

The Memory of the People: Custom and Popular Senses of the Past in Early Modern England

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Historians, unsurprisingly, spend much of their time thinking about how people make sense of the past. Modernists have not only produced biographies of famous historians and studies of important historical schools, they have also created a burgeoning literature on the ‘politics of commemoration’ and even some increasingly sophisticated studies of less respectable sources such as historical fiction. Historians of early modern England have shown somewhat less interest until relatively recently, though there now exists a significant body of work that addresses these issues. For instance, Daniel Woolf and others have explored the writings of 16th- and 17th-century antiquarians and chroniclers.⁽¹⁾ Indeed, R. H. Tawney, E. P. Thompson and Keith Thomas – three of the most famous historians of the period – have explored popular senses of the past at some length.⁽²⁾ Yet, we still lacked a thorough study of the role of memory and custom in early modern social relations. Now, thanks to Andy Wood, we have one.

Wood argues that most previous work on early modern memory is has been ‘elitist’, focusing on the wealthy, literate and powerful minority rather than the poor, illiterate and officially disenfranchised majority. He may slightly exaggerate this imbalance – as noted above, the ‘customs’ of ‘commoners’ have received attention before – but Wood is right that there is much more to be learned from an explicit focus on ‘popular’ perspectives. He does this by drawing on a broad range of primary sources, using a core of around 20,000 depositions made in the courts of Chancery, Star Chamber and Exchequer. Although these witness statements cover several centuries and every English county, he also looks more closely at a systematic sample of nearly 1,000 depositions from Norfolk cases between 1550 and 1599. His analysis of this sample reveals that such material provides a strong corrective to the more conventional focus on highly literate elites. Instead of wealthy gentlemen, the depositional evidence ‘mostly privileges the voices of older or middle-aged plebeian men’, including not only long-term residents but also a surprising number of relatively recent arrivals (pp. 36–8). Whilst depositions provide a solid foundation for his study of ‘plebeian’ memory, Wood also throws his net far wider, scooping up fascinating examples from estate papers and the records created by manors, parishes, guilds, urban corporations and ecclesiastical courts from across the country. The sheer depth and breadth of archival research presented in this book is extraordinary. That said, it is disappointing that the only systematic analysis is focused so narrowly on late 16th-century Norfolk. Given

how much Wood emphasises the importance of local specificity and of change over time in the chapters that follow, it would have been very interesting to see the results if this analysis had been extended chronologically or geographically. Were older plebeian men similarly privileged in, say, less commercialised parts of England such as the north-west? Did they retain their prominent voice in the central law courts even in the 18th century?

Much of the book revolves around common rights and agrarian custom. As Wood shows, a 'usable past' was absolutely central to the economic lives of the vast majority of the population who lived and worked on the land as tenants or smallholders. Their subsistence was often dependent upon precise – if occasionally selective – memories of customary rights to grazing, fuel and other resources. In 1570, for example, the tenants of Cockermouth were satisfied because 'albeit their Fermeholds were small the Comons were great' (p. 158). Yet, in most cases villagers only had access to such 'Comons' because they could prove that they had used them for 'time out of mind' and, according to Wood, their ability to deploy this 'usable past' changed substantially between the 14th and 19th centuries. The aftermath of the Black Death left the English peasantry in a strong position with landlords desperately needing tenants and labour. It was in this period, he argues, that the peasants won the indulgences that would soon, through the power of 'social memory', be transmuted into 'customs' and thus into rights or entitlements. In the early modern period, tenants defended these customs assiduously through increasingly sophisticated use of documentary evidence and the law courts. However, Wood also demonstrates how customs that favoured the tenantry were under attack. Lords sought to harness rents to inflation and seize exclusive control of common lands. In the wider culture, this manifested itself as a forceful discourse of 'improvement'.⁽³⁾ Similarly, Wood suggests there was a hostility to custom amongst godly humanists. Thomas More, for example, who is often quoted as a defender of the commons against the lords' man-eating sheep, was typical of many humanists in criticizing those who justified a practice by citing its antiquity (p. 123).⁽⁴⁾ Worse still, in the 17th century, gentry attitudes were 'hardening' even further and there was an apparently 'decisive shift' against custom and against commoners in the central law courts (pp. 126, 160). The power of popular memory was being eroded. According to Wood's chronology, it was in the late 18th century that the final break came. Enlightenment ideology and capitalist demands for labour discipline led to an 'epochal shift' towards a 'new order' in which custom had no authority (pp. 314, 350-2). However, even then the memory of the people was not extinguished. In the 19th century, as Wood acknowledges, common rights remained important for many working-class families and a strong sense of the past informed radical agrarian politics. The chronology presented in this book is thus careful and nuanced, even if the overarching narrative is one of struggle and loss.

Alongside the rich and detailed story of early modern agrarian custom are a series of other important insights into the nature of memory at this time. Religion, of course, is a significant part of this story and receives plenty of attention here. Indeed, the book opens with the biblical tale of Ruth gleaning in the fields of Boaz, a choice that will surprise those readers who are familiar with Wood's previous work where faith is never more than a fleeting concern. Much of the first chapter is focused on popular memories of the religious changes of the 16th century. It was a time when the wealthy took advantage of the Dissolution of the Monasteries and other 'reforms' to expand their holdings and engage in a large-scale 'asset-stripping of the medieval church' (p. 89). Custom, according to Wood, gave ordinary people a weapon with which to resist the new policies imposed by royal and ecclesiastical authorities, giving them a way of 'asserting local identities and histories over a nationally driven Reformation' (p. 86). As such, this chapter may provide ammunition to revisionist historians who have, broadly speaking, argued that the English Reformation was unpopular and faced prolonged parish-level resistance.⁽⁵⁾ However, Wood goes further in claiming that most people's memories of the fate of the monasteries were actually concerned with 'economic affairs rather than matters of doctrine' (p. 81). Indeed, he implies that they were less concerned about spiritual losses than material ones, a view that may be influenced by his main group of sources – court depositions – and should be put in a broader perspective by reading Alexandra Walsham's more detailed recent work on memories of religious change.⁽⁶⁾

Still, as Wood shows even more clearly in the second chapter, the well-known struggles over common lands and enclosure were not the only disputes in which custom played a key role. In addition to shaping the

impact of Tudor religious policy, it also influenced arguments about parochial religious practice long after the Elizabethan Settlement. Parishioners drew on their memories in their efforts to assert control over the arrangement of pews and the appointment of local clergymen. Here too we can see ordinary people using custom to resist what they see as 'foreign' impositions by their supposed superiors. In towns and cities, popular memory was also strong. Just as in rural areas, it had a direct impact on people's livelihoods thanks to its place in the guild system and in governing civic resources. The urban 'usable past' tended to take a somewhat different form than to its rural counterpart. Wood notes how charters of incorporation and other written documentation became central to urban custom very early on, meaning that the careful recollections of older residents were less important to defining rights and obligations. Nonetheless, he argues that the 'civil identity' which many historians have suggested was growing in this period was not the only way town-dwellers conceptualised local history. This sense of age-old corporate unity was largely confined to the mercantile elite whereas urban labouring people were more likely to have memories in which the 'neighbourhood' – rather than the city as a whole – was the preeminent point of reference. This book therefore provides a valuable reminder that 'custom' was not confined to village squabbles over common lands – it also informed the politics of parish religion, guild regulation, civic government and 'good neighbourhood'.

The diverse array of institutions that relied on popular memory was mirrored by the multitude of different 'ways of remembering', to which Wood devotes considerable space. Drawing on the important work of Adam Fox and others, he shows how the past was rehearsed through a mix of both oral and literate modes.⁽⁷⁾ In cities, for example, the importance of written charters may have reinforced the power of the educated elites, but civic tradition was never monopolised by the rich. During the early modern period not only did vernacularisation and the expansion of record-keeping broaden access to the urban past, but many of these written charters were read aloud on ceremonial occasions and were reinforced by even the most humble of freemen reciting their customary oaths orally. Moreover, as Wood shows, the documents that provided evidence of 'long used' common rights were not always controlled by the elite. In the countryside plenty of yeomen and even a few relatively poor husbandmen held their own records of customary rights or privileges. In more than one farmhouse one would have found a carefully-locked chest containing a small personal archive of 'Indenture evidenc[e]s and books of porchace' (p. 257). Of course, the increasing importance of written documentation resulted in some very fierce struggles over access and control. Wood uncovers striking examples of attempts to restrict access according to social status and of deliberate destruction of sensitive material, especially during the Dissolution of the Monasteries and the Civil Wars. Still, despite the undeniably rising 'credit' of written text over the course of the early modern period, this book demonstrates conclusively that 'the memory of the people' frequently continued to be transmitted and expressed through unwritten means. Annual parish or manorial perambulations imprinted the local boundaries on the young – rendered more memorable by cakes or blows – and historical knowledge was passed down orally through proverbs, story-telling or simply 'the comon voice of the cowntrye' (p. 284). Thanks to Wood, we can now understand much more clearly how these various documents and mnemonic devices interacted to sustain popular memory.

One of great strengths of this book is the clarity with which Wood addresses what one might call the 'problems' of early modern popular memory. Both Tawney and Thompson tended to romanticise 'custom' as inherently communalist and democratic. It would be impossible to miss the fact that Wood shares their broadly leftist political leaning and hostility to the landlord's surveyor whose 'commodifying gaze' only 'produced a narrow and impoverished vision of the landscape' (pp. 190, 193). But, despite his empathy with the 'commoners', Wood discusses the limits of custom extensively. He describes, for example, how manor courts – the guardians of customary rights – sought 'social tidying' by excluding migrants and promoting definitions of 'neighbourhood' that had no place for the poor (p. 178). Likewise, although deponents in the central courts were rarely gentlemen, they were even more rarely the very poorest individuals such as sub-tenanting labourers or mobile vagrants. Even more importantly, as noted above, they were nearly always male: only about one in 20 deponents were women. As a result, Wood argues that 'the memory of the people' was often merely 'the memory of man' (p. 306). Not only did men provide the vast majority of

deponents and dominate the institutions that preserved custom, their memories were also highly gendered, rarely including the words or deeds of women. Wood thus works hard to draw out the ways in which women practiced and protected local custom, including some specifically ‘gendered’ customs such as those associated with birth, dairying, market trading and inheritance.⁽⁸⁾ Hence, the reader is able to see how some women could draw on social memory to protect their interests whilst others suffered due to male-authored customs that, for instance, made a widow’s inheritance conditional upon her chastity. The exclusion of migrants, the very poor and women was never complete and often contested, but it was still an undeniable by-product of the ‘memory of man’ in many communities.

There is much more in this book that cannot be covered even in an extended review – it is both wide-ranging and incredibly rich in vivid detail. That is not to say that some avenues might not have been further explored. Would a more systematic long-term analysis of depositions reinforce or modify the broad chronology sketched by Wood? How much is the prominence of material concerns a result of the focus on legal sources? How much did the turmoil of the mid-17th century shape the nature of popular memories? Moreover, there are a handful of repetitions that Cambridge University Press’s editors should have caught (pp. 134, 136, 225–6). The engagement with the science of ‘memory studies’ is also sometimes distracting. It is clear that Wood often knows much more about how memory worked ‘on the ground’ than many of the theorists he admiringly cites. But such grumbles should not distract us from the fact that the book is a monumental achievement by a master historian. Through exhaustive archival research, Wood has produced a study that proves the centrality of custom and popular memory across more than three centuries. Not only does it successfully link Tawney’s 16th century with Thompson’s 18th century, it offers a much more thorough and nuanced narrative of the ‘usable past’ in early modern England than either of them was able to provide.

Notes

1. D. R. Woolf, *Reading History in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2000); *John Stow and the Making of the English Past*, ed. I. A. Gadd and A. Gillespie (London, 2002).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. R. H. Tawney, *The Agrarian Problems of the Sixteenth Century* (New York, NY, 1912); E. P. Thompson, *Customs in Common* (London, 1991); Keith Thomas, *The Perception of the Past in Early Modern England* (London, 1983).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Two studies that provide more detail on early modern ‘improvement’ have recently been published: *Custom, Improvement and the Landscape in Early Modern Britain*, ed. Richard W. Hoyle (Farnham, 2011); Paul Slack, *The Invention of Improvement: Information and Material Progress in Seventeenth-Century England* (Oxford, 2014).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. In More’s *Utopia*, a character criticises ‘depopulating’ enclosure, saying ‘your sheep that were wont to be so meek and tame, and so small eaters, now, as I heard say, be become so great devourers and so wild, that they eat up, and swallow down the very men themselves’.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Wood cites Eamon Duffy, *The Voices of Morebath: Reformation and Rebellion in an English Village* (New Haven, CT, 2001), but there is much more work on 16th-century resistance to religious change that would be relevant.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Alexandra Walsham, *The Reformation of the Landscape: Religion, Identity, and Memory in Early Modern Britain and Ireland* (Oxford, 2011).[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Adam Fox, *Oral and Literate Culture in England 1500–1700* (Oxford, 2000).[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. Wood here builds on Nichola Whyte’s important recent work such as ‘Custodians of memory: women and custom in rural England’, *Cultural and Social History*, 8, 2 (2011), pp. 153–73.[Back to \(8\)](#)

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