial associations and were as frequently passed down among the gentry as among their inferiors. When staying with Lady Honora O'Brien in Ireland in 1650, Ann Fanshawe was warned by her hostess, whose cousin had recently died, that it was

"the custome of this place that when any dye of the family, there is the shape of a woman appears in this window every night untill they be dead. This woman was many ages agoe got with child by the owner of this place, and he in his garden murdered her and flung her into the river under your window."¹⁰

Such stories, or at least the telling of them, maintained their popularity among segments of the clergy and gentry long after the end of the seventeenth century, as readers of Washington Irving and Emily Bronte will know, despite the increasing scepticism of the most highly educated and the official hostility of the church. In the case just cited, Lady O'Brien took the well-known Irish folk myth of the Banshee and made it more "real" for her non-Irish guest by attaching it specifically to her own house and family, and to a subject both women could comprehend, the not uncommon ordeal of a young woman seduced by her master. Ann Fanshawe does not, unfortunately, tell us whether she then passed a sleepless night.

Given the wide range of influences that could shape a tale or its transmission up, down and across social lines, it would be unwise to refuse to acknowledge some of these beliefs as popular simply because they have been passed down in the writings of an educated observer. How else, in most cases, would we know about them? Well educated and

widely travelled landlords were not utterly oblivious to their tenants' social lives and practices, even on the great estates of the eighteenth century: their attitudes toward these practices and beliefs is of course another matter entirely. Lawyers had their illiterate clients, physicians garrulous patients, clergymen rude but informative parishioners, some of whom might be of nearly equal social standing. Medical beliefs are a case in point. An entry in a late Elizabethan almanac, written by a physician, specifically associates good health with the passage of agricultural time by suggesting the spring as a time for "purging" the body prior to summer's heat:

In flowring Mayes moneth,
Bleede, bathe, purge, empty thy body
Of humors that abound,
Least summers heate do annoy thee.¹¹

The author, Robert Watson, was a physician in Braintree, Essex, and he was writing for an audience of the literate middling sort. It is impossible to tell whether he was repeating, and perhaps embellishing with medical knowledge and classical vocabulary concerning the humors, a popular belief about the relationship between the renewal of the earth and that of the body, or was simply echoing something he had read elsewhere. But whether or not this belief *originated* in oral culture, it was bound to interact with that culture purely because of Watson's contact with his patients, to say nothing of the wider audience that read his almanac.

As a rule, the earlier one looks in the age of print, the less likely one is to find a sharp distinction between the beliefs of the educated and those of the illiterate or semi-literate. At the very least, educated recorders and retransmitters of such beliefs are unlikely to be clear as to their origins since that was not an issue of concern to them: chapter and verse were not absolutely obligatory, even among scholars, before the mid seventeenth century. The Elizabethan miscellanist Thomas Lupton was willing to repeat, without supplying either a source or a proof, the belief that King Henry V had verified a popular cure for sciatica composed of ox and pigeon dung, honey, eggs, and melted wax, applied to the painful spot. This, said Lupton had been proven both by the fifteenth-century monarch "as the wryting did wytnes, out of the which I had this" and had been reverified since. Lupton also records for his educated readers a

story, ostensibly from the time of the Emperor Trajan, about a man who "dyd pyse with much a doo, a knotted barly straw"; localizing such an earthy tale in time helped provide it with some authority.¹² Later writers, because more sceptical, even snobbish, about vulgar beliefs, tended to be more explicit about their sources, whether oral or textual. The various physicians and travellers who visited therapeutic wells and springs in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, for instance, would record local beliefs about them without necessarily accepting them at face value. Therapeutic waters could be found all over the countryside, and local beliefs about many of them were, even then, undatable. Thus one Fellow of the Royal Society reported a spring in the Malvern Hills as "having a long and old fame for healing of eyes"; and John Aubrey noted a spring in Glamorgan "much frequented from several counties, time out of mind, for the King's Evil." Traditions involving magical healing had a long history, and though the power of the *rois thaumaturges* was on the wane, beliefs associating local waters with some kind of therapeutic powers persisted long after this period.¹³

Architecture, Topography and Folk Belief

Nothing stimulated thought about the past so much as its visual remains, natural or man-made, and it is with these that any enumeration of popular beliefs must begin. The old man-made structures (castles, churches, abbeys, bridges, tombs and monuments) which dominated the urban environment and broke up the horizon of the countryside conditioned people's memories and their sense of change.¹⁴ They also acted as focal points for local traditions, lightning rods which inspired the popular imagination. Around such inescapable reminders of earlier times, communities could and did weave an invented past; around any prominent topographical or architectural feature there could eventually swirl not just one tale but an entire magnetic field of traditions, tales, images and rituals. The town of Oakham in Rutland had a tradition that any nobleman, upon entering it, had to forfeit a horseshoe or pay a fine, the "evidence" for this consisting in a number of shoes nailed to the shire-hall door in the later seventeenth century. In the parish of Ecclesfield, near Doncaster (known colloquially as Eccleston), there was a church of such great age that by the end of the seventeenth century it had inspired a local proverb: when anyone in the vicinity wished to impress someone with the

great age of something he or she would say "it is as old as Eccleston church."¹⁵ The town of Windsor, William Harrison noted, was "builded in time past by King Arthur, or before him by Arviragus, as it is thought, and repaired by Edward the third, who erected also a notable college there"; over a century later the inhabitants of one small Denbighshire parish firmly believed theirs had once upon a time been a university town.¹⁶ A Devon tradition ascribed an old church to King Athelstan, while a similar tradition in Gloucestershire attributed another to Edward the Confessor. The inhabitants of Beckermeth, Cumberland referred to the nearby mount and ruined castle as Caemarvon and ascribed it to the Britons.¹⁷ By the early eighteenth century, characters from literary legend such as Lud and Belinus, once accepted by historians and antiquaries as genuine but since demoted to the status of myth, had found new life in popular tradition, as the builders or early occupants of churches, castles and other structures. The Gloucester historian Abel Wantner, writing at the beginning of George I's reign, noted that the local church of St Mary the Virgin "was built (if you please to believe antiquity carried on by tradition) by the renowned Lucius, the first Christian king in the world," who had placed a bishop and preachers there on his conversion, commemorated in a monument within the church. At Brill church, near Ludgershall in Buckinghamshire, Browne Willis would note in 1712 the tradition that "King Lud was killed in the parish on a spot of ground called Ludslan and that here was his seat: that only he had an hall at Ludgers Hall." At Ellesborough in the same shire, the remains of a castle on a round hill had inspired the belief that King Belinus had lived there; a large hill nearby was known as Belinesbury Hill.¹⁸

Such beliefs might be scorned by their recorders, even in the relatively more credulous sixteenth century. William Camden recorded the conviction of citizens of Hastings that their city was a rebuilt version of an ancient one which had fallen into the sea. A similar tale awaited him at the tiny Staffordshire village of Wall, a mile or so from Lichfield. This was so named because of the crumbling remains of an old wall in the village, which according to traditional belief was all that remained of "an ancient towne, destroyed long before the Conquest." The villagers were able to show him the place where they "ghesse the temple there stood," and produced Roman coins as proof. In Brecknockshire, Camden found "a currant speech of long continuance among the neighbours" that where the Meere, a local lake, then was, there had in times past been a city,

"which being swallowed up in an earthquake, resigned up the place unto the waters."¹⁹ More recent events, too, could endow a structure with historical character—the death of Cardinal Wolsey in 1530 near the scene of Richard III's demise half a century earlier almost immediately created a popular tag for his burial place in Leicester Abbey.²⁰

Nor were such beliefs confined to rural communities; they could be found in large centres as well. The Norwich tree on which the rebel Robert Kett was believed to have been hanged in 1549 was still referred to as Kett's Oak after the Restoration.²¹ London itself spawned a number of popular traditions: in his famous *Survey of London* John Stow noted of Tower Street ward that "there have been of old time some large buildings of stone, the ruins whereof do yet remain, but the first builders and owners of them are worn out of memory." Because there were no historical records of the origins of these edifices, "the common people affirm Julius Caesar to be the builder thereof, as also of the Tower itself," though Stow knew the latter to have been erected by William the Conqueror.²² Julius Caesar was a real, historical person, but intercourse between the learned and the unlearned had been sufficiently strong over the centuries for his name to enter the ranks of popular legend together with characters like Robin Hood.

Though classical and historical figures sometimes crept into local tradition and into ritual, it was often the case (and increasingly so after 1600) that what townsmen and villagers believed, or at least asserted as truth, was at odds with the "facts" as they were then known to classically educated visitors. Sixteenth-century inhabitants of Manchester averred that because their ancestors had fought the Danes valiantly, they had been rewarded with the name Manchester or "city of men." Camden, who was more sympathetic to such opinions than most of his seventeenth-century successors, gently points out to his reader, "But full little knowe the good honest men, that Mancunium was the name of it in the Britans time, so that the etymologie thereof, out of our English tongue, can by no meanes seeme probable."²³ With the exception of certain figures, like Julius Caesar or Alexander the Great, who had been absorbed into legend over a period of time, popular beliefs about the past include few of the classical elements which were of interest to most antiquaries. British or English figures such as King Arthur were more apt to be cited in connection with a specific site than were Romans, despite the abundance of Roman coinage. A ruined castle at Queen Camel near Yeovil,

Somerset, was known locally as "King Arthur's Palace" throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.²⁴ A round trench with an exit at either end, which the Restoration scholar Sir Daniel Fleming attributed to the Romans, was held by the country folk of western Westmorland "to have been one of King Arthur's Round Tables," and was commonly known among them as the Round Table. Fleming was equally unimpressed by the belief in Ravenglass, Cumberland, that one King Eveling had built a royal palace there. This was the local explanation for how the place got its name; the etymologically inclined Fleming preferred the rival story that the name derived from the Irish words "Ravigh" (fern or bracken) and "glass" (green), making it "a Feamy Green, where now ye towne stands."²⁵

Popular beliefs often displayed a religious aspect that defied external events such as the Reformation. The citizens of late Tudor Halifax claimed that their town was originally named Horton and that its modern name derived from the "hali-fex" (holy hair) of a murdered virgin: Many believed that Halifax was also the burial place of the head of John the Baptist, a tradition acknowledged and perpetuated by town authorities in the borough's corporate seal.²⁶ Such stories often had catholic, or even magical overtones which offended more puritanical sensibilities from the mid sixteenth century on. George Owen, the late Elizabethan lord of the manor of Kemes, Pembrokeshire, was struck how "all the inhabitantes, both younge and old" affirmed that the parish of Whitchurch had been free of adders for generations; a similar belief existed in the parish of St. David and the condition was ascribed to that familiar enemy to serpents, St Patrick.²⁷ A succession of antiquaries from John Leland at the beginning of the sixteenth to John Aubrey at the end of the seventeenth century repeat the story of the Droitwich, Worcestershire, salt wells, which had supposedly dried up in the Middle Ages and been saved through the intercession of a thirteenth-century saint (Richard de la Wiche, bishop of Chichester, 1244-53). These had been the occasion of annual revelry throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and had easily survived the assault on the saints in the 1530s. The ceremonies had been prohibited under the Commonwealth, and according to more recent tradition the wells had then dried up again, whereupon townsmen had revived their celebrations to restore the wells once more.²⁸ The clerical sensibilities of one Fellow of the Royal Society, Bishop William

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Nicolson, were offended by the superstitions of borderers, "who are much better acquainted with, and do more firmly believe, their old legendary stories of fairies and witches, then the articles of their Creed."²⁹ Though he disapproved of such beliefs, Nicolson at least attempted to explain their origins; he believed that they derived from pagan myths going back to the Danish invasions, and suggested parallels between the oral traditions and the legends mentioned in runic inscriptions which, like coins and other artifacts, turned up from time to time in this and other parts of the country.

Conversely, religious doctrine might be rendered more accessible to a popular audience through the dramatization of biblical episodes. For most ordinary people, the Creation, the Flood, and the story of Christ were much more familiar historical landmarks than the Norman Conquest or Magna Carta. The records of early drama contain numerous references to such performances, and despite the increasing orientation of English religion to written and printed media, they remained an important element of popular culture. At the beginning of the seventeenth century, Thomas Crosfield was witness to a puppet show which recounted human history in various episodes such as the Creation, Fall, murder of Abel, sacrifice of Isaac and the nativity:

Almighty God hath soe composed ye frame
Of things as yt each creature glorify his name
Our after ages may even things behold
Wch in those former tymes were never told.³⁰

The division of sacred from secular, with respect to the past, was a convention of historians, and it did not prevent the intermingling of episodes from the Bible with those from classical, medieval or recent history. Preachers would commonly appeal to a wide variety of episodes from the past for the purpose of illustration. In his notes for a homily on rebellion, Archbishop Cranmer, for instance, listed Old Testament examples such as Dathan and Absalom side by side with the architects of more recent "tumults in England," Jack Cade and Jack Straw. Even if he regarded all of these names as being equally historical, Cranmer would likely have understood the temporal distance between them. But to an ordinary churchgoer, listening to such examples, the nuances of time and

place would be lost, and the illustrative material would blur into a vague and fuzzy but very real past.³¹

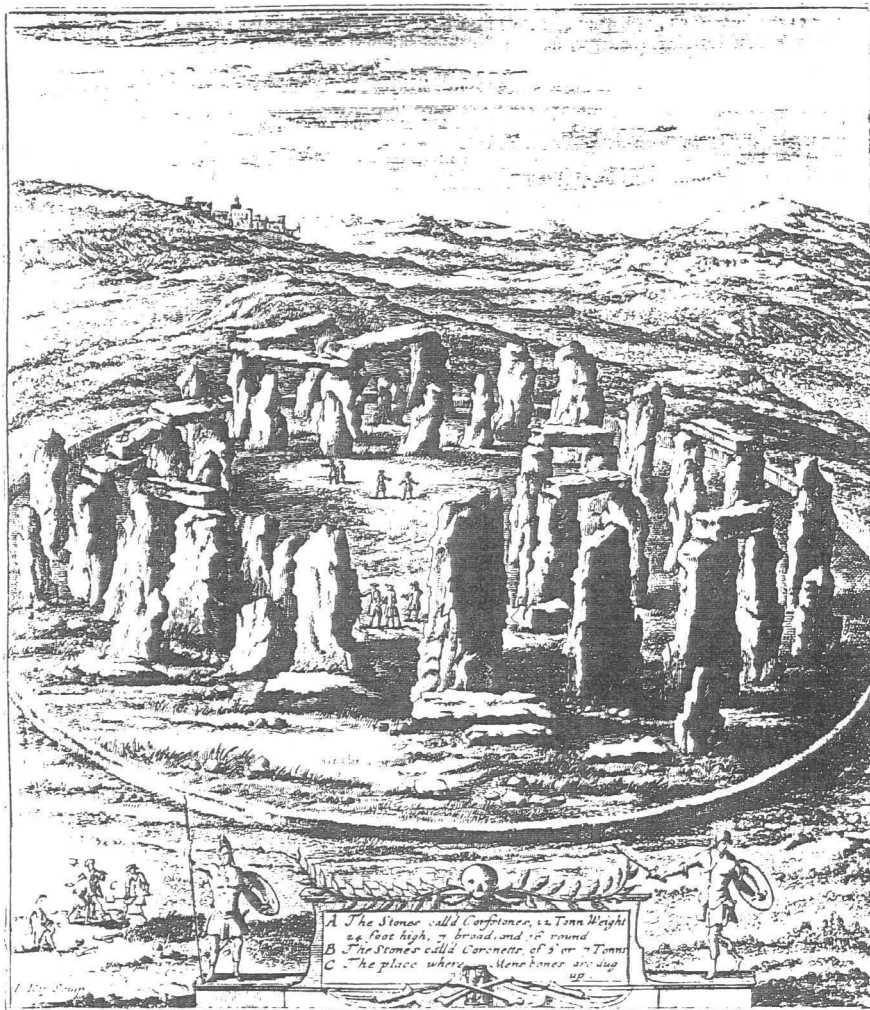
Not all local traditions and beliefs about the past were confined to oral discourse; many were given written or physical form by the community involved, thereby providing us with valuable pieces of evidence free of the scholarly recorder's bias. The larger and more urban the community, the more likely was an episode from the past, whether real or fictional, to find a variety of channels of expression. Among the inhabitants of St. Albans in the early seventeenth century there were a few sufficiently literate to compose an epitaph poem about the medieval traveller Sir John de Mandeville, whom they supposed to be buried in St. Albans Abbey. They showed the poem to John Weever, who was reasonably certain that he had seen Mandeville's genuine tomb in Liège.³² In Chester throughout this period a feast called the sheriff's calves' head breakfast was held annually on "Black Monday," commemorating a storm on Easter Monday, 1360, in which many of Edward III's troops had been slain outside Paris.³³

Figures such as Guy of Warwick, the bastard offspring of chivalric literature and popular tradition, often became indelibly associated with towns, and even with particular places within or near them. Some of these tales were of early modern origin: Thomas Deloney's so-called "novels" of Jack of Newbury and Thomas of Reading, for instance, were essentially compilations, aimed at successful and aspiring Elizabethan merchants, of material found in a variety of sources.³⁴ Others had a longer history, ultimately deriving from literary sources which had over several centuries crept into popular ritual and tradition, where they would remain for a long time. Warwick nurtured its association with the fictional Guy into the eighteenth century, and nearby Guy's Cliffe marked the site of a lost chapel in which the hero was believed to have spent his last years as a hermit. At Gosford Gate in the rival county town of Coventry during the early sixteenth century there hung a bone of the giant boar supposedly slain by Guy. Perhaps because he was mainly Warwick's hero, Coventry had also evolved its own dragon killer, St. Margaret, who had her own chapel, as well as the historical Lady Godiva.³⁵ Bristol was supposedly founded by Brennus, a legend supported in the sixteenth century by town records and civic rituals.³⁶ Sometimes a historical figure like Julius Caesar bulked so large in the imagination that the development of ahistorical personalities was inhibited. The Oxford antiquary Miles Windsor

recounted the belief that a skull dug up in St. Giles Street was that of the Anglo-Saxon king Offa, and that the heads of other old English monarchs had resurfaced at Brasenose and Exeter Colleges. An earlier antiquary, Leonard Hutten, echoed the "common received opinion" that the chapel of Our Lady at Smithgate in Oxford had been a Jewish synagogue, a belief endorsed by at least one nineteenth-century writer. The ruins of an old castle near Offton ("Offa's Town") in Suffolk was long believed by locals to have been built by Offa, in the words of one antiquary, "after he had barbarously slain Ethelbert, king of the East-Angles, and seiz'd his kingdom."³⁷

In London, more than in any other place, a wide assortment of tales had sprung up concerning men and sometimes women (Edward IV's mistress "Shore's wife," for instance) who figured in the mythology both of the city itself and also in its sub-communities, such as the guilds and livery companies. Many of these had monuments either officially or traditionally associated with their names. Sir William Walworth, the fourteenth-century mayor who slew Wat Tyler, turns up again and again in mayoral processions, up to the end of the eighteenth century, especially those involving the Fishmongers. It is not difficult to see how the reputation of such a character could be inflated and embellished over time. On 16 June 1562, a fishmonger named William Paris paid for Walworth's tomb to be "nuwe frest and gyld, and ys armes gyllt, with the pyctur all in aleblaster lyung in ys armur gyllt." The London diarist Henry Machyn noted this "goodly remembrans for alle men of honor and worshype," remarking that Walworth had been twice mayor and had "kyld Jake Cade in Smythfeld a-for the kyng," thereby conflating Wat Tyler with his fifteenth-century Kentish successor. Embellishing further, Machyn reported that Walworth had married the daughter of his former master, a four-time mayor. Machyn was not the only person to magnify Walworth's fame. The tomb was kept under repair till its destruction in the Great Fire, and Stow, ever perturbed by "men ignorant of their antiquities," censured the fishmongers for recording the name of Jack Straw instead of Tyler on Walworth's epitaph.³⁸

In the countryside, too, history and legend could envelop burial sites, bridges and caves, sometimes even arising from ordinary topographical features such as soil quality or color. Large-scale man-made features inevitably engendered accounts, on various points of the spectrum between fact and myth, of their origins and purpose. Stonehenge, for



[The Killam Library, Dalhousie University]

Stonehenge, engraved by J. Kip in *Camden's Britannia* (London, 1695):

example, had a particularly long tradition of stories, not all of which can be traced to Galfridian legend, and the discovery of bones in the surrounding ground throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries encouraged further speculation among antiquaries and the unlearned alike. The remnants of long-vanished transportation systems or defensive works like the Roman roads and Hadrian's wall provided similar inspiration. A section of the Roman road through Alnham was known to the inhabitants of that northern Northumberland parish as the "Devil's Causey" or causeway throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; Cambridgeshire similarly had its "Devil's Dike," likely put up in the sixth or seventh century by East Anglians or Mercians.³⁹ Others had specific historical associations. Hoxne or "Hegilsdon" in Suffolk was believed to contain the location of the martyrdom of King Edmund, murdered by the Danes; the anonymous Elizabethan chorographer of Suffolk describes the place as "notable and famous" for this event. The unearthing of brass horse harnesses and armor in mid Tudor Camelford (or Gaffelford) in Cornwall reinforced, if it did not create, the belief of inhabitants that a great battle had been fought there.⁴⁰ Local features of the landscape, because often associated with particular persons, often necessitated the spinning of aetiological legends. A field in the parish of Eastdown, Devon, in the mid seventeenth century was dominated by a Stonehenge-like circle of stones taller than a man. Since the field was known as Madock's Down, the local population surmised that the monument was "in memory of one Madocke there vanquished; for no man will think that they were there set in vain."⁴¹ In this case the legend, which may have been of relatively recent origin, served the purpose of "explaining" the monument. While such stories often performed this kind of toponymical function, they are also indicative of an element common to most popular beliefs about the past, namely their pre-eminent concern with violent conflicts and men of extraordinary physical abilities, a preoccupation with extremes that both endowed the past with meaning and made it more easily memorable within an oral context.

Speech, Print and Popular Legends

From the late sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, beliefs about the past increasingly worked their way from oral into written or printed form, only to double back into speech as the writers, readers and hearers of

stories, anecdotes, ballads and legends conversed. Perhaps the most often-studied vehicle for beliefs about the past is the ballad. Through the scholarship of Hyder Edward Rollins and others a large number of medieval and early modern ballads have now been catalogued and studied.⁴² The ballad, together with its late seventeenth-century successor the chapbook, exemplifies the workings of the relationship between oral and printed culture and shows how, in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the history of the poorest sort of people was not yet clearly distinct from the national history of the aristocracy and gentry.⁴³ An early example is provided by *The Song of the Lady Bessy*, an account of a conspiracy by Elizabeth of York and Sir William Stanley to bring in Henry VII and depose Richard III. This tale, as C. L. Kingsford noted at the beginning of the twentieth century, contains a mixture of truth and fiction (which scarcely serves to distinguish it from a humanist account such as Sir Thomas More's *Richard III*) and was probably composed initially by someone who knew some of the details of the events described. But despite its likely aristocratic origins, it was transmitted by mouth for three generations; the first known written version dates from Elizabeth I's reign. Once written down, it was repeatedly copied up to the reign of Charles II, and in this form it could feed back into and influence the original oral tradition from which it derived.⁴⁴

One of the effects of the change in transmission of historical consciousness from speech to printed text was to drive popular historical beliefs increasingly from the centre to the periphery, as a national historical tradition began to crystallize in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. That tradition was, by 1700, rooted in a large number of printed histories ranging from the scholarly folio to poems and history plays. This is true even of the ballads and almanacs written by the educated middling sort for their peers and inferiors. Precisely because balladeers were still writing for an oral audience, and had hopes that their lyrics would be added to a variety of songs sung to well-known tunes, they searched for memorable subjects and employed highly graphic, colorful language. War and sex were favored topics, and those historical figures who were well known from chronicles or oral tradition to have had military or romantic exploits (even better if both), such as Henry V, Shore's Wife and later Henry VIII, were more likely to enjoy a second life in popular historical literature than those that did not. The very popularity of Edward III and Henry V as chivalric heroes in the three

centuries following their respective deaths gave them a high profile in chronicles, poems and eventually plays; but because these genres influenced and were in turn influenced by popular "brut," their selection of heroes and events often tended to percolate back down into ballads, almanacs and eventually chapbooks.⁴⁵ In these media, writers and performers emphasized static episodes rather than complete historical processes; it was easier to create a story around one nuclear fact derived from printed or written sources than to retell the complete original narrative in abridged form. Thus in a ballad such as *The Battle of Agincourt in France*, which circulated widely early in the seventeenth century, an incidental event such as the "tun of tennis balles" sent by the French king to insult Henry V assumes a prominence and importance that it lacked in the original chronicle sources.⁴⁶

Much the same can be said with regard to almanacs, which from the late sixteenth century began to include historical tables or watered down "chronicles." The popular "writing tables" put out by Francis or Frank Adams, an Elizabethan bookbinder working near London Bridge, provide the names of English kings and their regnal periods (numbers of years, months and days) beginning with William the Conqueror. But only rarely are details about those monarchs included, and these invariably revolve around something done by a king *to* or *for* London and its citizens, or sometimes simply during that king's reign. Henry III, for instance, is primarily noteworthy for having granted London's citizens the right of free passage without toll throughout the kingdom. His father, King John, is memorable because "in the yeere 1209, the stone bridge over the Thames a London was finished." Just because the author and readers of this almanac were Londoners did not automatically make them more conscious of events of national importance. In fact, Adams's tables only mention a few of these events briefly, mainly rebellions interspersed with accounts of miracles and prodigies, and the work is remarkably free of the political and moral judgments on kings such as Edward II, Richard II and Richard III that dominate both the Tudor chronicle and the humanist histories that succeeded it.⁴⁷

Crime, conspiracy and treason, too, became popular topics from the late sixteenth century on, and would remain so into the eighteenth century. A ballad first recorded about 1630, but certainly of older origins, describes the end of one Banister, who betrayed his master, the duke of Buckingham, to Richard III. Its written version may have been inspired

by such recent events as the assassination of the latter-day duke of Buckingham by a disgruntled junior officer in 1628.⁴⁸ The key point here is not that this pertains to a real historical event, rather than a myth or folk tale, but that the balladeer was more concerned with peripheral characters and their fates than with the main event, which is pushed away from centre-stage. Throughout a great deal of Tudor and Stuart ballad literature, the "important" figures, kings and nobles, figure only as textual guests, making cameo appearances which provide a slender connection between history as the historians told it and history as ordinary readers or listeners liked to remember it.

This, in turn, helps to explain the prominence in ballads and jestbooks of interchangeable kings who encounter artisans, apprentices and merchants, and fall under some form of obligation (food, drink, shelter, or merely good company) to them, as well as those which focus on characters caught up in the conflicts of their superiors, such as the recurrent figure of *Shore's Wife*.⁴⁹ To us—and likely to the gentry and nobility who increasingly provided the audience of narrative historians from Francis Bacon to Gilbert Burnet—such tales seem fanciful, naïve; they appear to reduce historical reality to the lowest common denominator. But for the marginally literate and illiterate consumer of ballads, and of chapbooks, and for those who simply picked up such tales and retold or sung them, the fact was that the presence of such everyday characters, and the recounting of the story in such a way as to emphasize ordinary emotions—grief, fear, joy, sexual play—rendered the tale far more real than any scholarly, chronologically accurate account of the deeds of Edward III.⁵⁰

Giants, Native and Foreign

Because the heroes of written history were often of little interest or concern to their inhabitants, many local communities developed their own. As I have suggested above, some of these were adopted directly from an established literary discourse, such as the chivalric tradition (*Guy of Warwick* and *Sir Bevis of Southampton* being two well-known examples) and thus had a career beyond the towns that bore their names; and in other cases local features were associated with a specific figure from the national, biblical or classical pasts. The river Torridge in Devon ran by an outcrop known in the seventeenth century as "Hercules

Promontory," which inspired a local belief that Hercules had once visited that part of Britain. The same figures often adorned wall paintings and tapestries, replacements for the saints banished at the Reformation.⁵¹ Rather like the "gods from outer space" that are a favorite of late twentieth-century popular culture, exotic ancient visitors, classical and biblical, had long provided a way for a community to establish its significance in the wider world, in much the same way that more well-known legends, such as the visit of Brutus the Trojan, or of Japhet's offspring, or the Emperor Constantine's British parentage, helped place England itself in the mainstream of European history.

Memories of giants and other monstrous beings in the remote past endured in tradition and folklore from the early modern to the modern era, though it is difficult to date many of the survivals. Among the educated classes, belief in the existence of real, historical giants began to fade from about 1580, faster still by a century later, under the impact of increasing historical knowledge, antiquarian discoveries and of a post-Reformation hostility to superstition.⁵² As early as the 1590s, Edmund Spenser's characters Ireneus and Eudoxus, discussing old Irish burial mounds and stone monuments, dismiss the idea that these were made by giants and ascribe them to pre-Christian burial customs.⁵³ Spenser's attitude was likely occasioned as much by his pronounced distaste for Gaelic culture as by historical insight, but in the following century antiquaries and virtuosi would come to share in what amounted to an alternative explanation for such remains as fossils, artifacts and burial sites, which the great majority of the population still attributed to giants. Those legends that could be checked against some external source inevitably fell prey to learned scrutiny first, and although in time antiquaries developed a severe scepticism toward nearly all forms of local tradition, their initial targets were figures of pseudo-classical, biblical or medieval legend like Brutus the Trojan, Samothès, and Gomer, grandson of Noah. Simpler still to dismiss, because foreign and contemporary sources did not mention them, were putative ancient visits by real historical figures such as Hannibal and Alexander the Great: Camden, who reserved judgment on the issue of Brutus, was adamant that Hannibal and Alexander had never set foot in Britain.⁵⁴

But figures deriving exclusively from oral tradition could not be as easily verified, and following the rule that it is impossible to prove a negative they were not refutable in the same way as better known ones.

Many such figures were nameless men or women remembered solely for some great deed or for an existing monument to their memory. A great many were quasi-supernatural—the giants of Beanstalk fairy tale—but a number of village stories involve human giants, such as Tom Hickathrift, the giant-killer of the Isle of Ely.⁵⁵ These were abnormally large men (or, inversely, tiny ones such as Tom Thumb) who both provided a ready explanation for any out-of-the-ordinary natural phenomenon and figured in processions, entries and certain other sorts of local ritual, as ludic figures of aberrant nature, as symbols of misrule, and, sometimes, as examples of men of humble origins achieving fame and a measure of prosperity.⁵⁶

Early in the sixteenth century, John Leland encountered a Welsh giant-legend which connected a local feature with the deeds of King Arthur. In rural Cardiganshire he discovered two small hills; the nearby cottagers told him that this was where a giant had washed his hands, and that King Arthur had killed him. They also claimed that the giant was buried nearby and showed him the place.⁵⁷ Despite the opening up of what might be called a "credulity gap" in the latter part of the sixteenth century, giants continued for some time to occupy space in the mental worlds of both the educated and the illiterate, as the success of such authors as Rabelais illustrates.⁵⁸ The Bible, of course, recorded the existence of giants, and the decline of human stature was often mentioned as evidence of the general decline of the world; many classical sources also mention men and women of exceptional girth and height.

The Elizabethan necromancer and astrologer, Simon Forman exemplifies the overlap between popular and learned culture on this subject. One of his manuscripts notes that Adam and Eve had four gigantic children, while his "Bocke of gigantes and huge and monstrose formes," assembled in 1610 records the genealogies of Gog and Magog.⁵⁹ Still another manuscript provides a genealogical and biographical catalogues of all the giants who lived in Britain and elsewhere after the Flood, along with their dimensions; they included King Arthur, who was "15 foote longe in the prime of his yeres." But Forman went beyond his literary sources to link the biblical and pseudo-biblical giants to popular rumors that had arisen around various discoveries of large bones in England and elsewhere, from the body of a man 46 cubits long discovered after the explosion of a Cretan volcano, to the "tooth" in his possession that had been discovered in the Isle of Thanet about 1596 "with a mighti battell

ax by him." Forman's father-in-law, a Canterbury surgeon named John Russell, had been present at the discovery of this fossil "and with his own handes as he said pulled out the said toth for a memoriall, which afterward he gave to me." In 1603 Forman had seen with his own eyes another such tooth "that did way 8 pound naught" leaning against a doctor's house in Cambridge. He noted that "ther was a nother as they said that did way 8 pound and a halfe but I sawe not that. Thes were both found ner Cambridge in digginge a gravell pit."⁶⁰

At the local level, beliefs about giants were frequently reinforced by accidental "archaeological" discoveries such as those reported by Forman. Tin miners digging near Land's End at the end of the sixteenth century found an "exceeding big carcass of a man." In 1668 the body of a "giant of 10 foot long" was dug up in Cornwall, the news of this discovery being relayed to various antiquaries; in the 1680s a similar discovery of "a body of extraordinary size," buried in close proximity to some brass daggers, occurred in Beddgelert, near Snowdon.⁶¹ The inhabitants of one north Devon parish believed that a huge stone had been single-handedly tossed by a giant named Sir Magnus de St. Albino or St. Aubyn; the antiquary who recorded this was sceptical, primarily because he could think of men "in this our declining and languishing age (as some term it) equal of strength to the ancients." Devonshire men also recounted the legend of Ordulphus, a man who could stride ten feet at a step and break open iron gates with his hands.⁶² Not only humans but also animals were inflated to great proportions. Bristle Bridge in the parish of Myddle received its name after an Elizabethan soldier with a reputation for story-telling boasted of killing a gigantic boar whose coat had bristles the size of pitchfork prongs. The workmen who built the bridge shortly thereafter gave it this name, which was still current in 1701. At Caerleon in Wales in the early eighteenth century the parishioners were displaying in their church what the antiquary Thomas Martin thought was "the rib of a ffish, which is shown to strangers for the rib of an oxe that was fatted in that country; and the vulgar believe [it] to be such."⁶³

Human and inhuman giants had walked the north and midlands also. At the end of the seventeenth century, the Westmorland antiquary Thomas Machell heard in one village how "before the union with Scotland" in 1603, one Heard, a man of great stature and strength, had single-handedly driven off an incursion of Scots, earning from "the king" (unnamed) a small tenement still held by his family in 1692. The same

man also had a reputation as a prodigious eater. "They report of this Heard in the parish to this day," Machell noted, that he could sit down at four different tables at a marriage feast, eat four meals and then survive for four days without eating, while walking the two hundred miles to London. He had also been extremely long-lived, apparently dying only in 1682!⁶⁴ The skeleton of a man found at Corbridge, Northumberland included a "thighbone" of some two yards in length, and the whole body was estimated in reports at seven yards. Parts of this were put on display in 1695, and the Royal Society reported the find in its *Philosophical Transactions*. John Horsley speculated, thirty years later, that the bones had actually been "the teeth & bones of oxen and other creatures sacrificed here at some pagan temple." With great size generally went enormous prowess: a common tradition in Swannington, a chapelry of the parish of Whitwick in Leicestershire, told of a thirteenth-century knight reputed to be "a gyant, of great strength and might"; this may have been inspired by the great length of the man's tomb in the Whitwick parish church.⁶⁵

Foreign travellers like Thomas Platter were regaled with stories of British giants, though it is difficult to tell from their remarks whether these were entirely popular inventions or simply the "Samotheans" and other pre-British beings, like "Goemagot" or Gogmagog. This giant had evolved in the Middle Ages from the conflation of ancient giant legends with the Biblical character prince Gog of Magog (Ezek. 38-39) and the two nations Gog and Magog which were to lead the forces of Satan at Armageddon (Rev. 20.8). The existence of these sorts of giants was still being seriously upheld in many chronicles of the early seventeenth century, and they figured prominently in sixteenth-century civic processions and plays, for example the midsummer pageants at Coventry and Chester.⁶⁶ Two medieval figures at the Guildhall in London, known as "Hercules and Samson" in the early sixteenth century, had been renamed Gogmagog and Corineus by Elizabeth's reign; they were recarved in the early eighteenth century, after the gutting of the Guildhall in the Great Fire. Two quarter-jacks (figures striking the quarter-hour on a clock), also named Gog and Magog, were erected outside St. Dunstan's Church, London, in 1671.⁶⁷

Rogues, Hierarchy and Subversion

While many popular perceptions of the past were, from the point of view of the ruling powers, innocuous enough, others might be potentially subversive. As David Underdown has recently pointed out, the common people "had their own version of that 'ancient constitution' to which their superiors in Parliament were so constantly appealing, a version based on elements such as traditional rights, usage and custom." When Charles I tried to revive the forest laws in 1634, a member of the Essex Grand Jury charged with enforcing them asked to see a copy of the original forest charter.⁶⁸ Conversely, the historical liberties for which seventeenth-century MPs pleaded were of little interest to the ordinary Englishman more concerned about the price of grain or the security of his tenure; for him immemorial custom and prescriptive right had concrete and specific, local significance. Ultimately, this disengagement from the high political debates of the period would be eroded in the 1640s and 1650s, first under the encouragement of gentry leaders willing to use instruments such as "popular" petitions and the clamor of the crowd in pursuit of their own political goals, and subsequently as more democratically minded groups such as the Levellers and Diggers attempted to shift the discussion away from the liberties of the propertied to the rights of all free men.⁶⁹

But even before the civil war, statements at odds with official and semi-official views of the past might emanate even from a population with little clear understanding of the terms of the Petition of Right, much less Magna Carta.⁷⁰ Keith Thomas has demonstrated how substantial was the fear of ancient political prophecies, especially when these were revived in times of acute political crisis, and the actions taken by successive regimes to curb them.⁷¹ Though many songs and tales of the past appear unthreateningly loyal and obedient, and even condemn rebels such as Jack Straw and Wat Tyler, there are others less friendly to authority. A number of sympathetic ballads appeared after the fall of Thomas Cromwell in 1540 and again after the Northern Rebellion in 1569. Two of the latter celebrate the exploits of the "good noble erle of Northumberland" and his companion the earl of Westmorland, as well as the former's betrayal and execution.⁷² It would be going too far to suggest the existence of a historical counter-culture among the populace, a vision of the past antagonistic to that hierarchical, orderly one represented by chroniclers and university educated historians. There are, nevertheless

many indications that the printed histories of the period do not reflect the sum total of historical opinion. A traditional rhyme current in Westmorland at the end of the seventeenth century specifically attacked Henry VIII for greed:

Henricus Octavus
Took more than he gave us.⁷³

The contemporary ballad of "King John and the Bishop" begins similarly, with an emphasis on the lawlessness of the prince:

I'll tell you a story, a story anon,
Of a noble prince, and a prince of great might,
He held up great wrongs, he put down great right.
Derry down, down hey, derry down.⁷⁴

Even recollections and recreations of rebellion or threatened rebellion, from Wat Tyler to Guy Fawkes and Nol Cromwell are ambiguous; at the same time that they appear to condemn disobedience, they also point a finger at the structures being rebelled against.⁷⁵

Not all authority, however, was central authority; in the hierarchical society that was early modern England, local families represented power, wealth and privilege among those that lived on or near their lands. It is not surprising that some tales arose which made fun of the high and mighty and their ancestors. The Lacys of Winterton, Lincolnshire, provide a case in point. A successful family of yeomen which rose into the gentry during the sixteenth century, they found themselves the butt of at least one popular story in the latter half of the seventeenth century. According to this tale, which derives from a popular hostility to greed, an old man in the family had, at some time past, given all his property to his three sons on condition that they looked after him for a week at a time in rotation. When they fell to treating him with disrespect, as "no more than a dog," he borrowed a thousand pounds from a nearby attorney and pretended to count it out every week so his sons would believe he had more to leave them. As the parish curate who recorded this, Abraham de la Pryme, wrote, "This made them all so observant of him that he lived the rest of his days in great peace, plenty, and happiness amongst them."⁷⁶ This story, assuming Pryme got it right, says much about the shared perceptions of those who told it and heard it. It involves miserliness, a

longstanding attribute of the middling sort of person as perceived by the poor; it features a pettifogging attorney, who presumably must himself have been either a miser or a successful parasite in order to have a thousand pounds available to lend; it turns on a huge sum of money, which the folk who spoke of it would likely have difficulty visualizing; and it ridicules the folly of the aged while nevertheless allowing the old man finally to get the best of his inconsiderate sons. The same tale conveys both an acknowledgment of the achieved social superiority of a local family and a subtext which mocks the behavior of the powerful; and each message was recognized and implicitly endorsed by the educated clergyman who recorded it.

Another such tale, from early seventeenth-century Devon, is more concrete, and turns on local suspicions of the relations between their immediate, visible social superiors, and more remote, unimaginably powerful authorities, in this case royalty. As Tristram Risdon recorded it, the parishioners of Monkleigh recounted how Chief Justice Sir William Hankeford (d.1422) was in such fear of assassination by Henry VI for having imprisoned the young king's father as a youth, that he ordered his gamekeeper to shoot any intruders. Hankeford himself became the first and only fatal victim of this order, "which report is so credible among the common sort of people, that they can shew the tree yet growing where this fact was committed, known by the name of Hankford Oak."⁷⁷ The tellers of the tale, which conflates Hankeford with his predecessor, Sir William Gascoigne (d.1419), were apparently unaware that Henry VI, at the age of one, would have been incapable of plotting assassination; it was sufficient that the story demonstrated the comeuppance of a successful judge using a gamekeeper to protect his property.

Just as the popular vision of the past liked to elevate tinkers and weavers to the level of kings, so it also celebrated brigands and outlaws. Alan Macfarlane has argued that pre-industrial England had little history of banditry, though his own example of the Smorthwaites, a family of Restoration thieves, survived in oral tradition from the late seventeenth to the mid twentieth centuries.⁷⁸ Throughout the later Middle Ages ballads of heroic rebels such as Hereward the Wake and Fulk Fitzwarin, opponents respectively of William I and John, circulated widely. Tales of the most famous of all bandits, Robin Hood, date back to the thirteenth century, and the researches of Maurice Keen, J. C. Holt and J. G. Bellamy have established their place in the later Middle Ages.⁷⁹ Through-

out the sixteenth century Robin Hood remained one of the most popular characters to appear in ballads, pageants and plays, though dramatizations of his tale fall off noticeably after 1600.⁸⁰ Robin featured prominently in May games and morris dancing, and at various times during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was the target of hostility from reformers. This antagonism and the rituals themselves were by no means confined to Robin's traditional Nottinghamshire home. The churchwardens' accounts for Croscombe parish in Somerset in 1537 record expenses for "Maid Maryan's Kyrtle," while at Melton Mowbray in 1564, town officials received fourteen shillings as "Robin Hood's money."⁸¹

Robin's name also surfaced periodically as a pseudonym or toponym. Two minor risings that helped precipitate the fall of Edward IV in 1469-70 were led by Robin of Redesdale and Robin of Holderness. Robin, like similar figures from European legend such as Tyl Owlglass, became a byword for successful transgression of the laws protecting the propertied. As such, he was by the sixteenth century as much part of the vocabulary of the elite, many of whom must have read ballads concerning him, as of their inferiors. Chief Justice Ranulph Crewe waxed indignant at the pardon of a condemned horse thief (who was allowed to go to fight for Denmark in the Thirty Years' War) because the man had robbed up and down the countryside "like Robin Hood and his men." Various oral traditions associated aspects of the Devon landscape with a folk-hero called Symm, whom Thomas Westcote thought "another Robin Hood."⁸² Robin's popularity as a historical figure is further borne out by the number of places which from late medieval to modern times have carried his name.⁸³

Yet the very popularity of Robin Hood and his men in the early modern era suggests that it and similar roguish tales more often than not sanctioned social hierarchy (though not abuses such as greed, corruption, or a lack of charity) rather than challenging it directly. In the hands of Renaissance dramatists and pageant makers the original yeomen of the medieval ballads were raised in dignity to the status of gentlemen or nobles fallen on hard times or wronged of their rightful superior position; by the eighteenth century even antiquaries such as the great William Stukeley were claiming to have identified a historical Robin among the medieval aristocracy.⁸⁴ Vagabonds, thieves, beggars and rascals, while socially marginal, were not out-and-out traitors, and this subtle distinction rendered Robin more acceptable as a historical persona among the gentry

than such notorious popular rebels as Wat Tyler or Jack Cade. Robin of Redesdale was a creature of the earl of Warwick's faction, while the principal demand of his rival, Robin of Holderness, was the restoration of the Percys to the Northumberland earldom. In 1640 the Phelips faction in Somerset actually supported a candidate for election to the Short Parliament named Alexander Popham, who was known locally as Robin Hood because he was under sentence of outlawry.⁸⁵ We are obliged to conclude that a significant proportion of the references to Robin, far from representing popular resentment against social and economic inequalities, may in fact be interpreted more accurately as an elite attempt to manage and contain such feelings by channelling them into a single, semi-respectable figure. Westcote's reduction of the folk hero Symm to another Robin Hood is an instance of this process, which is further exemplified by the occurrence of Robin Hood themes in ceremonies and revels which might retain official recognition.

Ancient Foes

While relatively little ballad and broadside literature reflects a keen awareness of recent conflicts such as the Wars of the Roses, more ancient disturbances had a higher profile in popular consciousness, having by the early sixteenth century become associated in folk memory with specific places. In some cases, remembered conflicts might be simply exaggerated accounts of local disturbances: the inhabitants of two neighboring parishes in Merionethshire believed in the 1680s that their ancestors had fought each other in a great battle, and that the bodies of the slain lay in several fields between the two parishes. The earth itself could inspire historical explanations of its properties. The soil at Battle, near Hastings, looked reddish after rain, and in the seventeenth century this was explained as dye which had run while William the Conqueror's troops washed their livery.⁸⁶ Unusual geological formations, including caves, gave rise to tales of hidden vaults, tunnels and underground fortresses. A cave cut into the soft red rock of Nesscliff Hill, Shropshire had a natural partition, leading locals to believe that "one Kynaston," a robber, lived in one part while using the other for his horse.⁸⁷ Another instance, from the border counties, is provided by memory of the Picts, undoubtedly reinforced and magnified by more recent Scottish cross-border incursions and brigandage. In Cumberland in the late seventeenth century, country

people commonly referred to caves and vaults as "Pict-holes," completely uninterested in and unaffected by the insistence of antiquaries that these were in fact the remains of Roman encampments.⁸⁸

Anti-Scottish feelings died hard in the north; local tradition tended to conflate many centuries of depredations—Lesley's civil war troops with Robert Bruce's, for instance—and sometimes even blamed the Scots for damages they had not inflicted. Noting the remains of an old castle in his manuscript survey of Northumberland parishes about 1730, George Mark observed that while the original castle had apparently been used by the Scots as a fortification before their great defeat at Flodden in 1513, it had been ruined in the civil wars by Cromwell's army, "tho' the inhabitants, who seldom fail to lay the blame of most of their ills on the Scots, tell us an antient story of it." According to this tale, James IV, in order to take the castle after a long siege, had shot an arrow with an attached paper in which he had promised to reward any man who shot the arrow back with news of the condition of the besieged; a sentinel's treacherous compliance resulted in the taking of the castle. It is interesting to note that though Mark steadfastly believed the destruction of the castle to have occurred within the past eighty years, and not at the hands of the Scots, he had very little difficulty accepting much of what he heard—a point to which we shall return. "This is the tradition in relation to the destruction of this castle, which tho' not true in every particular, yet perhaps, as most traditions have, has some foundation in truth."⁸⁹

The Scots were much mentioned in the north, the Anglo-Saxons in the southwest. But the Danish invasions (which because of linguistic obstacles interested most historians and antiquaries relatively little prior to the mid seventeenth century) recur again and again as a topic in popular discourse, especially in those areas which suffered the worst of their ravages between the ninth and the eleventh centuries. More references to the Danes occur in popular lore of the period than to any other invading host, from the Romans to the Normans. It is perhaps significant that John Leland, who was the first and most sympathetic antiquary to record early sixteenth-century traditions, has far more to say about Danish incursions than he does about Normans or Anglo-Saxons. The atrocities of which his interviewees reminded him included the destruction of monasteries and the depopulation of villages, though it is possible that in the former case people may have been reminded of the Danes by the all too recent Henrician dissolution, while in the latter more

recent depopulations due to enclosure, famine or plague may have been projected back on to a remote ancient enemy. Sometimes, in fact, more recent events were conflated or associated with the Danes and other foreign invaders. In one Devon community, Kingsteignton, the inhabitants told Leland "how their town hath been defacid by the Danes, and of late tyme by the Frenchmen," which might mean either the Normans or more recent French coastal incursions. Elsewhere in the same shire he found the church of Axminster to be primarily famous in the area for the burial of a number of Danes slain under King Athelstan, likely at the battle of Brunanburgh in AD 937.⁹⁰

Whether many of the sites associated by locals with the Danes did in fact derive from that period is of little importance here; the remarkable fact is how strongly people "remembered" events so remote. Since at least the beginning of the fifteenth century the inhabitants of Coventry had celebrated their ancestors' overthrow of Danish tyranny in the Hock Tuesday play; suppressed as superstitious in 1561, it was revived at nearby Kenilworth in 1575 for the benefit of Queen Elizabeth and her host, the earl of Leicester. Public performances of the play, which conflates distinct historical events such as the massacre of Danes on St. Bruce's night 1002 and the death of Harthacnut in 1042, were resumed in 1575. In 1591, performance of "the destrucion of Jerusalem, the Conquest of the Danes, or the historie of K. E. the X [Edmund the Martyr]" on Midsummer's day was authorized by the common council as a grudging concession to the populace at the same time that maypoles were removed; the plays at least could be said to be "grounded on story."⁹¹ Dramatic representations of Danish atrocities crept easily from civic pageantry to elite theatre, in plays like *Edmund Ironside*, first performed in the 1590s and revived in the middle of the next century.⁹²

Residual hatred of the Danes survived even the depredations of the civil war, and the addition of an entirely new tradition of stories about rampaging Roundheads or cutthroat Cavaliers.⁹³ In the 1670s Richard Blome recorded a number of anti-Danish beliefs, which he generally accepted, including the assertion of inhabitants of Bolsover, Derbyshire, that two large trenches had originally been Danish garrisons.⁹⁴ In some places, a strong memory of the Danes exists today, as the evidence of regional dialects attests. An old person in the west country today may still call a red-headed boy "a proper little Dane," and red heads have often been disliked both because of their biblical connection with Judas Iscariot

(who is supposed to have had red hair) and because this color of hair later became associated with the Danes.⁹⁵

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, many such Danish connections centred on burial mounds. On the road to Stevenage in Hertfordshire at the end of the sixteenth century were a number of heaps of earth which were popularly believed to contain the remains of Englishmen killed fighting the Danes about 829—the date was almost certainly supplied by an antiquary or other learned person; a nearby place was and remains today known as Dane End. Throughout the seventeenth century memories of "a tirable battle there foughten betweene the Saxons and the Danes" two miles northeast of Gloucester gave the location the name Battle Bridge, while the placename Camden was said to derive from "Camp-Dane," a place used by the Danes as fortification. On her tour through the southwest at the end of the seventeenth century, the duchess of Cornwall encountered two circles of high stones, not unlike Stonehenge, which were known locally as Dauncemine. According to Edward Lhuyd's itinerary of the visit, the duchess was informed that these had been erected "for memorialls of the great battles there obtained against the Danes by the unconquered Cornish."⁹⁶

Often such places were associated with a specific historical figure from the period of the invasions, such as Alfred, Edmund or Athelstan, the image of whom adorned a wall in Beverley Church, where he was believed to have donated the "free stool," a stone chair which offered sanctuary to any fleeing felon. Various wells associated with Athelstan, including one at Startforth, near Newcastle, provided a focus for Dane stories in Northumberland. According to the Startforth tale, Athelstan was supposed to have camped nearby and, having found no water for his troops, the king had prayed for it; he then stuck a spear into the rock, "whence the water hath continued to flow ever since"; in the early eighteenth century, when this story was recorded, the well was "greatly frequented" by visitors. The citizens of Wantage in Berkshire similarly took pride in their town because it had been the birthplace of that "scourge of the Danes," Alfred, and a brick-paved pool located there was known as "King Alfred's Pool" from before that time until well into the present century.⁹⁷ The rural folk of Bartlow End, Essex, unearthed soldiers' bones in the sixteenth century, which they ascribed to a battle against the Danes. A plant with red berries known as Dane-wort was plentiful there, and the locals, who called the plant "Danes-bloud,"

believed that the plants signified the number of Danes slain there; Camden noted that they even believed that the plants "blometh from their blood."⁹⁸

Buildings such as the Axminster church, mentioned above, also developed Danish associations over time. The sixteenth-century inhabitants of Wallingford believed that the ruined castle and keep on the nearby river had been built by the Danes. The classically minded William Camden, who had regularly taken holidays there while a student, thought it a Roman building, destroyed by the Saxons or Danes and subsequently rebuilt under William I. By Camden's time, it had been in decay for over a century, and this more recent decline may have been confused by locals with earlier Anglo-Danish destruction. The late perpendicular church of Gainsborough, Yorkshire, together with its old fortifications and a burrow at the town entrance, gave rise to beliefs such as that the Danes were buried there because, as one observer commented, "they mightily infested this town in King William the Conqueror's days." Bury St. Edmunds, which John Percival thought primarily famous for beautiful women, good malt and fine streets (but also bad wives, bad beer and bad houses), was also renowned for the martyrdom of the East Anglian king St. Edmund at the hands of the Danes in AD 870.⁹⁹

Local Danish legends might receive a helping hand from interested visitors, concerned to fix architecture, topography and local language firmly to a documentable past. In his discussion of Danish "lows" or mounds, Richard Bolton, an early eighteenth-century Staffordshire topographer, noted the relative paucity of such traces of the great "slaughter" of Danes at Tettenhall. Locals claimed the place had been a Danish fortification, but Bolton went further. Although the old roads were hard to trace, having been interrupted by plough lines,

the foundations being dayly dug up by the former to mend the highways, make inclosures, and pavements, and then all made levell by the plough, which together with the large hinges for the doors, an antique dagger, and other things that have been found here, and some of the stones squared makes one rather thinke it some ruinous citty, then a fortification onely.

He concluded that the site was in fact the Danish city of Theotenhall, razed by Edward the Elder in AD 910 according to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. At nearby Wednesfield, where traces of another such great battle had recently disappeared, Bolton noted the survival of the low in

the place name Southlowfield "which has lately had a windmill sett upon it, the low before being there within memory." Close by was Northlowfield which had also once had a low "tho' now it be quite gone." In these cases, the educated visitor was prepared to expand upon and explain local tradition and dialect in terms of documented events. Elsewhere he was less persuaded: the local belief at Wilbrighton that the Romans had called the place Villam Brittonum was not substantiated by sufficient physical remains to make it convincing, so that "one may question whether this tradition have not been broached of later yeares, by some fond conceited etymologist"; in his view, the conclusions of an overenthusiastic antiquary had fed back into local lore and established sheer linguistic speculation as "fact."¹⁰⁰

Richard Bolton's ambivalence to explanations of local phenomena issuing from both local tradition *and* learned philology, like George Mark's above-mentioned willingness to accept a fantastic tale about the Scots, should serve as a warning to historians intent on creating, by the end of the seventeenth century, too firm a division between "accurate" elite views of the past and "mythical" oral traditions, ballads and folk tales. To quote Paul Veyne once more, "There is no such thing as a sense of the real."¹⁰¹ The literate and educated, for all that they might sneer at vulgar beliefs about the past, were entirely capable of accepting local explanations, particularly where they filled a complete vacuum in the written sources. Abel Wantner, a citizen of Gloucester who completed his unpublished history of the city and its environs in 1714, was willing to accept oral traditional sources if they concerned objects or structures which no longer survived, and "documented" two missing chapels in this way.¹⁰² The early Georgian antiquary Thomas Martin, who toured the western parts of England and Wales in the 1720s, was reluctant to accept local attributions of ruins on a round hill at Christchurch, Gwent, to the Romans, "as the inhabitants imagine it was." Yet when confronted at Lidbury by the puzzle of a signpost without a sign, he readily accepted a local story that until recently there had been a sign bearing the emblem of pigs in barley and the inscription "'The case is alter'd' quoth Plowden." Probing a bit further, Martin found and (uncharacteristically for him) chose neither to dispute nor to ridicule a complex tale which explained the now-absent sign through a story involving the famous Elizabethan lawyer Edmund Plowden (1518-85), whose estates lay nearby and whose name had long been associated with this phrase. "The people

thereabouts tell you that a country man taking some of the ffamous lawyer Plowdens pigs in his barley" was told by Plowden, unaware that these were his own pigs, to "huddle" them—that is, to slit each pig's rear hamstring and put the other leg through it to restrain them from ruining the barley. "But when the countryman told him whose pigs they were, he reply'd, if so the case is alter'd."¹⁰³

Conclusion

This discussion has done little more than point out some of the contours of popular beliefs about the past. They are part, but not the whole, of a broader early modern "sense of the past," which cannot be found simply by reading the chronicles and humanist histories of the era. There are a number of continuities and connections between popular beliefs about the past and the literary legends and stories that rivalled them, influenced them, and were in turn influenced by them. But many of these beliefs did not fit easily into the categories of formal historical knowledge employed by the educated, and this discrepancy became more pronounced as time wore on and the nature of the relationship between print and oral culture began to change. Shifting attitudes among historians and antiquaries toward oral tradition, that medium of popular belief which has figured so prominently in this essay, demand further investigation, as does the developing relationship between local memory and an emerging national historical culture contained in documents and authorized by the printed page. Until such matters are explored in greater detail we will have at best only a sketch of the historical mentality of three and four centuries ago.

NOTES

1. Place of publication of all pre-1900 printed works is London unless otherwise stated; dates are Old Style, but the year is taken as beginning on 1 January. Original spellings have been preserved, but contractions in manuscript sources have been silently expanded and punctuation occasionally altered for clarification. Earlier versions of this essay were presented at the Pacific Northwest Renaissance Conference, Vancouver, BC, in March 1991, and at the Department of History Faculty-Graduate Seminar, Dalhousie University, in October 1991. I am indebted

to the audiences at both sessions, and in particular to my colleagues Cynthia Neville, Lawrence Stokes and Gregory Hanlon. I especially wish to acknowledge the helpful comments and criticisms of a draft of the essay by Professor Ian Dyck of Simon Fraser University, and of anonymous referees for the *Dalhousie Review*. The research and writing of the essay were generously supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, grant number 410-90-0695.

2. The outstanding examples are both by Keith Thomas: *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1971) ch. 13; and *The Perception of the Past in Early Modern England* (London: Creighton Lecture, 1983). As yet there is little for early modern English popular culture in general to rival the various works on Europe by Natalie Zemon Davis, Peter Burke, Robert Scribner, Roger Chartier, Robert Muchembled and others: see, however, Margaret Spufford, *Small Books and Pleasant Histories: Popular Fiction and its Readership in Seventeenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1981); Barry Reay (ed.), *Popular Culture in Seventeenth-Century England* (London: Croom Helm, 1985).
3. The existence, even by 1700, of a rigid division between elite and popular (or "learned" and "unlearned") cultures now appears an untenable oversimplification, given the ample evidence of transference of beliefs and practices up and down the social ladder throughout the period in oral discourse, artifacts and cheap print media: for a good recent treatment of some of the problems involved in studying "popular" literature, see Tessa Watt, *Cheap Print and Popular Piety, 1550-1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991) 14, 144, 212-14. I have offered elsewhere a tentative explanation for the relative decline in certain types of popular belief, specifically those conveyed in oral tradition. See D. R. Woolf, "'The Common Voice': History, Folklore and Oral Tradition in Early Modern England," *Past and Present* 120 (1988): 26-52. The present essay differs from that in examining a broader range of beliefs through a wider array of sources, and in being more concerned to elucidate the meaning of predominantly local (parish, manor or town-based) beliefs than to explain their partial eradication and partial subsumption, in the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, within what, in the nineteenth century, W. C. Hazlitt could call "National" beliefs and legends. A fuller study of these beliefs and their place in the formation of modern historical culture, drawn from local archival as well as printed sources, will be offered in my book *The Origins of Modern Historical Culture*, in progress.
4. It would seem best at the outset to point out the problems involved in using modern folklore collections as sources for early modern beliefs. The literature on folk tales and other forms of popular belief is vast and informative; a useful summary of the principal tales and their variants may be found in K. M. Briggs, *A Dictionary of British Folk-Tales in the English Language* (2 parts in 4 vols., London: Routledge, 1970-71). Like most of its nineteenth- and twentieth-century sources, this work is concerned with the current form of the tale, not its historical origins. Many of the surviving tales which it cites can indeed be found in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, though in simpler form; many others, however, are of later origins. There is also, particularly in the historical traditions of vol. IIB, a greater sense of time and place—a more fully worked out sense of chronology—than I have found in

most of the oral traditions recorded by antiquaries and others between 1500 and 1700 (as opposed, of course, to literate prose romances). I have therefore felt free to draw upon the findings of Briggs and modern folklorists, but have not discussed a tale or legend unless it has a firm early modern source. It might be added that the structure of the modern folk tale, as something closely resembling written history in its sense of order of time and place, provides further evidence for my argument, advanced elsewhere, that the early modern era witnessed the overwhelming of much traditional memory of the past through print and the formulation of a national historical tradition, though clearly the existence of so many regional folk tales today demonstrates the continuing vitality of local beliefs: D. R. Woolf, "Memory and Historical Culture in Early Modern England," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* ns 2 (1991), forthcoming.

5. Phillips Barry, cited in Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (London: Temple Smith, 1978) 114.
6. See, for instance, the seventeenth-century account of the origins of the beadle's cry "Hang out your lanterns and candle-light," which ascribes this to the literal-mindedness of one Master Hobson who, in the mid sixteenth century, responded to the formerly used cry of "Hang out your lantern" by putting out an empty lantern: Briggs, *Dictionary of British Folk-Tales*, A.II 169.
7. Paul Veyne, *Did the Greeks Believe in their Myths? an Essay in the Constitutive Imagination*, trans. Paula Wissing (Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 1988) 1, 5-16, 27-57.
8. David Underdown, *Revel, Riot and Rebellion* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987).
9. Joseph Addison in *The Spectator*, no. 12 (14 March 1711), ed. Donald F. Bond (5 vols., Oxford: Clarendon, 1965) I, 53.
10. *The Memoirs of Anne, Lady Halkett, and Ann, Lady Fanshawe*, ed. John Loftis (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979) 125.
11. Robert Watson, *A New Almanack and Prognostication for . . . 1598* (1598), cited by Bernard Capp, *Astrology and the Popular Press: English Almanacs 1500-1800* (London and Boston: Faber, 1979) 336.
12. Thomas Lupton, *A Thousand Notable Things* (1579) 153, 257.
13. Both statements appear in the Royal Society's *Philosophical Transactions and Collections*, ed. J. Lowthorp (3 vols., 1722) ii, 332-33. On the decline of touching for the King's Evil, see Marc Bloch, *The Royal Touch: Monarchy and Miracles in France and England*, trans. J. E. Anderson (New York: Dorset, 1961, rept. 1989) 214-23.
14. Margaret Aston, "English Ruins and English History: the Dissolution and the Sense of the Past," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 36 (1973) 231-55.
15. Richard Blome, *Britannia* (1673) 191; *The Diary of Abraham de la Pryme*, ed. Charles Jackson, Surtees Society, 54 (1869-70) 112. On proverbs and the transmission of oral lore, see James Obelkevich, "Proverbs and Social History," in *The Social History of Language*, ed. Peter Burke and Roy Porter (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1987) 43-72.
16. William Harrison, *The Description of England*, ed. G. Edelen (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1968) 226; Thomas Martin of Palgrave, "Some Remarks and Observations

- taken in a Journey from Eton . . . to Oxford . . . 1724," Bodleian Library, Oxford (hereafter Bodl.) MS Top. gen. e. 85, 72, parish of Llanrhaeadr.
17. Thomas Westcote, *View of Devonshire* (written c. 1630, 1st ed., Exeter, 1845) 112; Abel Wantner, "History of Gloucester" (written 1714), Bodl. MS Top. Glouc. c.3, fo. 147v; Blome, *Britannia* 71.
 18. Wantner, "History of Gloucester," Bodl. MS Top. Glouc. c. 3, fos. 50r, 93r; Browne Willis, notes on archdeaconry of Buckingham churches (written 1712), Bodl. MS Willis 13, fos. 71r, 136v. Lud was the eponymous builder of Ludgate, where his image and those of other kings were erected in 1260. According to Stow, these "had their heads smitten off, and were otherwise defaced by such as judged every image to be an idol," but were repaired by Mary; new images adorned a rebuilt gate from 1586: John Stow, *The Survey of London*, ed. H. Wheatley (London: Dent, 1912) 37.
 19. William Camden, *Britain*, trans. P. Holland (1610) 317, 582, 628.
 20. On 4 December 1530, Eustace Chapuys wrote to Emperor Charles V that "The cardinal [Wolsey] of York died on St. Andrew's Day about 40 miles from here, at a place where the last king Richard was defeated and killed. Both lie buried in the same church, which the people begin already to call 'the tyrants' grave": *Calendar of State Papers, Spanish, 1529-30*, 833.
 21. Blome, *Britannia*, 169. Because trees lived to great ages, they were obvious natural foci for popular beliefs. When some trees were found buried underground in southern Cheshire, inhabitants thought them to have been there since Noah's flood: Joshua Childrey, *Britannia Baconica: or, the Natural Rarities of England, Scotland and Wales* (1661) 129.
 22. Stow, *Survey of London* 124.
 23. Camden, *Britain* 746-47.
 24. John Leland, *The Itinerary of John Leland in or about the Years 1535-1543*, ed. Lucy Toulmin Smith, 2nd ed. (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 1964) I, 151; Blome, *Britannia* 199.
 25. "Sir Daniel Fleming's Description of Cumberland, Westmorland and Furness, 1671," 26, 34, *Fleming-Senhouse Papers*, ed. Edward Hughes, Cumberland County Council Record Series, II (Carlisle, 1962). Richard Blome thought the structure Roman, but the abundance of similar nearby trenches, ruins and coins persuaded locals that it was a place used for tilts and tournaments by Arthur's knights: Blome, *Britannia*, 238. For a Denbighshire Arthur's table, disputed by an anonymous antiquary c. 1700, see "The Description of Wales," Bodl. MS Gough Wales 5, fo. 12r.
 26. Camden, *Britain*, 692; *The Place-names of the West Riding of Yorkshire*, English Place-name Society, vol. 32, part iii (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1961) 104.
 27. George Owen of Kemes, *The Description of Penbrokeshire*, ed. H. Owen, 2 vols. in 4, Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion Record Series (1892-1936) I, 250 and note.
 28. John Aubrey, *Remaines of Gentilisme and Judaisme*, in Aubrey, *Three Prose Works*, ed. J. Buchanan-Brown (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 1972) 189, cited by Underdown, *Revel, Riot and Rebellion* 259.
 29. Royal Society, *Philosophical Transactions and Collections*, ed. Lowthorp, III, 433-34.

30. *Diary of Thomas Crosfield*, ed. F. S. Boas (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1935) 26, 29, 54; Crosfield notes that a similar show was regularly performed in Oxford; *Dramatic Records of Sir Henry Herbert, Master of Revels 1623-1673*, ed. Joseph Q. Adams (2nd ed., New York: B. Blom, 1964) 47; Richard Carew recorded the "Guary miracle," a Cornish interlude, in his *Survey of Cornwall* (1602), fos. 71r-72r; for this and similar biblical reenactments up to 1600 see Ian Lancashire, *Dramatic Texts and Records of Britain: a Chronological Topography to 1558* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984) 8, 76, 280.
31. *Works of Thomas Cranmer*, Parker Society, vol. 29 (Cambridge, 1846) II, 188.
32. John Weever, *Ancient Funerall Monuments* (1631) 567-68.
33. A. R. Wright, *British Calendar Customs* (3 vols., London: Folk Lore Society, 1936-40) I, 113; *Records of Early English Drama: Chester* (hereafter abbreviated as REED followed by county name), ed. L. M. Clopper (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1979) 322-3.
34. Briggs, B.II 370-75; Thomas Deloney, *The Pleasant History of John Winchcomb, in his Younger Yeares called Jack of Newberie* (8th ed., 1597); *idem*, *Thomas of Reading* (4th ed., 1612).
35. Blome, *Britannia* 40, 230-31; C. Phythian-Adams, *Desolation of a City: Coventry and the Urban Crisis of the Late Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1979) 173. More recent historical events could rival and even expunge older traditions: by the late seventeenth century Newbury, for example, was already beginning to evolve traditions about the battles fought there in the civil war.
36. David Harris Sacks, "Celebrating Authority in Bristol, 1475-1640," in *Urban Life in the Renaissance*, ed. Susan Zimmerman and Ronald F. E. Weisman (Newark, London and Toronto: U of Delaware P, 1989) 187-223.
37. Both Windsor and Hutten are quoted by Herbert Hurst in his *Oxford Topography: an Essay*, Oxford Historical Society, 39 (1899) 115, 127; *Magnae Britanniae, or a Compleat History of Suffolk* (1730) 203, annotated edition in Suffolk Record Office, Ipswich HD1538/42.
38. *The Diary of Henry Machyn*, ed. J. G. Nichols, Camden Society, old series, 42 (1848) 285, 390 n.; Stow, *Survey of London* 193.
39. Northumberland Record Office, ZAN M13/D19 (unpaginated: comments by Rev. John Horsley, and letter of George Mark to Horsley, 6 May 1737); M. H. Dodds (ed.), *A History of Northumberland* (15 vols, Newcastle and London: Northumberland County History Committee, 1893-1940), vol. XIV, 68-73; Sir John Percival, *The English Travels of Sir John Percival and William Byrd II: the Percival Diary of 1701*, ed. Mark R. Wenger (Columbia, MO: U of Missouri P, 1989) 68. I wish to thank the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle-upon-Tyne for permission to read and cite material of theirs on deposit in the Northumberland Record Office.
40. *The Chorography of Suffolk*, ed. Diarmaid MacCulloch, Suffolk Record Society, 19 (1976) 48; Camden, *Britain* 194.
41. Tristram Risdon, *The Chorographical Description or Survey of Devon* (1811) 345.
42. H. E. Rollins (ed.), *The Pepys Ballads* (8 vols., Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1929-32); *Analytical Index to the Ballad Entries (1557-1709) of the Register of the Company of Stationers of London* (rept., Hatboro, PA: Tradition, 1967). Earlier

collections include Francis James Child, *English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (5 vols. in 10 parts, Boston, 1898) of which vol. III (parts V and VI) is devoted to Robin Hood ballads and historical ballads; R. Brimley Johnson (ed.), *Popular British Ballads, Ancient and Modern* (4 vols., London, 1894) of which the first two volumes contain material for the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries. J. S. Farmer (ed.) *Merry Songs and Ballads Printed to the Year 1800* (5 vols., New York: Cooper Square, 1964) consists mainly of reprints from literary source, few of which are on historical or pseudohistorical subjects. For the printing history of ballads in this period, the following are indispensable: Cyprian Blagden, "Notes on the Ballad Market in the Second Half of the Seventeenth Century," *Studies in Bibliography* 6 (1954): 161-80; Leslie Shepard, *History of Street Literature* (Newton Abbot: David and Charles, 1973).

43. Chapbooks, unlike ballads, have until recently attracted little attention. An extract of Pepys's collection of chapbooks may be found in Roger Thompson (ed.), *Samuel Pepys' Penny Merriments* (New York: Columbia UP, 1977); this should be used in light of the comments in Spufford *Small Books and Pleasant Histories*, 5n. Spufford's book remains the fullest treatment of the later seventeenth-century chapbooks; for their early development, see Watt, *Cheap Print* 257-95.
44. British Library (hereafter B. L.) MS Royal 18 B. ii; C. L. Kingsford, *English Historical Literature in the Fifteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1913) 252.
45. See, for instance, a ribald 1707 rendition of the tale "Of King Edward and Jane Shore," in *Merry Songs and Ballads*, ed. Farmer, IV, 100-106. Edward III and Henry V appeared at least as commonly in versifications of history further up the social scale, figuring for example in historical poems by Charles Aleyne and Thomas May in the early seventeenth century, and in political verse of the Restoration: see, e.g., Nahum Tate, "Old England" (printed 1685), in *Poems on Affairs of State*, ed. G. de F. Lord (8 vols., New Haven: Yale UP, 1963-75) III, 183-206.
46. For this ballad see *The Pepys Ballads*, ed. Rollins, I, no. 2; cf. the somewhat later "King Henry Fifth's Conquest of France," the oral version of which Child speculated derived from print, *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, VI, 321. Child also notes (II, 323n.) a tradition, likely derived from this ballad and current in the Derbyshire Peaks during the nineteenth century that Henry V would not recruit widows' sons or married men for the Derbyshire campaign. The tennis ball story appears in some, but not all, of the early fifteenth-century chronicles: the *Liber Metricus of Thomas Elmham* and Capgrave's *Life of Henry V* which follows it both mention the incident, as would late versions of the vernacular translations of the *Brut* and *Polychronicon*; the "official" Latin biography of Henry by the humanist Tito Livio Frulovisi does not, though his early Tudor translator (in Bodl. MS Bodley 966) does: on the sources for the tale see *The First English Life of King Henry the Fifth*, ed. C. L. Kingsford (Oxford: Clarendon, 1911) xliii, 15.
47. Frank Adams, *Writing Tables* (1578): B. L. C. 124.b.28., n. pag., no sig. [other editions to 1628 listed in Pollard and Redgrave, *Short-Title Catalogue*, revised ed., vol. 2 (London: Bibliographical Society, 1976-1986) 478-79].

48. *A Most Sorrowfull Song, Setting Forth the End of Banister*, in *The Pepys Ballads*, ed. Rollins, 2, no. 68. Banister is mentioned briefly in Edward Hall, *Hall's Chronicle*, ed. H. Ellis (1809) 395.
49. See, for instance, the chapbooks "King Henry VIII and a Cobler" and "Henry VIII and the Abbot of Reading," both collected by Pepys, in *Samuel Pepys' Penny Merriments*, ed. Thompson 24-32; "Of King Louis of France and the Husbandman," in *Tales and Quicke Answeres, Very Mery, and Pleasant to Rede* (1532?), in *A Hundred Merry Tales and Other English Jestbooks of the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries*, ed. P. M. Zall (Lincoln, NE: U of Nebraska P, 1963) 260-61, which is immediately followed by another similar tale involving "the forenamed king." Other such "jestes" are often even less specific, involving variously "a king of England" out hunting and, in an earlier jestbook, "the most noble and fortunate prince, King Edward of England," likely Edward III but unspecified: *ibid* 122, 284. Such tales continued to be attached to later kings, including Charles I, into the eighteenth century: Briggs, B.II 22.
50. This may provide us with part of the explanation for a fact noticed by Margaret Spufford, that the chapbook literature of the late seventeenth century contains remarkably little reference to such a central event as the Wars of the Roses: *Small Books and Pleasant Histories* 219.
51. Westcote, *View of Devonshire* 312; Aylett Sammes, *Britannia Antiqua Illustrata* (1676) 57; Watt, *Cheap Print* 195, 212.
52. Thomas Molyneux, "An Essay concerning Giants," *Philosophical Transactions* 22 (1700), 489; Antoine Schnapper, "Persistence des géants," *Annales ESC* 41 (1986), 177-200 is helpful but deals primarily with elite discussions of giants.
53. Spenser, *View of the State of Ireland* (1595), ed. H. Morley (1890) 117-18.
54. Camden, *Britain* 32; on the treatment of these legends by antiquaries see T. D. Kendrick, *British Antiquity* (London: Methuen, 1950) chs. VI, VII; May McKisack, *Medieval History in the Tudor Age* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971) ch. V.
55. Briggs, A.I, 529-31; Spufford, 247-48.
56. K. Park and L. J. Daston, "Unnatural Conceptions: The Study of Monsters in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century France and England," *Past and Present* 92 (1981): 20-54, deals with living giants among contemporary "monsters." For giants in the context of popular drama, see Michael Bristol, *Carnival and Theatre: Plebeian Culture and the Structure of Authority in Renaissance England* (New York: Methuen, 1985), *passim*. Ms. Kathryn Brammall, a PhD candidate in the Department of History at Dalhousie University, is now investigating early modern English notions of monstrosity and deformity.
57. Leland, *Itinerary* III, 119.
58. Walter Stephens, *Giants in those Days: Folklore, Ancient History and Nationalism* (Lincoln, NE: U of Nebraska P, 1989).
59. "The Bocke of gigantes and huge and monstrose formes gathered by Simon Forman anno 1610," Bodl. MS Ashm. 244, fos. 187r, 192r-199r.
60. Bodl. MS Ashm. 802, fos. 19r-48r, 59r-v.
61. Childrey, *Britannia Baconica* 25; *Life and Times of Anthony Wood, Antiquary, of Oxford*, Described by Himself, ed. A. Clark, 5 vols., Oxford Historical Society

- (1891-1900) II, 141; Anonymous, "The Description of Wales" (written c. 1688), Bodl. MS Gough Wales 5, fo. 19v.
62. Westcote, *View of Devonshire* 263, 340; Childrey, *Britannia Baconica* 28. Some caves in Wiltshire, near Luckington, were known as "the Giants' caves" in the mid seventeenth century, "according to the language of ignorance, fear, and superstition," as Childrey (45) put it; he preferred to believe that they were the tombs of Anglo-Saxons or Danes slain in battle.
63. Richard Gough, *The History of Myddle*, ed. D. Hey (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981) 32-3: this sort of tale has a modern successor in accounts of the "fish that got away"; Thomas Martin, "Remarks and Collections" (1724), Bodl. MS Top. gen. e. 85, 15; Martin was equally dismissive (*ibid.* 22) of the tradition at Cardiff that its architecturally unusual parish church had been built by the same man, "whoever he was," who had constructed the steeple of Gloucester Cathedral.
64. Thomas Machell, *Antiquary on Horseback*, ed. Jane M. Ewbank, Cumberland and Westmorland Archaeological and Antiquarian Society, extra series, 19 (Kendal, 1963) 126-27.
65. Notebook of Rev. John Horsley, Northumberland Record Office ZAN M13/D19, 213; William Burton, *The Description of Leicestershire* (1622) 277. Burton's attitude to this giant is ambiguous. While admitting that many histories, English and European, record disproportionately large men, he is reluctant to record the numerous stories surrounding this because they are "not worthy (for the uncertainty of the truth) heere to be set downe" (305-6).
66. *Thomas Platter's Travels in England*, 1599, ed. and trans. Clare Williams (London: Cape, 1937) 183. "Gogmagog" was virtually a byword for giants: the Gogmagog hills near Cambridge were the scenes of recreations and games which university authorities repeatedly tried to suppress; sixteenth-century Newcastle had an effigy of a giant named Hogmagog, used in their pageants, to the upkeep of which money was regularly contributed by the town officials: *REED: Cambridge*, ed. A. H. Nelson (2 vols., Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1989) 270-72, 276-77; *REED: Newcastle upon Tyne*, ed. J. J. Anderson (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1982) 26-7, 33, 36 and *passim*.
67. Stow, *Survey of London* 243; *The Guardian*, 173 (29 Sept., 1713), ed. J. C. Stephens (Lexington, KY: U of Kentucky P, 1982) 564; Lewis Spence, *Minor Traditions of British Mythology* (London and New York: Rider, 1948) 60-61, citing Anon., *The Gigantick History of the Giants in the Guildhall* (1740); C. F. C. Beeson, *English Church Clocks 1280-1850: History and Classification* (Chichester, Sussex, Antiquarian Horological Society, 1971) 111. The career of the Chester Giants roughly reflects changes in religious sensibilities in the town: this midsummer pageant endured from 1497 (and perhaps earlier) till 1599, when Henry Hardware, Chester's puritan mayor, suppressed the pageants. Revived four years later, they were again suspended during the interregnum, restored once more in 1661, and finally abolished in 1678: Thomas Sharp, *A Dissertation on the Pageants or Dramatic Mysteries Anciently Performed at Coventry* (1825), ed. A. C. Cawley (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1973) 200-206. On Christmas eve in Chester there was an "old order, & custome" whereby the mayor, sheriffs, aldermen and

- forty common councillors rode through the city in triumph, whereupon the Recorder would speak on the antiquity of the city, which was "founded by Gyants": *REED: Chester*, ed. Clopper 415. For Coventry examples, see *REED: Coventry*, ed. Ingram 667 sub "giants."
68. Underdown, *Revel, Riot and Rebellion* 125.
 69. The "Norman Yoke," so often cited as an example of popular resistance to an aristocratic and subsequently capitalist regime whose control over property dated from the Conquest was in origins a learned rather than a plebeian tradition, and scarcely "popular" in the sense applied to most of the beliefs related here, though in the writings of Winstanley and later radicals it would penetrate somewhat further down the social scale: the sources used by Christopher Hill in his celebrated essay on this subject are uniformly those of literate culture: C. Hill, "The Norman Yoke," in his *Puritanism and Revolution* (1958, rept.; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986) 58-125.
 70. The Suffolk incumbent John Rous, an educated man, recorded in his diary on 3 May 1628 that parliament had assembled and was to pass a bill (actually the Petition of Right) for confirmation of liberties "which were granted to the subjects in Magna Charta, &c., with an explanation of those grants." The brevity of the entry suggests that Rous recognized this as something worth noting, but had little understanding and less interest in its implications for him or his parish: *Diary of John Rous*, ed. M. A. E. Green, Camden Society os 66 (1856): 14.
 71. Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, ch. 13, *passim*.
 72. "Thomas Cromwell," "The Rising in the North" and "Northumberland betrayed by Douglas," in Child, *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, pt. VI, 377, 404, 411.
 73. *Antiquary on Horseback*, ed. Ewbank 65.
 74. Child, *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, pt. II, 413, version B.
 75. In the west midlands, as late as the nineteenth century, children still played a game called bread and cheese, which Wright thought "a record of Wat Tyler's insurrection": Wright, *British Calendar Customs* I, 111.
 76. *Diary of Abraham de la Pryme* 162-63; for an early Tudor jest with a similar point, see *A Hundred Merry Tales*, ed. Zall 317.
 77. Risdon, *The Chorographical Description...of Devon* 276-77.
 78. Alan Macfarlane, *The Justice and the Mare's Ale* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1981) 163-72.
 79. Maurice Keen, "Robin Hood—Peasant or Gentleman?," *Past and Present* 19 (1960), 7-15, and his *The Outlaws of Medieval Legend* (London: Routledge, 1961) 11-52; R. H. Hilton, "The Origin of the Robin Hood Myth," *Past and Present* 14 (1958): 30-44; J. C. Holt "The Ballads of Robin Hood," *Past and Present* 18 (1960): 89-107, and *Robin Hood* (2nd ed., London: Thames & Hudson, 1989) 159-99; J. G. Bellamy, *Robin Hood: an Historical Enquiry* (Bloomington, IN: U of Indiana P, 1985).
 80. Malcolm A. Nelson, *The Robin Hood Tradition in the English Renaissance* (Salzburg: Institut für englische Sprache und Literature, 1973), chs. 3 and 4 notes that Robin's only appearance in early Stuart drama is in Ben Jonson's *The Sad Shepherd*, first printed in 1640. Child, *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, pt. VI,

reprints over thirty Robin Hood Ballads, of which number several are traditional, from the late Middle Ages to the early nineteenth century; cf. J. H. Dixon, *Ancient Poems, Ballads, and Songs of the Peasantry of England*, Percy Society 17 (1846): 71.

81. Wright, *British Calendar Customs* II, 240-232. Lancashire, *Dramatic Texts and Records of Britain*, provides an excellent list of pre-1600 Robin Hood references and their sources: see esp. 14, 27, 63, 65, 77-8, 81, 88, 107, 280. Instances of suggested or actual censorship or suppression of Robin Hood celebrations occurred in 1510 at Exeter, where the city council forbade Robin Hood plays except on dedication days (*ibid.* 135); in 1535 when they aroused the hostility of Richard Morison (65); in 1580 at Burnley, Lancashire (91), and in 1589 (75 and 148, for two alleged cases of priests taking part in a morris involving Robin). Robin Hood plays were also part of royal May Day recreations under Henry VIII (as in 1515, *ibid.* 263) and might be staged in private houses, such as that of John Thynne at Longleat, Wiltshire about 1562 (223).
82. *HMC Cowper*, i, 282; Westcote, *A View of Devonshire* 95. A few decades earlier, John Lyly had grumbled that the English were more inclined to talk of Robin Hood "then to shoot in his bowe": *Euphues and his England, Complete Works of John Lyly*, ed. R. Warwick Bond (Oxford: Clarendon, 1902) ii, 200.
83. For Robin Hood Bay near Hackness, Yorkshire, see Leland, *Itinerary*, I, 51; *Diary of Lady Margaret Hoby 1599-1605*, ed. Dorothy M. Meads (Boston and London: G. Reutledge, 1930) 205; The most recent edition of the *Bartholomew Gazetteer of Places in Britain* (London: Bartholomew, 1986), which is not exhaustive, lists Robin or Robin Hood locations in Staffordshire, Lancashire, West Yorkshire, North Yorkshire (Robin Hood's Bay), as well as streams such as Robin's Brook (near Coggeshall, Essex). This is surely an underestimate.
84. This is the position of Keen, *Outlaws* 145-73, 178; but cf. Holt, *op. cit.*, who points out that the term yeoman in the medieval literature may refer to a household servant of gentle status.
85. C. S. L. Davies, *Peace, Print and Protestantism* (London: Granada, 1977) 85; Underdown, *Revel, Riot and Rebellion* 135.
86. Childrey, *Britannia Baconica* 57-58.
87. Anonymous, "The Description of Wales" (written c. 1700), Bodl. MS Gough Wales 5, fo. 19v; Thomas Martin of Palgrave, "Some Remarks and Observations taken in a Journey" (1724), Bodl. MS Top. gen. e. 85, 92. This explanation exasperated Martin, a natural sceptic, who sneered: "How his horse got up, or how we may credit any other part of the story, I know not." For similar "fabulous stories" involving a cave said to have been inhabited by an old woman, see *ibid.* 67.
88. *Fleming-Senhouse Papers*, ed. Hughes 43. Houses, too, occasionally had hidden rooms for which elaborate explanations were created. When a "secret" chamber was discovered at New Hall in Boreham, Essex, it was soon put about that this had been "Cardinal Woolseys contrivance to lay treasonable transactions in, or of that sort, and no doubt riches. . . .": Nicholas Jekyll to William Holman, 23 Feb 1724/5, Essex Record Office, D/Y/1/Acc.A3921A.

89. George Mark, "History of Northumberland" (written c. 1730), Northumberland Record Office ZAN M13/F9 (fourteen unfoliated leaves).
90. Leland, *Itinerary*, I, 119, 121, 225, 243; Briggs, B.II, 10. The stones on Exmoor (also in Devon) included one with Danish runes, and the village of Hubblestow was believed to have been the site of a battle in which the Danes had lost their banner and their captain: Childrey, *Britannia Baconica* 29.
91. Sharp, *A Dissertation on the Pageants or Dramatic Mysteries Anciently Performed at Coventry* 12, 125-7, 131; REED: *Coventry*, ed. Ingram 215, 233, 271-6 for Hock-Tide and the Danes; Phythian-Adams, *Desolation of a City* 172.
92. Irving Ribner, *The English History Play in the Age of Shakespeare* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1957) 242 ff.
93. For several Cromwellian tales, including some believed by folklorists to have been passed down directly from "eyewitnesses," see Briggs, B.II, 25-27, 52-53.
94. Richard Blome, *Britannia* (1673) 51, 78, 196. Blome's account also lists a number of towns which had heroically withstood Danish sieges.
95. K. Palmer, *Oral Folk-Tales of Wessex* (Newton Abbot: David and Charles, 1973) 58-59; Sharp, *A Dissertation on the Pageants or Dramatic Mysteries* 31; Briggs, B.II, 17.
96. John Norden, *Speculum Britanniae pars: the discription of Hartfordshire* (1598) 3; Wantner, "History of Gloucester," Bodl. MS Top Glouc. c. 3, fos. 147r, 203v; Edward Lhuyd, account of duchess of Cornwall's tour in Bodl. MS Carte 269, fo. 42v: the Cornish tin miners also believed that the layer of loose stones near the mines had been left by the receding of Noah's flood (*ibid.*, fo. 45r).
97. Percival, *English Travels of Sir John Percival and William Byrd II* 105-6; M. R., *Memoirs of the Life of Mr. Ambrose Barnes . . .*, ed. W. Longstaffe, Surtees Society 50 (1866): 26-27—there appear to have been numerous Athelstan's wells in the region, according to the author; Blome, *Britannia* (1673) 42. The *Bartholomew Gazetteer* 71 notes "Dane" place names in Cheshire, Lancashire, Staffordshire, East Sussex, Leicestershire, Norfolk, Hampshire, Derbyshire, Devon, and Gloucestershire, as well as other features such as Dane's Brook on the Devon-Somerset border.
98. Camden, *Britain* 452; Childrey, *Britannia Baconica* 29. At Cerne Abbas in Dorsetshire in the nineteenth century a laborer was discovered cutting the figure of a giant into the turf. He explained to visitors that this was the image of a Danish giant who had led an invasion of the coast "about a hundred years" earlier and who had been beheaded by locals while lying on the hill to sleep: Briggs, B.I, 611, citing A. L. Gomme, *Gentleman's Magazine Library: English Traditional Lore* (1885).
99. Camden, *Britain* 281; *The Diary of Abraham de la Pryme* 72; Percival, *English Travels of Sir John Percival and William Byrd II* 65; *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, trans. A. Savage (London: Phoebe Phillips and Dorset Press, 1983) 92. For a Suffolk tale, likely of later origin, involving St. Edmund hiding from the Danes under a bridge, see Briggs, B.II, 425.
100. Richard Bolton, *A veiw [sic] of Staffordshire or a discription of the county* (1707), Bodl. MS Top. Staffs. e. 2, 187; *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles* 115. Bolton drew his manuscript topography principally from earlier surveys such as the then unpublished

Elizabethan chorography by Sampson Erdeswicke (a contemporary copy of which is Bodl. MS Gough Staffs. 4) and Robert Plot's *Natural History of Staffordshire* (1676), but he added numerous additions of his own.

101. Veyne, *Did the Greeks Believe in their Myths?* 27.
102. Wantner, "History of Gloucester," Bodl. MS Top. Glouc. c.3, fo. 282r. Collectors and scholars could equally well create their own explanations. The eighteenth-century inscription to a fifteenth-century panel in the South Range of the Bodleian Library quadrangle suggests that the two figures represented are William of Scotland doing homage to Henry II; they almost certainly represent St. Thomas of Canterbury at the feet of Louis VII of France. The framers of the inscription, likely clergymen themselves, chose to invent and perpetuate in brass an explanation for the panel, even though they recognized in the same inscription that the adjoining one *did* feature Henry II doing penance before the shrine of the murdered archbishop. The invention of tradition can occur at all social levels and for a variety of purposes: Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, *City of Oxford* (London: HMSO, 1939) 4.
103. Thomas Martin, "Remarks and Collections" (1724), Bodl. MS Top. gen. e. 85, 16, 59.