

Did London Chroniclers Spin Their Facts or Did They 'Wryte in theyr Regystres Suche Thynges as Dayly Happen and Falle'?

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THE LONDON CHRONICLES IN THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY. A Revolution in English Writing. With an Annotated Edition of Bradford West Yorkshire Archives MS 32D86/42. Mary-Rose McLaren. 2002. D.S. Brewer, Cambridge, an imprint of Boydell & Brewer Ltd, Woodbridge. £60.

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This is a deeply disappointing book.¹ The fifteenth-century London chronicles – the earliest were probably composed 1399-1430 and they continue into the sixteenth century – are a marvellous and under-used source, and it is the stated intention of the author to advertise their importance and encourage their use, but sadly, in its first part the jargon of literary criticism dominates the author's comments and often obscures the chroniclers' sober efforts to record events as they knew them, and in part two a lack of expertise in palaeography and Latin destroys the value of the edition of an interesting example of these chronicle.

This is also a deeply confusing book. For example, where terms are defined: 'scribe' is 'used only when the manuscript is a copy of another text'; 'writer' is used when it is 'unclear' if a manuscript is copied or altered; 'chronicler' is a general term for 'anyone who wrote, compiled or copied' (p. 12). This general word 'chronicler' is therefore used throughout, to confusing effect. 'Compiler' and 'scribe' would have been safer and more readily understood terms to use, especially as McLaren appears to be keen to destroy any notion of authorship (e.g. pp. 47-48) and because almost no manuscript of a compiler is known to survive in its original version – except the small Frowyk Chronicle, which was not used in this book.

This review will be thought harsh, but it is a disturbing fact that simple accuracy is no longer high on the agenda of some universities and publishers (and television makers), and it is time to dwell on this development, with McLaren's study and her chronicle edition as an example. It seems to happen with appalling regularity these days that publishers think it unnecessary to engage the services of knowledgeable proof readers or editors; it is likely the present study would have

¹ Title quotation from William Caxton in the introduction to his *Polychronicon*, quoted A.F. Sutton and L. Visser-Fuchs, *Richard III Books*, Stroud 1997, p. 184.

benefited from such supervision. McLaren herself, in spite of her own shortcomings, does not hesitate to criticise her learned predecessors, such as the ever-useful and industrious C.L. Kingsford, who edited so many of these chronicles, or the knowledgeable A.R. Myers. The latter is castigated for accepting the details of Henry VI's progress through the streets of London during his restoration as they were reported, whereas McLaren prefers to interpret them as somehow affected by an 'historian's' spin, given them by the chronicler (pp. 8-9).²

Which is not to say some of this book's conclusions are not interesting or acceptable (although some can only be extracted with great effort). The general conclusion can be read with interest (pp. 47-48, 49, first two paragraphs): it sensibly accepts that the chronicles start in 1189 because this was the generally accepted 'mythical' date of the beginning of the mayoralty – unfortunately we here get rather bogged down in a 'quo warranto' theory, whose originator does not appear to be given (pp. 16-17). It is acknowledged that it was the printing press which brought the London chronicles to an end, only a few, such as Arnold's chronicle, making it into print (p. 145). It is also recognised that many of the texts were pragmatic compilations made for use (p. 24), that some were full of documents, but more were not (p. 24), and that both kinds of chronicles had been in existence long before 1400. *Liber antiquis legibus*, *Annales Londonienses* and the French Chronicle are examples of earlier types of detailed chronicle, and existed alongside the lists of mayors and sheriffs, which represent the most ancient chronicle form. These lists, almost from the beginning, had longer entries inserted (p. 23). McLaren accepts the existence of earlier texts and yet contends that although 'the London chronicle form' was established before 1400 it was only then that 'a London chronicle' emerged (p. 122). Surely this is an unnecessarily complex and confusing contradiction?

The book is determined to present fifteenth-century London chronicles as an 'extraordinary' phenomenon: 'we do not know how the chronicle writing trend started, why, or exactly even when' (p. 1). And again: 'That [Londoners] should begin to compose accounts, ..., is quite extraordinary. This sort of thing used to be someone else's job'; 'they came to see the world as literary rather than just oral or visual' (p. 94). This is surely a highly patronising attitude to those poor London citizens, officials or merchants, many of whom were literate and well educated! What was 'new' – and even that is arguable, as survival is one of the most unreliable of statistics – was that these texts were in English, unlike their predecessors; that anyone could own the cheapest of chronicles, the mayoral lists, and scrawl in his additions; and that they happen to survive in larger numbers. London chronicles survive in numbers comparable to many fifteenth-century documents and literary manuscripts.

² See also her 'The aims and interests of the London chroniclers of the fifteenth century', in *Trade, Devotion and Governance*, ed. D.J. Clayton *et al.*, Stroud 1994, pp. 158-76, esp. pp. 165-68.

The author sets out to gauge how 'they', the compilers, 'perceived' people and 'present[ed] events' and 'express[ed] ideas' (p. 49). This is a worthwhile endeavour, but dangerous when applied to much copied and probably altered texts. And it is dangerous to lump all these diverse, unknown persons together as 'they'. Each chronicle that is amenable to such scrutiny should really be treated separately; many have no discoverable pretensions. McLaren believes that the compilers 'constructed their accounts to provide a literary meaning which they perceived as mirroring the visual meaning of the events they recorded' (p. 50) – in other words, they were less objective than 'literary'? The chosen examples of certain processions, such as those showing the restored Henry VI, only convince the reviewers of the essentially factual and unimaginative approach of these chroniclers.

The author has found a total of forty-four manuscripts; probably a few more should be added, such as the Frowyk Chronicle. Chronicle history was one of the most popular reading materials of the time as is witnessed by the survival of over 240 copies of the prose *Brut*, the national chronicle of England. Any idea that the London chronicles were a particular genre – apart from their London-centricity – or a new development of 'remarkable suddenness' (p. 3) must be severely questioned. They were continuations of a long established tradition, as the author – almost – admits.

The forty-four manuscripts are put into groups and there is an attempt to put some of them into *stemma*. The precise value of this exercise must be left to other commentators, but it was undoubtedly an enormous task to undertake. The basis is 'similarity of wording' (p. 98), by which at least four strands are discerned, leading to eight groups, thirteen miscellaneous texts (30% of whole), and at least twenty-five sources. The author seems to doubt the value of the effort herself, as she emphasises the 'fluidity' of texts and that there are only groups and no 'families' (p. 99). The work, however, may be a useful initiation for future students of these texts.

McLaren is determined to 'jettison' (p. 12) attributions to named authors, compilers or even owners, but allows herself to be persuaded of Arnold Fitz-Thedmar and Andrew Horn's work (both pre-1400) and accepts that the 'author' (her word) of Egerton 1995 (known as 'Gregory's Chronicle') was a mayor, though she opts for no individual (pp. 33, 41).³ Robert Fabian's authorship of the

³ The reference to 'thys tyme of my yere being mayre' in Egerton 1995, f. 195, the so-called 'Gregory's Chronicle', occurs in connection with a grant of a plenary indulgence, now known to have been made in 1455, while Stephen Forster was mayor, and not in 1451, as the chronicle has it, while Gregory was mayor. In fact, what the author or later annotator may have been saying was that no such indulgence had ever been granted before or since, 'unto thys tyme of my yere being mayre', in other words in any year covered by the chronicle. As it exists now, the chronicle is a fair copy of the original compilation, and it lacks its last folios and ends prematurely in 1469. Neither Gregory

Great Chronicle, Guildhall Library MS 3313, suggested by Thomas and Thornley mainly on internal evidence, is inevitably criticised by McLaren. Her main objection centres on an inserted gathering of eight folios (ff. 157-164v, covering 1449-60) in a different hand from the section that Thomas and Thornley thought 'might' be Fabian's. She is perfectly right to reject hand-writing as evidence of 'authorship' in this instance, as no certain example of Fabian's writing is known, but the manuscript is in any case more likely to be in the hands of employed scribe(s) making up a fair copy for the compiler of this fine chronicle. McLaren's argument – not very clearly expressed and certainly opaque for any reader unfamiliar with Thomas and Thornley's learned edition – does not dispose in any way of the *internal* evidence given by the compiler about his own career, which does indeed suggest that he was Alderman Robert Fabian. This evidence was fully set out in Thomas and Thornley's edition and has been extended in subsequent research; the case for Fabian remains excellent, though not proven beyond doubt.

The author admits that many chroniclers resorted to formulae to describe events (pp. 92-93), an ancient practice beloved by all kinds of writers and still in use by those writers who are uninventive, unskilled or just plain lazy. It may also be argued from this that these compilers had *no* 'literary' aspirations; the use of formulae and lack of originality may be taken to show they merely wanted to record an event briefly and had no exceptional interest in it. Only rarely does a chronicler rise above the mundane: there are many diarists but only one Pepys.

It is important to remember that many 'official' documents circulated in copy in London, both within official and semi-official circles and outside them. Members of the companies, such as the Mercers, were adept at obtaining copies of acts of parliament, royal letters and other papers that concerned themselves – they only had to know the right clerks and scribes, whose business depended on a wide range of exemplars and making copies for a fee. Lack of an official position did not preclude access to documents, among them the 'pamphlets', described by McLaren 'as propaganda tools' and as 'mainly a Yorkist tool' (p. 42 and n. 102). A pamphlet was a small number of folios, probably sewn, certainly not bound, containing verses, a romance, a religious text, or even annual accounts (the Mercers called their accounts 'pamphlets'). The word did not necessarily denote subversive treatises before 1500 and innocent texts in this format greatly outnumbered such 'propaganda tools' – among which McLaren includes, surprisingly, the 'Arrivall of Edward IV' and the account of Margaret of York's marriage. Reference to *John Vale's Book*⁴ would have helped the author to understand what were the truly political texts that circulated and that such texts were not limited to one party. Nor

nor Forster, therefore, seem certain candidates for author, compiler, owner or annotator, merely some mayor since 1451 and before the 1470s or even 1480s. Perhaps Forster has the edge on other candidates.

⁴ *The Politics of Fifteenth-Century England*. John Vale's Book, ed. M.L. Kekewich *et al.*, Stroud 1995.

did these short texts, political or not, only begin to exist or circulate in the fifteenth century.

The author is right to emphasise the role of scribes' workshops in producing copies of chronicles, but this should not overshadow the desire of the individual or the household to add to a chronicle, however small. The little chronicle produced in the Frowyk household survives in its *original* form and shows the process of insertion by many hands very clearly.⁵ One of the things McLaren fails to do, and which would have made this book really worthwhile, is to envisage in greater detail the compilation of an average London chronicle of this period, to show the workings of a scribe's workshop, on which so much work has already been done by many scholars. Instead she gets bogged down in what is a doomed attempt to find an 'author' who had a concept of 'history', or, as she puts it: 'how the chroniclers take a visual and oral experience of life in the city, and translate it into a written form' (p. 100). To her these chronicles were a 'first attempt' by lay people (p. 13) to write their own 'history'. This is not only a patronising judgment on their efforts, but it forgets the achievements of FitzThedmar and Andrew Horn. It also suggests that a straightforward record of events – today usually called a chronicle – was somehow inferior to 'history'. By 'history' McLaren means a text in which the maker expresses an opinion rather than gives the facts as he knows them. Some modern historians, however, would rather have the *Great Chronicle* than the 'opinions' of Thomas More, Polydore Vergil or Edward Hall; they are grateful that London chroniclers wrote down in their counting houses or workshops, 'in theyr regystres', what had happened, giving straightforward facts, and relaying information as they understood it. Whatever small prejudices they were prone to are more acceptable than the more conscious and unhelpful 'spin' of later 'historians'. There is a failure to acknowledge that the compilations of FitzThedmar or Horn were the true ancestors and predecessors of the fifteenth-century chronicles. In the sixteenth century there developed a more self conscious 'contrivance' of history in which the writers deliberately imitated classical models – with these works it is arguable that we enter a different world of 'history' rather than 'chronicle' writing.

Part 2 of the book is 'An annotated edition of Bradford, West Yorkshire Archives MS 32D86/42'. Its seventy-five pages could have found a better use. However interesting the text may be – and apart from being unedited it does not seem to stand out particularly, though internal evidence suggests that it may have been partly compiled by Richard Hedley, Clerk of the Chamber of Guildhall – this edition is of no help to scholars because of its appalling lack of accuracy. The author herself apparently has very little Latin, but nonetheless assumes that 'the original chronicler ... seems to have struggled with the Latin'. Her knowledge of

⁵ A.F. Sutton and L. Visser-Fuchs, 'The making of a minor London chronicle in the household of Sir Thomas Frowyk (died 1485)', *The Ricardian*, vol. 10 (1994-96), pp. 86-103.

palaeography leaves much to be desired, but her introduction has the following amazing statements, which must be quoted at length to be believed:

I have tried to transcribe the manuscript exactly as it was written. ... I have not expanded contractions because I do not wish to bias the reader's understanding of the text. ... I have transcribed the Latin as it is written. Much of this, especially in the marginal notes, is nonsensical. This may well be because the chronicler has [*sic*] little idea what he was [*sic*] writing. If so, it is important that the modern reader [*sic*] realise this, rather than having sense made of it for them [*sic*]. It is by reading the chronicler's own words, not an editor's version of those words, that we can step inside a fifteenth-century consciousness (p. 155).

As a result of this approach an innocent student, reading this edition, might be left with the feeling that the scribe – perhaps the holder of a responsible position in the city government – and particularly the scribes of the marginal notes were out of their minds. The main text, where it is in English, is more or less correctly transcribed, but from the Latin text and marginalia and the names some random examples have been checked against the Bradford manuscript.

Text on p. 3 (the author uses 'fol.', but means 'page', as she does not use *recto* and *verso* but numbers continuously):

Eodem anno dus Simon Mounfort desponsavit Alianorum sororem dm
Reg. H. & Comitissam de pembrok Et anno sequi feat dtm dmn.
Comite

recte (capitals and punctuation modernised):

Eodem anno dominus Simon Mounfort desponsavit Alianoram sororem domini regis Henrici et comitissam de Pembrok. Et anno sequenti fecit dictum dominum comitem.

It must be emphasised that the text of the manuscript is perfectly legible and contains all the correct and very common abbreviation marks.

Marginalia on p. 22:

Ensmarcio in hibmiton
Qua' Regi Broa' inipt' fuit Isabella Regia
murdra' sup ponte london'
Arestatis Duxy

recte: Transmeacio in Hiberniam
recte: Quam regi Ricardo nupta fuit Isabella regina
recte: Murdrum super pontem Londoniensem
recte: Arrestacio ducorum

Some names on p. 77:

michell derindr m'e'
Roulam'ns hill mc'ir'r
Smarub Guikley m'c'millonle's

recte: Michell Dormer, mercer
recte: Roulandus Hill, mercer
recte: Henricus Suckley, merchaunttaylor

These names are quite legible – and could easily be checked against Beaven, *Aldermen of London*⁶ – and contain only perfectly ordinary abbreviation marks. It is a

⁶ A.B. Beaven, *Aldermen of London*, 2 vols, London 1911, 1913.

fallacy to assume that the scribes did not know what they were writing. The scribes of the Bradford manuscript and all their colleagues used these abbreviations every day, they were part of their professional 'mind's eye', they wrote them but thought of the full word. No medieval scribe, when using the squiggle that meant *-orum*, or the little horizontal line that meant *m* or *n*, heard in his head the 'sound' of a squiggle or a line, just as we do not hear 'no ten' when we write 'No. 10', or 'el five' when we write '£5'. Medieval scribes were no more fools than we are, and what is almost more important in the context of this review: their Latin was better than ours, they used it every day and it is dangerous to question their accuracy as in nine cases out of ten they turn out to be right.

There are unfortunately a host of other minor errors, many of which could have been corrected by a good publisher's reader. For example, the name of a later owner of the manuscript, Thomas Pryne, occurs on the last page, and is transcribed as 'Dryner', whereas elsewhere in the book the name is given correctly (pp. 39, 150); otherwise blank folios are said to be 'underlined' when 'ruled' is meant (p. 226); *constat* is said to mean 'belongs to', while it just means 'is' in medieval Latin and, like *est*, only with a dative has the meaning 'owned by', belongs to'; we are told that London chronicles are very different from continental – called 'European'! – town chronicles without being given a single example or reference (p. 96); the index states that London chronicles will be found under their 'manuscript shelf names' [*sic*], but Fabian's chronicle can only be located via his name, not via Guildhall MS 3313; and is 'G.I. Doyle, the librarian of University College, Dublin' perhaps Dr I.A. Doyle, librarian of the University Library at Durham? At the end of the book there are six appendices of varying interest. The last one, 'Significant events recorded in the London chronicles', implies again that the chroniclers selected the events they included, instead of just putting in everything they could.

Finally we would like to point out that a few opportunities have been missed. The author fails to locate and use contemporaries' own comments on why they made chronicles, such as Caxton's words quoted in our title, which would have illuminated the work of these London compilers. Nor did she use that 'chronicle in the making', John Vale's book, a collection of documents made in the household of Thomas Cook, Mayor of London, which overlaps to a large extent with 'finished' chronicles and could have revealed so much. One would also like to recommend to her the 'palaeography by post' course available from the Richard III Society. But equally to blame are the publishers who did not help Dr McLaren to turn her years of research and hard work into a more worthwhile book.