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978-0-521-03246-9 - Literacy and the Social Order: Reading and Writing in Tudor and
Stuart England

David Cressy

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Preface

This book is a study of the dimensions and value of literacy in pre-industrial England. It grew from a larger interest in social structure and cultural change in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and supplies one line of attack on a vexed and important question. What were the limits of participation in the main stream of early modern society? To what extent could people at different social levels share in the political, religious, literary and cultural episodes for which their age is famous? How vital was the ability to read and write, and how widely distributed were those skills? If we can reconstruct the profile of literacy in pre-industrial England and examine the uses to which it was put we may better understand the pattern of communications and its importance for social cohesion and change.

The approach adopted here involves a combination of humanist and social science methods. Traditional archival and literary research into education, religion, social commentary and law is blended with a quantitative investigation of social structure and cultural attainment. I have tried to expose with candour the formidable problems of evidence and analysis with which this undertaking is encumbered, while providing the reader with reliable information about the penetration and significance of literacy. Attention is drawn to gaps in the evidence as well as to firm conclusions, and there is an implicit invitation to inter-disciplinary collaboration and further research.

Almost a decade of data-gathering, thinking and writing has gone into this book, although the pace of research has not been at all constant. Some of that time has been spent pondering Tudor palaeography or seventeenth-century bibliography and several months were spent tending the terminal of a DEC-10 computer. In the course of this study I have incurred many debts which cannot be discharged by a simple list of acknowledgements.

Professor G. R. Elton of Clare College, Cambridge, taught me to love documents but not to trust them. Peter Laslett of Trinity College, Cambridge, has been constantly encouraging and has stimulated and challenged my thinking about social structure.

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x *Preface*

Richard Wall and others at the SSRC/Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure offered criticism and advice over coffee and biscuits and drew my attention to theses and articles which I would otherwise have missed. Margaret Spufford has been my closest critic and although she will not agree with everything in this book she may recognize her influence in several chapters. Above all I am grateful to Roger Schofield, without whose help this book could not have been written. The basic research design is his and he has generously allowed me access to the data he collected for his own unpublished study of illiteracy. The argument of this book and the statistics which support it would both be much weaker without his contribution, although the figures here and the conclusions drawn from them are my own.

Librarians and archivists everywhere have been helpful but special thanks are due to the staff of the Cambridge University Library, Guildhall Library, London, and the Huntington Library, San Marino, California, who always made me want to return. Thanks are due to the students at Pitzer College, Claremont, California, who unveiled the mysteries of computer programming and data management, especially Houston P. Lowry, Richard Lee and E. Berkeley Shands, who were so patient with my demands. Various stages of this research were supported by grants from the American Council of Learned Societies, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Pitzer College Research and Development Committee. In 1978 I was a Fellow of the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, studying 'literacy and the character of English migration to early America', and some of the material examined at that time has found its way into this book.