

William Camden and the Re-Discovery of England

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William Camden (1551–1623) stands out as one of the founding fathers of English Local History, with *Britannia* (1586) his chief claim to fame. This article takes stock of the remarkable shelf life of this classic book, its aims, methodology, structure and achievement. Camden's account of Leicestershire receives special attention. By virtue of its agenda, *Britannia* needs to be seen as a work of national re-discovery, while its enthusiastic reception by the author's contemporaries demonstrates how much it contributed to the defining and development of 'Englishness' in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

The late sixteenth century in England stands out as one of the most remarkable periods in this country's history and witnessed enormous and often unsettling and destabilising social, economic, cultural, religious and political changes as well as outstanding achievements in many fields. A huge outpouring of creative cultural energy occurred. Shakespeare, Raleigh, Sidney, Spenser and many more of their contemporaries are justly celebrated; the roll-call is stunningly impressive. William Camden, by contrast, did not become a household name either at that time or since. Even Thomas Fuller's mid seventeenth-century *The Worthies of England* curiously omits him. His life was, by most standards, unspectacular and uneventful. Yet, within the scholarly circle in which he moved during his lifetime his reputation was very considerable. His tomb which is in Westminster Abbey, close to that of Chaucer, bears the inscription, 'Camden, the Nurse of antiquity and the lantern unto succeeding ages'.¹ A glowing biography of him in Latin by Thomas Smith was published in 1691. To the antiquary William Nicholson in 1714 he was quite simply 'the immortal Camden.... the sun whereat our modern writers have all lighted their little torches'. Recent historians such as Fussner, Kendrick, Levy, McKisack, Mendyk, Parry, and Woolf are unanimous in paying homage to him and commemorating him as one of the founding fathers of their discipline.² A learned body, the Camden Society,

¹ Along with many other funerary monuments in the Abbey it suffered damage during the English Civil War. This may have been simply the result of indiscriminate vandalism though Camden had been unmistakably anti-puritan and was perhaps a target for that reason. (D.R. Woolf, *The Social Circulation of the Past. English Historical Culture 1500–1730*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003, p.94.) Hereafter Woolf, 2003.

² W.Nicholson, *The English Historical Library*. London: 2nd ed., 1714, p.5, quoted in Rosemary Sweet, *Antiquaries. The Discovery of the Past in Eighteenth-Century Britain*. London: Hambledon and London, 2004, p.36; F.S. Fussner, *The Historical Revolution. English Historical Writing and Thought, 1580–1640*. London: Routledge, 1962. Hereafter Fussner, 1962; T.D. Kendrick, *British Antiquity*. London: Methuen, 1950; F.J. Levy, *Tudor Historical Thought*. San Marino, CA: Huntington Library, 1967; May McKisack, *Medieval*

perpetuating his name and significance was founded in Cambridge in 1839 with ecclesiology as its initial remit. It was incorporated into the Royal Historical Society in 1897, thus giving added resonance to the commemoration of Camden's name; appropriately, Camden Society volumes thereafter have been devoted to scholarly editions of original source material. Also, unknowingly, everyone who uses the term 'Middle Ages' acknowledges him, since he coined it.³ Like Raleigh, but in a very different way, Camden occupies a special place in the English Renaissance and helps to illustrate what was distinctive about it. This article, which highlights his contribution to chorography and local history and links him to the re-discovery of England, draws attention to his chief contribution as a new kind of historian.

To understand his significance he needs to be placed within several different but interrelated contexts: political, social, educational, and historiographical. But first some personal details are needed, just enough to transform a name into a credible individual. Camden lived from 1551 to 1623 and, apart from his university education at Oxford, spent most of his working life in London, to which his parents had originally come as migrants. For over twenty years he taught at Westminster School and from 1587 held the additional appointment of Librarian of Westminster Abbey. He took up a key position in the College of Heralds in 1597 and held this until the time of his death twenty-six years later, much to the resentment of co-herald Ralph Brooke who thought that Camden (a mere schoolmaster) had been unjustly elevated by patronage to an office for which he had little training or capacity, a monstrous act which had instantly blighted his own promotion prospects. The disgruntled, jealous, and pedantic Brooke published, in English, a caustically-annotated catalogue in 1594 of Camden's heraldic errors in *Britannia*, to which Camden, true to form, countered with a dignified defence in Latin. But Brooke's injudicious dedication of these polemics to the ill-fated Earl of Essex, 'the undoubted champion of truth', guaranteed they would soon sink virtually without trace.⁴ Camden's advancement in an age in which patronage oiled all wheels was certainly due to that factor. But Lord Burghley and Fulke Greville, his patrons, clearly helped promote him not to ease him into a sinecure but because they recognised his many merits. Camden was on good terms with Queen Elizabeth herself, and had the advantage of having a varied and well-placed web of former pupils. This highly serviceable network included politicians such as Sir Robert Cotton, Dudley Carleton, Richard Neile, later Archbishop of York, and the playwright Ben Jonson. Although not a wealthy man by the standards of the day Camden was sufficiently prosperous to travel extensively within England, to become a major book-collector, to buy a country property at Chislehurst in Kent for his

History in the Tudor Age. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971; S.A.E. Mendyk, *Speculum Britanniae. Regional Study, Antiquarianism and Science in Britain to 1700*. Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1989; G. Parry, *The Trophies of Time. English Antiquarians of the Seventeenth Century*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995; Woolf, 2003. See also D.R. Woolf, *The Idea of History in Early Stuart England*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990.

³ S. Piggott, 'William Camden and the *Britannia*', in R.C. Richardson (ed), *The Changing Face of English Local History*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000, p.16.

⁴ R. Brooke, *A Discoverie of Certain Errours published in print in the much commended Britannia 1594... to which is added Mr Camden's Answer to this Book*. London, 1723. Camden's rejoinder to Brooke's work had pride of place in this early eighteenth-century reprint.



1. Portrait of William Camden, engraved by R.White, frontispiece to Camden's *Britannia*.

retirement, and to found an endowed Chair of History at the University of Oxford at his death. It was a life of great personal satisfaction and of achievement recognised by the *cognoscenti* – but no great public fame. Then, as now, the scholar rarely caught the glare of the limelight.

Camden's career was impinged upon by politics in various respects and in a modest way he contributed to the political climate of the era. Although not directly moving in court circles himself, his chief patron, William Cecil, Lord Burghley, was one of the leading English statesmen of the second half of the sixteenth century and it was at his prompting that one of Camden's best-known books was begun. This was his *Annals of the Reign of Queen Elizabeth* – a celebratory account of the last of the Tudors.⁵ Begun in one set of political circumstances in the Elizabethan period, the fact that the first part of the book did not appear until 1615 meant that it became attached to the politics of the reign of the Queen's successor, James I, a king determined to connect himself with the recent past and thus claim useful political continuities. Camden's political history of the reign of Queen Elizabeth was, therefore, integrated into the Jacobean political scene. (Part Two of the *Annals*, in fact, did not come out until 1627.) It provided also a further demonstration of the close, mutually supporting associations between the political *milieu* and the subject History, which were one of the essential hallmarks of the Renaissance, and an expectation that affected both authors and readers alike. Camden, though not a practising politician himself, helped fuel the politics of his age.

With regard to his social context there are three elements in Camden's own placing in society that are indicative of leading social trends in the period to which he belonged. First, he was a Londoner and thus part of the extraordinary burgeoning growth of the city that was starting to transform the cramped, second-rate, late-medieval capital into a huge centre of population and employment opportunities and one of the great political and commercial hubs of Europe, giving it in the process the kind of socio-economic and cosmopolitan base that could underpin the public theatres for which Shakespeare wrote and performed.⁶ His parents, like the majority of the city's inhabitants, were not native to the capital but had migrated to London, in this case from Lichfield, Staffordshire, and Workington, Cumberland respectively. His father was a sign painter. This was a highly mobile society with an increasing proportion of its members having experience of living in more than one part of the country.

Secondly, Camden himself was a professional man. He belonged, like Shakespeare, to an expanding sector of society that was becoming both numerically and proportionately more significant. Interestingly enough, Shakespeare's professions of playwright and actor and Camden's of schoolmaster were three of the completely new professions of this period. Older professions such as the law and the church were consolidating and regulating themselves more effectively and attracting better-qualified recruits.⁷

⁵ Most recently Camden's *Annals* and the circumstances surrounding the commissioning and publication of this work have been discussed in H.R. Trevor-Roper, *Queen Elizabeth's First Historian. William Camden and the Beginnings of English Civil History*. London: University College, London, Neale Lecture, 1971. Hereafter Trevor-Roper, 1971.

⁶ The history of London in the late-sixteenth and seventeenth centuries has, not surprisingly, received an enormous amount of attention in recent years. See especially: A.L. Beier and R. Finlay (eds), *The Making of the Metropolis. London 1500–1700*. London: Longman, 1981; Lena Cowen-Orlin (ed), *Material London c. 1600*. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania University Press, 2000; P. Griffiths and M.S.R. Jenner (eds), *Londinopolis. Essays on the Cultural and Social History of Early Modern London*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000; J.F. Merritt (ed), *Imagining Early Modern London. Perceptions and Portrayals of the City from Stow to Strype, 1598–1720*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

⁷ See P. Clark and D. Souden (eds), *Migration and Society in Early Modern England*. Totowa, N.J.: Barnes and Noble, 1987, and J. Patten, *Rural–Urban Migration in Pre-Industrial England*. Oxford: University of Oxford School of Geography Research Papers 6, 1973.

Thirdly, the fact that the greater part of Camden's career was spent in schoolteaching ('the inferior province of boy beating', as Ralph Brooke, his most acerbic critic, dismissively declared), first as an assistant master and then as Headmaster of Westminster School, is a reminder of his close connection with a central feature of the Renaissance – a classical education.⁸ He was bound up with the great phase of educational expansion which Lawrence Stone and others have termed the 'Educational Revolution', one key feature of which was the rapid proliferation of grammar schools.⁹ Camden himself had been trained in Classics and since this subject was the principal ingredient of the grammar-school curriculum of the day, he spent much of his time teaching it. His own most widely used publication at the time was a Greek grammar. Camden had an intimate familiarity with the Greek and Roman historians, some of whom had a decisive effect in shaping his historical consciousness and methodology.

History as a subject was an integral dimension of the English Renaissance, as of the earlier Italian Renaissance. Indeed, the 'new sense of the past' that emerged in this period can be taken as one of the defining characteristics of the age. (It involved a direct engagement with the sources, a more scholarly scientific attitude, and a heightened awareness of anachronisms.) What took place in late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century England, a modern scholar has argued, was an 'Historical Revolution', in which writers like Raleigh, Bacon, and later Clarendon, took History as a subject in a variety of new directions, extending its range and enhancing its status.¹⁰ Camden's place within this changing historiographical framework was critical, as recent commentators agree. John Hale has described Camden as 'the greatest practitioner of History of his age' while Hugh Trevor-Roper has argued that this writer 'placed historical studies on a new base of scientific documentation and in a new context'. More intriguingly, perhaps, Denys Hay concluded that 'Camden did more to unite Britain in the long run than did King James' – a startling claim, on the face of it, which will be further investigated later.¹¹

Camden's *Annals of the Reign of Queen Elizabeth* was the first of his two great works to be begun and something has already been said about it earlier in this article. It was a work concerned predominantly with the politics of the recent past – a veritable minefield! For that reason Raleigh in his *History of the World* had studiously avoided it. 'Whosoever in writing a modern History', he declared, 'shall follow Truth too near the heels it may happily strike out his teeth'.¹² Camden's approach was to tread carefully but purposefully – although in the end that inevitably aligned him with the government rather than its critics. 'Things manifest and evident I have not concealed', he asserted; 'things doubtful I have interpreted favourably; things secret

⁸ See W.R. Prest (ed), *The Professions in Early Modern England*. London: Croom Helm, 1987.

⁹ L. Stone, 'The Educational Revolution in England 1560–1640', *Past and Present* 28 (1964), pp.41–80. See also K. Charlton, *Education in Renaissance England*. London: Routledge, 1965 and Joan Simon, *Education and Society in Tudor England*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966.

¹⁰ Fussner 1962, *passim*. See also P. Burke, *The Renaissance Sense of the Past*. London: Routledge, 1969.

¹¹ J.R. Hale, *The Evolution of British Historiography*. London: Macmillan, 1967, p.16; Trevor-Roper 1971, p.33; D. Hay, *Annalists and Historians*. London: Methuen, 1977, p.151.

¹² Quoted in J. Racine, *Sir Walter Raleigh as Historian. An Analysis of the History of the World*. Salzburg: University of Salzburg Studies in English Literature, 1974, p.9.

and abstruse I have not pried into'.¹³ Writing what Trevor-Roper has termed 'politique history', Camden identified himself with the hierarchical political and religious order of the Elizabethan age, a stance perfectly revealed when he dealt with rebellions and with the growth of Puritanism.¹⁴

Camden's researches for his history of the Queen's reign were based on state papers and diplomatic despatches, made available to him through Burghley's good offices, on legal records, and on Parliamentary proceedings. The arrangement he adopted – as his title makes clear – was a chronological one. Lengthy digressions and invented speeches (both characteristic devices of Renaissance historiography) were shunned. 'Speeches and orations', he declared, 'unless they be the very same verbatim or else abbreviated I have not meddled withal, much less coined them out of mine own head'.¹⁵ He avoided excessive moralising, was interested always in the sequence of events and in causes and processes, and adopted a consistently questioning approach. With evident approval he quoted the views of the classical historian Polybius:

Take away from History why, how and to what end things have been done and whether the things done have succeeded according to reason and all that remains will be an idle sport and foolery than a profitable instruction; and though for the present it may delight for the future it cannot profit.¹⁶

Camden's *Annals* were not designed as leisure-time reading but in the best Renaissance tradition, as an earnest attempt to convey the political wisdom of the recent past.

Any exploration of a country's history is an act of discovery or re-discovery, designed to extend the boundaries of knowledge and understanding. Camden's *Annals* represented a kind of map of the recent past, a new and original contribution to the geography of knowledge. But the *Annals* ultimately are not Camden's chief and most enduring claim to fame. His main historiographical legacy is surely his *Britannia*, as its own publication history clearly reveals. Like the *Annals*, *Britannia* was first written in Latin, the common elite language of Renaissance Europe; it was first released in 1586. Three further printings had been called for by 1590 as well as two impressions in Germany. To satisfy demand a fourth, enlarged, edition came out in London in 1594. It grew physically. It started its life as an octavo then became a quarto and in 1607 was converted into a folio volume with much additional matter. An English translation by Philemon Holland appeared in 1610. A major new edition prepared by Edmund Gibson came out in 1695, which faithfully preserved Camden's original text (in a new and better English translation) but offered alongside it many additional illustrations and much new material provided by William Dugdale, John Evelyn, Ashmolean Museum keeper Edward Lhwyd, Samuel Pepys, Ralph Thoresby, and White Kennett among others. A second, further enlarged, edition of Gibson's Camden appeared in 1722. Such was the market for *Britannia* that it was even issued in parts as a newspaper supplement in 1733. As a complete text *Britannia* went on being reissued and enlarged throughout the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth century, thus becoming a focal point of new antiquarian research and antiquarian networking. The Richard Gough edition of Camden's work in 1789 had expanded to three stout folio volumes. *Britannia* peaked at four volumes in this format in 1806. A handsome reprint

¹³ *Annals*. London: 1615, preface to the reader, quoted in Fussner 1962, p. 237.

¹⁴ Trevor-Roper 1971, p.21.

¹⁵ *Annals*, preface to reader, quoted in Trevor-Roper 1971, p.74.

¹⁶ *Annals*, preface to the reader, quoted in Fussner, 1962, p.237.

CAMDEN'S BRITANNIA,

Newly Translated into English :

WITH LARGE

A D D I T I O N S

A N D

IMPROVEMENTS.

Publiſh'd by *EDMUND GIBSON*, of
QUEENS-COLLEGE in OXFORD.

Cic. de Divinat. Lib. 1.

*Quem non moveat clarissimis Monumentis testata
conſignataque Antiquitas ?*

L O N D O N,

Printed by *F. Collins*, for *A. Swalle*, at the Unicorn at the West-end
of St. Paul's Church-yard ; and *A. & J. Churchil*, at the Black
Swan in Pater-noster-Row. 1695.

of the 1695 edition was published as recently as 1971. Few other historical works of this period had such an amazingly long shelf life and few, if any, writings of this period made a more decisive contribution to the 'discovery of England' and to the emergence of a real sense of 'Englishness'.

Its title notwithstanding, Camden's *Britannia* is indeed chiefly about England and Wales and although it begins with a very substantial overview – nearly two hundred pages long – of the country's past from the earliest times to the Norman period, its chief centre of interest is the Roman occupation. The Anglo-Saxons preoccupied Camden less than was the case with William Lambarde and other sixteenth- and seventeenth-century scholars.¹⁷ Nor is there much on Prehistory in *Britannia*; even when he comes to Stonehenge Camden does not move far beyond simply registering its awesome physicality. Scotland and Ireland, which he had never visited, are briskly despatched in seventy-seven and forty-three pages respectively. Camden has his preferences and blind spots but openly parades the kinds of evidence available for what interests him and is critical in his analysis and assessment.

The bulk of the book – 876 pages of it in the 1695 edition – with its overriding preoccupation with place, is best described as chorography and proceeds to offer a county-by-county survey of England and Wales partly arranged geographically; he starts with the south and moves northwards. But the counties are then presented alphabetically within the tribal divisions that the Romans found when they invaded. (Modern readers need to look closely at the table of contents since the arrangement of the text is not immediately obvious.) Interestingly, when writing about counties, Camden tends to follow the Roman roads to explore them. 'I have followed the tract of this way', he says of Watling Street, for example, 'very intently from the Thames into Wales for the discovery of places of antiquity; nor could I expect to meet with any more faithful guide for that purpose'.¹⁸ His general aim, announced in the preface, was 'to restore Britain to its Antiquities and its Antiquities to Britain'. 'If there are such men to be found', he went on, 'who would be strangers to learning and their own country and foreigners in their own cities let them please themselves. I have not written for such humours'.¹⁹

Camden has more to say about some counties than others. Cornwall, Devon, Kent, Gloucestershire, Cheshire and Yorkshire are amply covered. Leicestershire is not one of the longer entries and it is clear that his attention was not overly gripped by this county. Comments such as 'on the south side [of Leicestershire] nothing of note presents itself' and 'in the north part nothing else occurs worth mentioning' hardly suggest that Camden felt irresistibly inspired to re-locate to the East Midlands. (William Burton's full-length, much more enthusiastic, alphabetically arranged *Description of Leicestershire* did not appear until 1622 and was strikingly different, not least because it displayed all the signs of being written by a local man – he was squire of Lindley – from first-hand knowledge.) That said, however, Leicestershire gets

¹⁷ Lambarde, a jurist by training, published *Archaeionomia*. London:1568, an edition of the Anglo-Saxon laws. On Lambarde see Retha M. Warnicke, *William Lambarde Elizabethan Antiquary*. Chichester: Phillimore, 1973. Lambarde and the other early local historians of this period are discussed and contextualised in Richardson 2000 as in n.3 p.109

¹⁸ Camden, 1695, p.443. On the organisation of Camden's work see W. Rockett, 'The structural plan of Camden's *Britannia*', *The Sixteenth-Century Journal* 26 (1995), pp.829–41, which argues that recent commentators have tended to exaggerate Camden's fixation on Roman Britain.

rather more space in Camden's text than Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire. He presents a useful thumbnail sketch of the topography of the county, its landscape, its rivers, and its economy. Sheep farming, lime production, and coal mining get special mention. The varying fortunes of Leicester itself over the centuries are quickly rehearsed. (Local author Burton, by contrast, waxed lyrical about Leicester's 'rich, delicate situation' and its 'delicious air', lamenting only its lack of a navigable river.)²⁰ But other places in the county seem to have attracted Camden more. Carlton Curliu, Market Bosworth and Lutterworth are three of them. Human interest comes first in his brief account of Carlton Curliu, 'the town of husbandmen'.

I know not whether it be worth relating but most of the natives of this town, either from some peculiar quality of the soil or water or other unknown cause in nature have a harsh and ungrateful manner of speech with a guttural and difficult pronunciation and a strange *wharling* in the utterance of their words.²¹

Tudor political correctness, by contrast, is fully observed when he comes to Market Bosworth.

Near this town within the memory of our grandfathers the right of the crown of England happened to be finally determined by a battle. For there Henry, Earl of Richmond, with a small body of men gave battle to Richard III, who in a most wicked manner had usurped the crown, and whilst for the liberty of the country Henry with his party valiantly exposed himself to death he happily overcame and slew the Tyrant.

(William Burton's description of this place follows the same drift but he offered a more rounded account by drawing on archaeological evidence and oral history.)²² Political correctness gives way to Protestantism, however, in Camden's pithy memorial of Lutterworth's most famous worthy. John Wyclif, he writes, was

a man of close subtle wit and very well versed in the sacred scriptures who, having sharpened his pen against the Pope's authority and the Roman church, was not only grievously persecuted in his lifetime but one and forty years after his death, by command of the Council of Sienna his body was in a barbarous manner taken out of his grave and burnt.²³

An examination of Camden's sources and methods is very instructive. The visual immediacy of many of his descriptions of places stemmed from the most obvious of his methods – fieldwork. Following in the tradition of John Leland, the early sixteenth-century investigator who documented England at the time of the dissolution of the monasteries, Camden made a point of visiting many of the places about which he wrote, and he freely availed himself of Leland's copious notes.²⁴ The touring began in

¹⁹ Camden, 1695, Camden's preface, unpaginated.

²⁰ W. Burton, *Description of Leicestershire*. London: 1622, p.160. Hereafter Burton, 1622.

²¹ Camden, 1695, p.443. Burton, 1622, p.67, also retails the same story.

²² Camden, 1695, p.444. Burton, 1622, p.47.

²³ Camden, 1695, p. 443.

²⁴ Ralph Brooke, Camden's hostile critic, went further and openly accused him of plagiarising Leland. For Leland see Lucy Toulmin Smith (ed), *Leland's Itinerary in England and Wales* (with a foreword by T. Kendrick). London: Centaur Press, 4 volumes, 1964, and McKisack 1971 as in n.1 p.108

1575 in the interval between completing his studies at Oxford and taking up his teaching post at Westminster School. From then on research travel became a regular feature of his summer vacations. We know, for example, from his notes that Camden went to East Anglia in 1578, Yorkshire and Lancashire in 1582, Devon in 1589, Wales in 1590, Salisbury, Wells and Oxford in 1596, and Carlisle and Hadrian's Wall in 1600.²⁵ Camden, self-evidently, was not an armchair historian. W.G. Hoskins, doyen of the modern study of English Local History in the University of Leicester and an advocate of the stout walking-boots approach to the subject, claimed him as a much valued academic ancestor.²⁶

Camden, nevertheless, made extensive use of written records of all kinds. His book learning was formidably impressive. He built up a very large private library with the two subjects of History and Law as its chief categories and he had other extensive collections at his disposal.²⁷ Sir Robert Cotton (1571–1631), Camden's former pupil, who was a rising politician in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries and who accompanied his old schoolmaster on his 1600 research tour, assembled one of the greatest private libraries in England (the original heart, in due course, of the British Library). Camden enjoyed free access to it.²⁸

Camden made pioneering use of coinage and inscriptions to explore political, economic and social dimensions of the early history of England and Wales, one reason perhaps why the Lancashire squire William Blundell the younger (1620–98) – a numismatist and local antiquary in his own right – was such an avid reader of *Britannia*.²⁹ Camden was also a pioneer in his investigation of the etymology of place-names and surnames and, unusually for an Englishman in this period, to assist him in this kind of research he rose to the challenge of learning Welsh. (John Aubrey was clearly much impressed by this.)³⁰ Philology was always a subject close to Camden's heart and found extensive expression in his *Remains*, a companion volume to the *Britannia*, which consisted largely of working notes for, and additional matter left over from, his *magnum opus*.³¹ The *Remains* has long sections on English christian names and surnames while other parts address the general usage and derivation of words. Another section is devoted to proverbs. The science of map making was still in its infancy in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries but Camden was linked to its development and utilised its findings as they became available. For example, he was on close scholarly terms with the great Dutch cartographer Abraham Ortelius from the 1570s, and as English county maps by Christopher Saxton and John Norden

²⁵ R.L. De Molen, 'The Library of William Camden', *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 128 (1984), p.328.

²⁶ W.G. Hoskins, *Provincial England. Essays in Social and Economic History*. London: Macmillan, 1965, p.210. See also Hoskins, *Local History in England*. London: Longman, 1959, 3rd ed., 1984. Hoskins, it is true, has more to say about the early county map-makers and about the first historians of individual counties.

²⁷ De Molen 1984 as in n.25.

²⁸ K. Sharpe, *Sir Robert Cotton, 1586–1631. History and Politics in Early Modern England*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979, pp.20, 91.

²⁹ Woolf, 2000, p.254.

³⁰ O.L. Dick (ed), *Aubrey's Brief Lives*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972, p.150.

³¹ The *Remains* first appeared in 1605. A modern scholarly edition is now available: R.D. Dunn (ed), *William Camden. Remains concerning Britain*. Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1984.

were published they were incorporated into successive editions of *Britannia*. In a different sense, Camden's friendship with Richard Hakluyt linked him to the contemporary extension of world cartography associated with the transatlantic voyages of discovery.

Camden freely availed himself of the work of others. He collaborated. Humanist scholars were famous for networking and Camden was no exception. He drew extensively, as we have seen, on Leland's work and occasionally exposed himself to criticism for so doing. He was constantly in touch with other antiquaries of the day. William Lambarde, for example, whose book on Kent had been published in 1576, was a close friend. Camden sent him the manuscript of *Britannia* for comment before it was published thus causing Lambarde to abandon his own similar project of a nationwide survey. This author's *Topographical Dictionary* had to wait until 1730 for posthumous publication.³² Camden talked and patiently listened to local people as he went around the land. Fellow schoolmasters and other antiquaries in different parts of the country corresponded with him and shared with him the precious local knowledge which had no substitute.

His extensive research effort notwithstanding, Camden was not aiming to make his *Britannia* comprehensive. He was disarmingly frank about its shortcomings and limitations and modest about his achievements.

Somewhat must be left for the labours of other men... 'Tis enough for me to have broke the ice and I have gained my ends if I have set others about the same work whether it be to write more or amend what I have written... I frankly own that I am ignorant and many times erroneous nor will I patronise or vindicate my own mistakes. What marksman that shoots a whole day can always hit the mark?³³

In the nature of things Camden did not always write on the secure foundations of local knowledge. The self-evident virtues of *Britannia* notwithstanding, William Lambarde still insisted on the general rule that

the inwards of each place may best be known by such as reside therein. I cannot but still encourage some one able man in each shire to undertake his own whereby both many good particularities will come to discover everywhere and Master Camden himself may yet have greater choice wherewith to amplify and enlarge the whole.³⁴

Camden also modestly apologised for his style of writing, which he felt was not always properly polished. 'I did not design to gratify the reader with a nosegay of all the flowers I could meet with in the garden of eloquence'.³⁵ In his search for the truth about the past Camden confessed that he had simply done the best he could.

I have not slandered any family nor blasted anyone's reputation, neither have I taken the liberty of descanting upon any one's name nor violated their credit, nay

³² C.R.J. Currie and C.P. Lewis (eds), *English County Histories. A Guide*. Stroud: Sutton, 1994, p.12. Lambarde's *Topographical Dictionary* circulated in manuscript long before it appeared in print.

³³ Camden, 1695, preface, unpaginated.

³⁴ Preface to the second edition of Lambarde's *Kent* quoted in Currie and Lewis 1994, p.15 as in n.32. Some of the contributors to the Currie and Lewis volume, drawing on modern day methodologies and knowledge, accurately – but anachronistically – draw attention to some of Camden's errors and ill-founded conjectures.

³⁵ Camden, 1695, preface, unpaginated.

not so much as Geoffrey of Monmouth.... whose *History* is yet of little authority amongst men of learning....³⁶

Camden belonged to a busy circle of scholars in Elizabethan England and was a leading figure among them. He was a founding member of the Society of Antiquaries and worked closely with, and was influenced by, other antiquaries in England at this time. Richard Carew, Sampson Erdeswicke, William Lambarde, George Owen, and John Stow, historians of Cornwall, Staffordshire, Kent, Monmouthshire, and London respectively, were some of them.³⁷ Local history and chorography in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries – of which Camden was the leading practitioner – were bound up with the kind of society that existed at that time. These closely connected genres were not simply spun out of the brain. Historical writing never is. Localism was one of the most deeply ingrained characteristics of the Tudor and Stuart age and the country gentry were its most ardent exponents and followers. For them local history – especially the history of counties – was not a digression, a pastime, a second-best kind of history, a poor relation of historical studies. It was the most relevant and important kind of history of all so far as they were concerned – the kind of history that coincided most closely with the miniature worlds which the gentry knew intimately, dominated, and to a large extent effectively controlled. To label Camden and his *Britannia* as *antiquarian* in one sense is obviously true. In other ways it is highly misleading and too laden with later pejoratives. Later generations of historians, with an inflated professional pride in their methods and achievements, were very anxious to distance themselves from the inferior tribe of antiquarians.³⁸ Even some of Camden's own contemporaries found the figure of the antiquary to be a source of amusement. Thomas Earle's satire in *Microcosmography* (London, 1628) is one of the most obvious examples. An antiquary, he joked,

is one that hath the unnatural disease to be enamoured of old age and wrinkles and loves all things (as Dutchmen do cheese) the better for being mouldy and worm-eaten.... He loves no library but where there are more spiders' volumes than authors', and looks with great admiration on the antique work of cobwebs... His very attire is that which is the eldest out of fashion... He never looks upon himself till he is grey haired and then he is pleased with his own antiquity....³⁹

³⁶ Camden, 1695, preface, unpaginated.

³⁷ Richard Carew, *Survey of Cornwall*. London, 1602; Sampson Erdeswicke, *A Survey of Staffordshire*. London, 1717; William Lambarde, *A Perambulation of Kent*. London, 1576; George Owen, *The Description of Pembrokeshire*, ed. H. Owen. Cymmrodorion Record Society. London, 1892, 1906; John Stow, *A Survey of London*. London, 1603. Everyman Library Edition, London: Dent, 1912. (The original texts of Erdeswicke and Owen, of course, belonged to the early seventeenth century but were not published until much later). Of this group John Stow has been particularly well served by modern historians. See B.L. Beer, *Tudor England Observed. The World of John Stow*. Stroud: Sutton, 1998; M.J. Power, 'John Stow and his London' in Richardson 2000, pp.30–51 as in n.3 p.109; and P. Collinson, 'John Stow and Nostalgic Antiquarianism' in Merritt 2001, pp.27–51 as in n.6 p.111 The Elizabethan Society of Antiquaries is discussed in McKisack 1971 as in n.1 p.108

³⁸ See Rosemary Sweet 2004 as in n.2 p.108, and Philippa J.A. Levine, *The Amateur and the Professional. Historians, Antiquarians and Archaeologists in Nineteenth-Century England*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

³⁹ H. Morley (ed), *Character Writings of the Seventeenth Century*. London: Routledge, 1891, pp.165–6.

Today we would do well to avoid the snobbery, condescension, and mockery which underpin such verdicts. Rosemary Sweet's vigorous, but measured, defence of the antiquarian movement and its achievements offers a clear case for so doing.⁴⁰ The antiquaries, she argues convincingly, played a key role in the intellectual world of their day, stimulating consciousness of, and pride in, the national heritage. William Camden, a key figure in the scholarly life of the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods and a man enjoying a resounding reputation in Europe at the time, belongs to the first rank of his period not the second. Thomas Smith's Latin biography of Camden includes his correspondence with such well-known luminaries as Isaac Casaubon, John Dee, Tobie Matthew, Gerard Mercator, Abraham Ortelius, Henry Spelman, James Ussher, and Henry Wootton. The translation of *Britannia* into English in 1610 took it outside its first audience of the Latin-reading circle of scholars in England and mainland Europe and brought it firmly before a wider and receptive public which relished its patriotism as well as its findings.

[Britain] is certainly the masterpiece of nature performed when she was in her best and gayest humour; which she placed as a little world by itself upon the greater for the diversion of mankind. [So wrote Camden in some of his most purple prose]. The most accurate model which she proposed to herself to beautify the other parts of the universe. For here which way soever we turn our eyes we are entertained with a charming variety and prospects extremely pleasant. I need not enlarge upon its inhabitants nor extol the vigour and firmness of their constitution, the inoffensiveness of their humour, their civility to all men, and their courage and bravery, so often both at home and abroad, and not unknown to the remotest corner of the earth.⁴¹

It is a piece of writing which, in intention at least, lends itself to comparison with the famous 'sceptered isle' speech which Shakespeare gave to John of Gaunt in his 'Richard II' (1595). Certainly Camden's *Britannia* made a profound contribution to the development of 'Englishness' that was such an increasingly regular and defining feature of the Elizabethan age by making its local and historical foundations so secure. This, surely, is what Denys Hay had in mind when he underlined Camden's contribution to national unification (see p.112 above). Richard Helgerson's *Forms of Nationhood. The Elizabethan Writing of England* (Chicago, 1992), one of the most recent works on the subject, gives Camden and the other antiquarians and map-makers of his day their full due in his depiction of the emergence of this tradition. Camden's re-discovery, or even discovery, of England was, in its way, as significant and formative as the explorers' adventures in the New World. Perhaps, after all, Camden has a place in that portrait gallery of Elizabethan celebrities with which this article started and from which he has been conventionally excluded. *Britannia*, without question, stands out as one of the major historiographical landmarks of its age. William Burton in his *Description of Leicestershire* (1622) was but one of many writers who, while engaged in the very act of going beyond it, acknowledged its inspiration and bowed low before the great man's achievement: William Camden 'that most learned and never enough admired antiquary'. His memory lives on securely among historians at the beginning of the twenty-first century. But who now

⁴⁰ Sweet 2004 as in n.2 p.108

⁴¹ Camden, 1695, introduction, 'Britain', p.iii

remembers Ralph Brooke, Camden's blustering rival at the College of Heralds, unless he happened to be the original for that other 'Master Brook', jealousy personified, the figure of fun whose neurotic antics are gently mocked by Shakespeare in 'The Merry Wives of Windsor' (?1598)?

Notes

- * I am enormously indebted to Dr A.K.B. Evans for her painstaking reading of an earlier draft of this article.

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