

# The Writing of County Histories in Early Modern England

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**Abstract:** The writing of county history in England experienced its first boom from the 1570s to the 1650s, during which time a series of outstanding county histories were written, including William Lambarde's *Perambulation of Kent*, William Burton's *Description of Leicestershire* and William Dugdale's *Antiquities of Warwickshire*. All these works are manifestations of the phenomenon of 'county history writing by the gentry'. County histories are primarily about local place names and famous persons, but also give accounts related to rivers, mountains, land, architecture, real estate, family clans, regional customs and histories. This essay illustrates the sociocultural phenomenon of 'county history writing by the gentry' in the view of the formation of the nation state, and aims to demonstrate the significance and value of the writing of county histories by gentlemen, from the perspective of the 'community of county gentry'.

**Keywords:** Early Modern England, Gentry, Historiography

## Introduction. The Writing of Local History and its Development

Written history has a long tradition in England. Chronicles from the Middle Ages are full of local histories and matters,<sup>1</sup> the earliest example being the work by the fifth- or sixth-century monk and saint, Gildas, recording Britain's rivers, land, cities and castles. From the end of fifteenth century, topography was added to written local history. Later, Ptolemy's *Geography* was published at Vicenza in Italy in 1475 and brought to Britain. In 1547, the antiquarian Robert Talbot compiled his *Itinerary* in which he depicted Britain's landscapes and its customs. William Worcester's travel notes from the same period are also worthy of mention. Worcester is one of the fathers of English topography, which constitutes the foundation of local history. Worcester devoted his life to the study of English topography and history. His notes contain everything he saw on his travels, including natural landscapes, architecture, religions and the lives of ancient celebrities. W. G. Hoskins paid tribute to William Worcester as «the spiritual grandfather of all who read this book» (Hoskins 1959, 15).

<sup>1</sup> The relationship between chronicles and the writing of local history is complicated. See Helgerson (1986).

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John Leland was the first important writer of local history in early modern England. He was appointed by Henry VIII as the king's antiquary and was allowed to collect ancient manuscripts for the royal library (Toulmin Smith 1907, ix). Thus he travelled around Britain and visited numerous monasteries, churches and schools and discovered a multitude of antique works, especially manuscripts by ancient chroniclers. His travel notes contain information about English villages, towns, markets and castles, and also the genealogies of many gentry families. Leland was called by L. Toulmin Smith «the father of English topography» (Toulmin Smith 1907, XIII). He planned to write a book about Britain's ancient history based on its counties, in which he would cover the history and topography of English counties. Unfortunately, the proposed work was never finished, and the content remained in manuscript form. John Leland himself was widely regarded as a silent and dull scholar, as J. W. Thompson once commented:

to weave the «thing of shreds and patches» into a systematic and significant design was more than «the silent scholar» could do, and although great expectations were aroused in his contemporaries by his projected history and industry with which he collected material, his plan never came to fruition. His notes were made use of by every historian of the later Tudor period, and William Camden succeeded magnificently where Leland had failed (Thompson 1942, 1:607).

Though his planned masterpiece never became a reality, Leland's travel notes were read by many of his contemporaries and younger local historians, whose own works often drew directly from this learned man's manuscripts. From the perspective of compiling paradigms, Leland is the pathfinder of the writing of British history by counties, and this method was inherited, perfected and enriched in subsequent compilations of local history. What is more, Leland's travels around Britain coincided in time with the English Reformation. Some of his travelling was before the dissolution of monasteries, which made it possible for him to reserve a great number of valuable medieval historical documents and manuscripts, and he himself also became an important witness of that time. Anthony Wood said: «At the time of the dissolution of monasteries, he saw with very great pity what havock was made of ancient monuments of learning, and if no remedy should be taken, they would al perish» (Wood 1813, 198). In this sense, Leland's work exerted a great influence on later writings of local history. But generally speaking, nothing but sporadic records related to local history appeared in Leland's age, and systematic narratives did not emerge until the next era.

The true landmark of the commencement of local history writing in England is William Lambarde's *Perambulation of Kent*, which was finished in 1570 and published six years later. Lambarde is thus considered the founder of modern writing of county history. Unlike earlier travels, the *Perambulation* is no longer a simple list of places and persons, but rather a systematic and detailed description of Kent's history, culture, natural conditions, geography, climate, administrative divisions, etc. In his work, he first enumerated all the peoples that filled and formed the history of Britain: Britons, Romans, Scots, Picts, Saxons, Danes

and Normans. As a jurist, he pointed out, in particular, that three important laws existed during the Heptarchy, namely, the Danelaw, the Wessex Law and the Mercia Law. In the following pages, Lambarde gave an overall profile of Kent and its history. The contents of this local history were briefly introduced, then the geographical position of Kent was given, after which came the origin of the name «Kent». According to Lambarde, there were two theories for the origin of the word «Kent» (Lambarde 1826, 2-3). As for the administrative division, Kent was divided into five lathes, under which were hundreds, and, at the bottom, villages or towns. Residents of Kent could be divided, according to Lambarde, into three categories: the gentry, yeomen and craftsmen, in order of social hierarchy. The gentry was the ruling class. Gentlemen were generally knowledgeable about law. By managing their land and family, they retained their wealth. They were also gentlemen with a strong sense of responsibility and participated zealously in public affairs. The yeomen enjoyed more freedoms and happiness than peasants from any other region, as they were no longer in bondage. Craftsmen included fishermen, masons, blacksmiths, carpenters and weavers. As far as the paradigm is concerned, the *Perambulation of Kent* is based on administrative divisions and describes villages, towns and ports one by one. These characteristics established the principles and ideas for compiling modern local history. From its publication, this work was highly applauded by its readers: William Camden praised that «in his researches that he has left very little for others» (Copley 1977, 1). Later scholars shared the high evaluation of the book, with Lambarde being defined by some scholars as «one of the giants among the historians of Kent» (Warnicke 1973, 35). The gentlemen from Kent also continued their narratives about their home county and built on the foundation laid by the *Perambulation of Kent*. Updated versions of this local history showed up in 1657, 1659, 1776 and 1798. According to Peter Laslett, it is no exaggeration to say that English local history was born in Kent in the late sixteenth century and was nurtured by its gentry in the early seventeenth century, in such a way as to become the point of departure for the entire modern movement of British institutional history (Laslett 1948, 159).

The key figure of local history writing in England at the start of the seventeenth century was the antiquarian William Burton. His *Description of Leicestershire* quickly became a model for the writing of local history, and also inspired and motivated many men of letters. William Dugdale's ambition to undertake some work of note was aroused by reading William Burton's *Description of Leicestershire* (Parry 1995, 219). Burton was initially interested in classical literature, then turned to genealogy and devoted himself to antiquarianism and writing about local history. The publication of the *Description* in 1622 brought him much acclaim and established him as a second-generation «father of local history». Under his guidance and support, the written county histories of Warwick, Worcester, Northampton and the Midlands were inaugurated. For example, *The Antiquities of Warwickshire* by William Dugdale, published in 1656, used material collected by Burton four decades earlier. From around 1636, Burton began to revise the first edition of the *Description* because of some inaccuracies in ge-

nealogies, completing the task in 1638. The revised work contained information about topography, county administration, churches and the genealogies of large Leicestershire families. An introduction to local religious groups and armouries, as well as a list of all the sheriffs were appended at the end of the book (Burton 1777, 296-302). In terms of the materials collected, the sources adopted by Burton ranged from official archives, contract documents and genealogies in the possession of gentlemen to newer archaeological materials and messages from his friends. Burton verified rigorously and critically all the materials collected and, by comparing different sources, he tried to sort out and eliminate fake information and ideas. As a result, *The Description of Leicestershire* was organised clearly and logically, and became quite a readable work and the most comprehensive county history of its time.

The representative figure in local history writing in the mid-seventeenth century was William Dugdale of Warwickshire, who gained lasting fame with *The Antiquities of Warwickshire*, which took him a quarter of a century to research and write. This immortal masterpiece was published in 1656 and was immediately met with an intense response and praise among the gentry. In his letter to Dugdale, Thomas Pecke, a gentlemen of Norfolk declared that

There are many brave spirited gentlemen who will questionlesse recompence your industrie; and all that I desire to be a gainer by that design, is onely the honour, which will redound to mee as the occasion of such an eminent worke (Hamper 1827, 353).

Dugdale inherited the local history writing tradition established by William Lambarde. His *Antiquities* was organised in the form of entries of hundreds, and described the geography, history, culture and customs of Warwickshire one by one. Genealogies of gentry families in Warwickshire were also recorded in this book, and Dugdale further investigated the history and marriage relationships of several major families and focused on the armouries of these clans. Numerous documents are referenced in this work to show an all-round picture of Warwick's history and culture, and it became an emblem of local history in the second half of the seventeenth century. Hoskins believes that «Dugdale's *Warwickshire* and Thoroton's *Nottinghamshire* are the two greatest county histories that the seventeenth century produced» (Hoskins 1959, 18).

#### Historical Writings by the Gentry in relation to the English Nation State

England's formation as a nation state roughly occurred during the two centuries after 1500 and specifically manifested in the Tudor revolution of government and the English Reformation. Understanding and reconstructing the history of the English people emerged as an important and significant mission for English scholars, including local history writers, antiquarians, and legal historians. As members of the national commonwealth, local history writers expressed their national feelings and patriotism through their compilations of history. A good example of the intertwining of the local perspective and the future of the nation

in early modern England is the county of Kent. As Rebecca Brackmann asserts, «In the *Perambulation of Kent* Lambarde settled on geographic organization, but it also wavers at times between local and national identity; the *Perambulation* is a local work with national aims. This is hardly surprising» (Brackmann 2012, 136). Neil Younger also believes that «here, Lambarde showed his engagement with the wider issues of English politics, and his appreciation that the local and the national were intimately intertwined» (Younger 2010, 78).

Kent has a long history. This shire is located in the south-eastern corner of England, an important dominant position, to the south of the mouth of the Thames, and thus offers easy access to London by water. The land of Kent reaches out to the Strait of Dover on the east, opposite Calais, which means that, since ancient times, Kent has served as an important point of transit for people entering Britain from the European continent. A dense network of castles, fortresses and beacons was constructed across Kent to look out for threats against London. In culture and religion, Kent established its key role early in the Anglo-Saxon period. Its convenient geographical position generally meant that Kent gentlemen had special connections with London. London capital flowed into Kent, as members of the London bourgeoisie, such as merchants and lawyers, bought monastery land there and took their place as landholders. The wealthy in Kent aimed to build connections with the capital city and the royal court, thus tended to send their offspring to London schools or noble families as retainers, in order to train and prepare their children for future opportunities and development. Many of Kent's gentry families could date their success to two or three generations earlier, and their fortunes were the largest in England. Indeed, at the time, a saying ran: «A Knight of Wales, A gentleman of Cales, A laird of the North Countree; A yeoman of Kent, Sitting on his penny rent, Can buy them out all three» (Campbell 1968, 77). And the Kentish gentry also had superior access to all kinds of domestic or international information. One reason was that Kent is located along an important route between London and the rest of Europe. Travelling envoys, tourists and merchants passing through brought all sorts of political and commercial messages. Furthermore, Canterbury was an important religious centre, which meant that communications between Kent and France were frequent. Also, many Kentish gentlemen owned estates in London for investment and recreational purposes, which expanded their source of information from London. Some gentlemen did not even identify themselves as specifically Kentish or Londoners, a fact that gives us a glimpse into the fusion between the two places. Even those who did not have their own house in London could get messages through correspondence with relatives and friends. It became common for gentlemen in Kent to go to London frequently or even reside in London at that time. They longed for news from the capital, whether political, social, economic or on the royal court, even if it was hearsay or gossip.

During the years of continental wars and the Reformation, England was constantly under the threat of invasion and was forced to strengthen its coastal defences. Kent was naturally a frontier, and its fate was closely tied to the fate of the entire kingdom. Thus, written local history was not merely descriptions

of the local area, but rather explicit or implicit expressions of authors' passions and historical views, based on a much broader social and historical context. If we go back to Lambarde's *Perambulation of Kent*, we can find Kent's geographical position introduced as follows: it was not only the Romans and the Saxons, but also the followers of Philip the Apostle and the messengers of Pope Gregory I all landed in Kent. Similarly, commodities and foreign visitors to England arrived first in Kent, then experienced the hospitality of English people, especially the Kentish (Lambarde 1826, 1-2). Lambarde's words reveal the significance of Kent as the south-eastern gateway to England and its strategic importance to national security. In preparing for the possibility of war with Spain, the royal government re-enabled the coastal beacons, so that intelligence could be sent swiftly to London and the central government could make appropriate deployments. Beacons in Kent are mentioned by Lambarde in his *Perambulation*, which provoked controversy at that time. Many people did not think it was appropriate for Lambarde to mark the location of beacons on maps, because the enemy would be able to learn about these military structures from his book. Lambarde, however, explained that, although the enemy might acquire the intelligence, it was more important to let more English people know the positions and functions of beacons, which were unknown to many of them before then. The beacons could give the alarm to warn of invasions from the sea, so that local inhabitants could arm themselves and defend their homeland. Even if these maps were not included in his book, foreigners could get hold of them by other means (Jessup 1974, 97; Warnicke 1973, 31). In a tense atmosphere of war, Kentish people protected their land for their own safety, as well as for the security of the entire country. Local and national identity reinforced each other and acted as each other's cause under multidimensional pressures and responsibility, which became the deepest reason and impetus for Lambarde to write his *Perambulation of Kent*. It was in this sense, too, that the *Perambulation* was called an excellent work of «patriotism»: «The patriotic element here operated on three different levels. First, it focused on the county itself; second, on the realm; and finally, on the queen» (Mendyk 1986, 472).

Local history publications in the early modern period also contained their authors' love and eulogy of their kingdom as a commonwealth. The sense of national pride presented by English scholars, including local history writers, was a common phenomenon during their time. The rhapsodic language William Harrison uses to present England is close to exaggeration.

There is no kind of tame cattle usually to be seen in these parts of the world whereof we have not some and that great store in England, as horses, oxen, sheep, goats, swine, and far surmounting the like in other countries, as may be proved with ease. For where are oxen commonly more large of bone, horses more decent and pleasant in pace, kind more commodious for the pail [suitable for enclosures], sheep more profitable for wool, swine more wholesome of flesh, and goats more gainful to their keepers than here with us in England? [...] In like manner our oxen are such as the like are not to be found in any country of

Europe, both for greatness of body and sweetness of flesh, or else would not the Roman writers have preferred them before those of Liguria. [...] Their horns also are known to be more fair and large in England than in any other places, except those which are to be seen among the Paeones, which quantity, albeit that it be given to our breed generally by nature, yet it is now and then helped also by art. [...] Our horses, moreover, are high, and, although not commonly of such huge greatness as in other places of the main, yet, if you respect the easiness of their pace, it is hard to say where their like are to be had (Harrison 1968, 305-306).

«Historical Writings of the Gentry» in relation to the Community of the County Gentry

The forming of the nation state in early modern times is the general background for «historical writing by the gentry». However, the direct cause of this sociocultural phenomenon lay in the so-called community of the county gentry, an idea proposed by Peter Laslett in the 1940s, when he was exploring the origin of the English Civil War. In Laslett's explanation:

In the middle of the seventeenth century there existed in the form of the communities of county gentry an important intermediary institution of this kind. If the conclusions about the gentry of Kent which are presented here are correct, and if the other counties were generally similar, it is possible to draw the following picture of one of the ways in which the «England» of the historians was constructed in 1640 (Laslett 1948, 158-59).

In my view, the community of the county gentry is the community of local gentry with a shared future in the formation period of the nation state. It is a gentry community held together by a shared sense of identity and local belonging forged and strengthened on the basis of sharing land estates within a county, kinship, similar social networks and identical educational experience, and was a relatively independent political force. The formation of the community of the county gentry was reflected by the widespread participation of members of the gentry in local governance and their appeals on behalf of the interests of the local community (Rihua 2016). The development and consolidation of the gentry's protestant sense of identity can briefly be illustrated in the example of the Thomas Wyatt Uprising. In July 1553, the young Edward VI died and was succeeded by Mary, the eldest daughter of Henry VIII. Mary I was a pious Catholic who became engaged to the Catholic Philip of Spain after her accession, placing England at risk of a Catholic restoration. And if it had become a reality, the gentry's interests would have been severely threatened, as the majority of the land released by Henry VIII's Reformation and the dissolution of monasteries fell into their hands after twists and turns. The marriage of Mary I was therefore extremely unpopular in England and resulted in several revolts in different regions, the largest of which broke out right in Kent, namely the Thomas Wyatt Uprising of 1554. Thomas Wyatt was a gentleman and a speculator who acquired a large expanse of monastery land during the Reformation. Yet these

estates would turn to nothing if the Catholic Church were to be restored in England, thus he revolted and became the leader of the rebellion. The rebel forces fought their way to London, but eventually failed, and Wyatt himself was killed. The uprising suggested that the gentry would resort to any means to safeguard their economic, political and religious interests, and marked the formation of county communities with the gentry at the core. Narrating local history also became a responsibility and a source of honour for gentlemen in a community led by them and was also the immediate impetus for the writing of local history by gentlemen, as represented by William Lambarde's work. The works by members of the gentry reflected gentlemen's sense of responsibility and honour as elites in local societies. Order, for instance, which was mentioned frequently in Lambarde's *Perambulation of Kent*, was a top concern of the gentry in that era. According to the count done by John M. Adrian: «order now required» (Lambarde 1826, 1), «I will observe this order» (Lambarde 1826, 87), «or to interrupt mine own order» (Lambarde 1826, 89), «and for the desire that I have to keep order» (Lambarde 1826, 100), «but chiefly for the observation of the order which I have begun» (Lambarde 1826, 119), «in the order of my journey» (Lambarde 1826, 178).

Local history compilations also reflected the gentry's sense of local identity. Lambarde mentioned beacons in his work and he believed the Saxons had been the earliest people to use them, an idea that was later challenged by Sir Roger Twysden. This detail indicated, from a certain perspective, the interest people had in local affairs and county history. Who would care about these trifles, unless they had a strong sense of local identity? Although the author of the *Perambulation of Kent*, Lambarde was not actually a native of the county. He lived in London before moving to Kent to inherit his father's property. Although the distance between London and Kent was not great, it was naturally a delicate matter for a former London gentleman to write the county history of Kent. Fortunately, Lambarde did not let the native gentry down. He was particularly well-informed about the topography and history of Kent. For example, he gave two explanations for the origin of the name of the river Medway: it seems to have been so named either because it ran through the middle of the Kentish kingdom, or because it ran between the two bishoprics (Lambarde 1826, 197). The *Perambulation of Kent* achieved great popularity after its publication. Its revised edition came out in 1596 and a fourth edition was introduced in 1640 and became a frequent reference for a large number of antiquarians, including many Kentish gentlemen. This also indicated that Lambarde had won the recognition of the gentry in the county community and was no longer considered an outcomer. The local identity of gentlemen was also seen in changes in the content of local histories. Richard Helgerson pointed out that, whereas earlier chorographers – Lhuyd, Lambarde, and Camden – focused on place names and made etymology their principal tool, later ones preferred genealogy and people's names. More and more, chorographies became books where the county gentry could find their manors, monuments, and pedigrees set out in detail. In just a few decades, chorography thus progressed from being an adjunct to the chronicles of kings



to being a topographically ordered account of real estate and family chronicles (Helgerson 1986, 73). The narration of the county gentry and famous persons in works of county history was actually related to the glory and sentiments of gentry families. Thus, the local history scholar, Thomas Westcote, continued the genealogies of gentry families in Devonshire and gave a comprehensive account of local gentry families in his *View of Devonshire* in 1630. This change endowed local history writings with more value. They started to contain social and political dimensions, rather than being kept as mere collections of explanations of geographical names. This new feature was typically shown in William Dugdale's *Antiquities of Warwickshire*, in which Dugdale offered sound historical explanations for the gentry's rule in local societies, by tracing back family histories and land tenures. Christopher Dyer thus states that part of the impetus behind local history lay in the desire for social recognition among the landed gentry. County histories traced the descent of manors and illustrated coats of arms, which provided the leaders of county society with pride in their ancestry and knowledge of the links between families. They were also reassured about their title to the land and rents on which their wealth and standing depended. A gentleman in possession of a county history would be able to read about his lineage and predecessors, admire engravings of their heraldry, and even (in the case of the very rich) see a representation of his house, all of which demonstrated his superior position in the world. It also reinforced the gentry's sense of identity, first by celebrating their membership of an elite, but also by defining their local roots through their lordship of manors and rights of patronage over parish churches. The gentry felt that they belonged to their neighbourhood and to the county itself (Dyer and Richardson 2009, 4-5).

«Historical writing by the gentry» in early modern England is a cultural phenomenon that shows the contribution of the gentry class to the civilisation of England. This phenomenon was not isolated at the time, but was combined and intertwined with antiquarianism. The study of antiquities promoted the compilation of local histories, and many antiquarians were also local history writers. Their speculations and descriptions of British history, customs, institutions and peoples fit in with the custom among the early modern English of re-exploring and re-evaluating their own history and tradition. When did our history start? Where did our ancestors come from? What kind of people are we, and what was the origin of our institutions? These were questions English people, particularly the intellectual class, asked during this transformational period of their society. The formation of the English nation state never eliminated local communities; on the contrary it tightened the relationship between local lives and national destiny, and these two elements became fused. Transitions in the local community impacted the future of the nation and vice versa. On this foundation, a brand new type of nation state appeared. These local history scholars were witnesses to a new era and, at the same time, the writers of that history. They recorded the history and culture of their country and nation by compiling local county histories and contributed to the progress and prosperity of English scholarship with their talent and wisdom.

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