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CHAPTER 1

Narratives

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No matter how refined and penetrating the study of original materials may have become, historians would be in a bad way if they did not have the work of their predecessors to guide them. Although the middle ages did not regard the study or writing of history with any great respect, they nevertheless practised it. Curiosity about the past and a desire to perpetuate the memory of the present are universal human attributes, while from ancient Rome, that general fount of learning, there survived examples to act as instructors. Some men devoted themselves seriously to the study of the past and deserve the name of historians. Others were content to note whatever came to their eyes and ears; bare chronicles and mere annals—lists of events ordered by years—are plentiful. The later middle ages yield quantities of such writings, of very varied competence and extent. In general, however, there was a decline in quality from the work of the twelfth century, and the fifteenth descended to a point little higher than that reached in the dark ages of the Danish invasions. However,

BIBLIOGRAPHY. The chronicles for the last three medieval centuries are listed, together with notes of discussions about them, in the bibliographies of three volumes of the Oxford History of England: F. M. Powicke, *The Thirteenth Century* (1953), 730–5; M. McKisack, *The Fourteenth Century* (1959), 543–9; E. F. Jacob, *The Fifteenth Century* (1961), 730–5. For the Tudor chronicles see *Bibliography of English History: the Tudor Period*, ed. C. Read (2nd ed. Oxford 1959), 25–9. There are two standard series of editions: the Rolls Series (R.S.), officially called ‘*Rerum Britannicarum Medii Aevi Scriptores*’, published from 1858 onwards and now obtainable from Her Majesty’s Stationery Office; and the still progressing ‘Medieval Classics’, edited by V. H. Galbraith and R. A. B. Mynors, published by Nelson (N.M.C.). This latter series prints the original and a translation on opposing pages. Many chronicles, however, have appeared independently from these

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towards the end of that century historical studies received a new impetus from the influence of Italian scholarship which, in the hands of learned humanists, had revived critical methods and improved, without profoundly altering, the characteristic chronicle style of the middle ages. The humanists still wrote consecutive narrative, still thought largely of purely political history, and still tended to organise their matter by years, though they usually managed to give a better shape to their histories and to investigate cause and effect a little more searchingly. Tudor historical writing was influenced by these innovations through the work of Polydore Vergil, an Italian resident in England for many years from 1502 onwards, who wrote a big history of his host country down to 1537. The narrative sources for our period therefore fall into three groups: the last set of serious chronicles of the medieval type, the scrappy and often primitive aftermath of this activity, and the reinvigorated chroniclers of the sixteenth century.

The first group of writings, covering the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, is both quite full and largely continuous. At the Benedictine abbey of St Albans, something like a tradition of historical enterprise established itself with Roger Wendover in the early thirteenth century. He was succeeded by Matthew Paris, the most prolific and idiosyncratic historian of medieval England; and after some lesser names and a partial lapse the tradition came

series; some are listed in the footnotes to this chapter. A good introduction to the medieval histories is provided by J. Taylor, *The Use of Medieval Chronicles* (Historical Association: Helps for Students of History No. 70; 1965). For medieval scholarship see especially two lectures by V. H. Galbraith: *Roger Wendover and Matthew Paris* (Glasgow 1944) and *Historical Research in Medieval England* (London 1951). On Tudor historiography see F. J. Levy, *Tudor Historical Thought* (San Marino, Calif., 1967) and F. S. Fussner, *The Historical Revolution: English Historical Writing and Thought 1580-1640* (London 1962). Two valuable studies of individual historians are: R. Vaughan, *Matthew Paris* (Cambridge 1958), and D. Hay, *Polydore Vergil: Renaissance Historian and Man of Letters* (Oxford 1952). (P.S. The N.M.C. series is now published by the Oxford University Press.)

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to an end with Thomas Walsingham in the early fifteenth century.¹ For just over two centuries, English history thus benefited from the labours of men who were sufficiently close to the centre of affairs to escape the purely parochial. Other monks, too, assist us. At Bury St Edmunds, Jocelin de Brakelond's fascinating account of Abbot Samson—an attempt at general history which turned into a biographical monograph—seems to have inspired the keeping of a chronicle which terminated in 1301.² A Yorkshire monk, Walter of Gisborough, variegates our knowledge in a work once ascribed to Walter of Hemmingburgh (and so cited in the older books);³ this ends early in the reign of Edward II. Matthew Paris ran down to 1265; from then on the Norwich chronicle of Bartholomew Cotton fills the gap.⁴ The fine work of Gervase of Canterbury, so important for the twelfth century, was brought down to 1207 by Gervase himself; a valuable continuation was kept at Canterbury to the death of Edward I.⁵ All these are general chronicles, well aware of the world at large. More specialised information comes from a less usual source, two narrative poems. William the Marshal, the great knight and administrator, inspired an enormous piece of 19,214 lines in rhymed French, while Simon de Montfort moved an Oxford Franciscan to an ecstatic admiration embodied in a much shorter Latin poem.⁶

Even larger in number though inferior in quality are the records of the fourteenth century. The insufficiencies of the St Albans

¹ The St Albans tradition is discussed by Galbraith and Vaughan in the works cited in the Bibliography on p. 14. See also V. H. Galbraith, *The St Albans Chronicle 1406-1420* (Oxford 1937) and 'Thomas Walsingham and the St Albans Chronicle 1272-1422', *English Historical Review* (1932), 12-30.

² Both these works have appeared in N.M.C.: *The Chronicle of Jocelin de Brakelond*, ed. H. E. Butler (1949); *The Chronicle of Bury St Edmunds 1212-1301*, ed. Antonia Gransden (1964).

³ *The Chronicle of Walter of Gisborough*, ed. H. Rothwell (Camden Series, vol. 89; London 1957).

⁴ *Historia Anglicana*, ed. H. R. Luard (R.S. 1859).

⁵ Gervase of Canterbury, *Chronicles*, ed. W. Stubbs (R.S. 1879-80), vol. 2.

⁶ *L'Histoire de Guillaume le Maréchal*, ed. Paul Meyer (3 vols; Paris 1891-1901); *The Song of Lewes*, ed. C. L. Kingsford (Oxford 1889).

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series before about 1380 are compensated for by the works of two secular clerks from Oxfordshire. Adam Murimuth covers the years 1303–47; Geoffrey le Baker is useful for the years 1320–56.¹ In the many-authored *Flores Historiarum*, building up on Matthew Paris, a Westminster monk, Robert of Reading, wrote a section which provides an original contribution on the reign of Edward II.² Even more valuable is the anonymous *Life* of that king, written by a monk who had meant to compose a general history but came to deviate into biography.³ The military exploits of Edward III are recorded by Robert of Avesbury⁴ and at greater length in the remarkable chronicles of the layman Jean Froissart who in his history of fourteenth-century wars and chivalry concentrated mostly on France and Burgundy, but of course recorded the deeds of the invading English and in consequence incorporated some internal English history.⁵ More domestic matters form the mainstay of an exceptional contribution from the mostly silent north, the Anonimale Chronicle of the abbey of St Mary's, York, important especially because it incorporates newsletters received from the south.⁶ For the last quarter of the fourteenth century and the first of the fifteenth, we possess in addition to Walsingham the writings of another two secular clerks of notable ability, Henry Knighton and Adam of Usk.⁷ There are other lesser accounts, some very petty but some adding significantly to knowledge.

As we move into the fifteenth century, this abundance is

¹ Adam Murimuth, *Continuatio Chronicarum*, ed. E. M. Thompson (R.S. 1889); Geoffrey le Baker, *Chronicon*, ed. E. M. Thompson (Oxford 1889).

² *Flores Historiarum*, ed. H. R. Luard (R.S. 1890), Vol. 2, 137–235.

³ *Vita Edwardi Secundi*, ed. N. Denholm-Young (N.M.C. 1957).

⁴ Added by Thompson to his edition of Murimuth (above, n. 1).

⁵ The Tudor translation of Froissart by Lord Berners, still the best complete version in English, was republished by W. K. Ker in his series, *Tudor Translations* (6 vols, London 1901–3).

⁶ *The Anonimale Chronicle 1333–1381*, ed. V. H. Galbraith (Manchester 1927).

⁷ *Henry Knighton's Chronicle*, ed. J. R. Lumby (2 vols; R.S. 1889, 1895); *Chronicon Adae de Usk*, ed. E. M. Thompson (London 1904).

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replaced by real dearth.¹ Though some monastic establishments continued to keep chronicles, these rarely now amounted to anything much; like that very belated example, the register kept by Butley Priory in the early sixteenth century,² they confined themselves much more exclusively to the affairs of the house that produced them. Equally localised were the interests of the town chroniclers who multiplied in this century. But because London was already very much the centre of affairs, the lively chronicle tradition of that city contributes something of value to the general historian. However, what was done in the main part of the century was scrappy and recorded little except city affairs.³ Work in this tradition improved a great deal in the reign of Henry VII and led straight to more serious historical efforts in that of Henry VIII.⁴ By the side of this poor material we can put little except the English *Brut*, a vernacular set of annals terminating in 1479 which after 1333 includes original contributions; before that, the English *Brut* is a translation from a French original which owes too much to legend and fable.⁵ Altogether, the *Brut* is so poor a source that it is used only for periods not described in better books. The fifteenth century produced something like a new phenomenon in the lay antiquary William of Worcester, an ardent collector of materials, some of whose notebooks survive; however, these do not significantly contribute to knowledge.⁶

¹ See C. L. Kingsford, *English Historical Literature in the Fifteenth Century* (Oxford 1913).

² *The Register of Butley Priory, Suffolk, 1510-1535*, ed. A. G. Dickens (Winchester 1951).

³ *Chronicles of London*, ed. C. L. Kingsford (Oxford 1905).

⁴ *The Great Chronicle of London*, ed. A. H. Thomas and I. D. Thornley (London 1938). The introductions to the works mentioned in this and the preceding footnotes provide the best account of the London chronicles, extant and lost.

⁵ *The Brut or the Chronicles of England*, ed. F. W. D. Brie (2 vols; Early English Text Society, London 1906, 1908). The work is called by this name because it begins with the popular fairy-tale of England's colonisation by one Brutus, eponymous hero of Britain.

⁶ K. B. McFarlane, 'William of Worcester, a preliminary survey', *Studies Presented to Sir Hilary Jenkinson*, ed. J. Conway Davies (London 1957), 196-221.

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The increasing number of writings not of the chronicle type will be considered in the appropriate place.

After this two things happened to historical writing in England. One was the arrival of 'humanist' historiography in the hands of Polydore Vergil, scholar and papal tax-collector; this has already been mentioned. The other was the invention of printing. History sold, and history therefore served the printing presses well; in supplying the new reading public, the popular historians tried to abstract and transmit the work of their medieval predecessors, as well as to continue it into their own time. The work produced falls into two main types. On the one hand we have books that deal with a relatively short period of history and even make a theme of it. To this category belong Edward Hall's account of the triumphant emergence of the House of Tudor and William Camden's history of the reign of Elizabeth.¹ Apart from these largely original compositions, on the other hand, there appeared vast compilations covering either all or most of England's history. Of this profitable literary enterprise, Richard Grafton, the printer, was the first exponent; Ralph Holinshed composed the largest and most read collection; John Stowe's chronicle was the most careful.² Both Grafton and Stowe published abridgements of their mammoth works, an idea in which Matthew Paris had preceded them. These chronicles embodied both the London tradition and the best known medieval chronicles, especially those of St Albans; though they learned both matter and manner from Polydore, they reacted against his criticism with a chauvinistic attachment to the *Brut*; for their own time, they added much detail, some of it resting on careful research. Between them, Polydore and the native Tudor chroniclers really established the outline of the traditional 'kings of England' type of history. The

¹ E. Hall, *The Union of the two noble and illustre families York and Lancastre* (best edition: London 1809); Hall finished his work down to 1532, but the remainder to the death of Henry VIII rests on his notes. W. Camden, *Annales rerum anglicarum et hibernicarum regnante Elizabetha* (best English edition: 1688).

² First editions and best editions: Grafton 1568, 1809; Holinshed (1577), 1587, 1807–8; Stowe, many editions starting in 1580.

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sixteenth century also witnessed a more sophisticated continuation of the biographical tradition going back to Asser and Jocelin: Thomas More's one-sided *Life* of Richard III was used by Hall, but the better book on Wolsey by George Cavendish remained unpublished and unknown until the nineteenth century.¹ There are a few minor diaries and chronicles of independent value.

One exceptional work, however, which clearly belongs to the narratives, deserves special mention: John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments*, or, as the popular term has it, his *Book of Martyrs*, one of the most influential books ever to appear in English. Excessively hostile criticism nearly demolished Foxe's credit in the nineteenth century, but modern scholars have come to the conclusion that he was a careful worker whose unquestioned bias did not destroy the reliability of his research. Although Foxe told the story of Christian martyrs back to the foundation of the Church, his important contribution covers the persecution of English dissenters from the early fifteenth century to 1558; and for this period and topic he remains indispensable.²

Thus, while there was plenty of history written in these centuries, by no means all the period enjoyed equal benefit. The first thing to note is that none of the writers mentioned can be said to have been outstanding historians. An exception should probably be made for Camden, a man worthy of regard in any company, who in his narrative writing, however, concerned himself with only a very short piece of history. Polydore Vergil scored in the main by a degree of independence, a product of his foreign birth and humanist training, but he did less with these advantages than might be supposed; he cannot compare with other Italian historians like Bruni or Guiccardini, brought a second-rate mind to his

¹ Best editions: Thomas More, *The History of King Richard III*, ed. R. S. Sylvester (New Haven 1963); G. Cavendish, *The Life and Death of Cardinal Wolsey*, ed. R. S. Sylvester (Early English Text Soc., London 1959).

² Best editions by S. R. Cattley and G. Townsend (8 vols, London 1837-41) and J. Pratt (8 vols, London 1870). For a discussion of Foxe's scholarship and influence see J. F. Mozley, *John Foxe and his Book* (London 1940) and W. Haller, *Foxe's Book of Martyrs and the Elect Nation* (London 1963).

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systematisation of the past, and showed little objectivity in his treatment of his own time. Hall was honest and just capable of organised thought; Stowe's industry and care were not matched by his control or by a sufficiently critical sense. As for the medieval chroniclers, even Matthew Paris cannot be mentioned in the same breath as such real historians of earlier times as Bede or William of Malmesbury. This lack of intellectual distinction was aggravated by the primary principle of medieval and Tudor historiography. In his study of the past the historian's first duty was to collect the best accounts and transcribe them as accurately as possible, not to analyse and reconstruct them; how could he, who had not lived through those events, know better than those who had? He applied criticism only in the most limited sense, that is in deciding which past statement was the better and more trustworthy. 'Original composition was the last refuge of the historian.'¹ Most chroniclers reached a long way back—to the Creation or the Fall or the Flood, or at least to the arrival of Brutus in England. But what they had to say about the times before their own is readily identified as more or less verbatim borrowing from their predecessors.² The Tudor chroniclers were no better in this. Men like Grafton or Holinshed collected; they did not study, analyse or compose.

Naturally, this method failed the historian when he came to his own time; there, reluctantly, he had to make his own contribution to the common stock. For the modern student of these centuries, all the writers really matter only when they are writing contemporary history. Here again their quality and usefulness vary widely, but it should be understood that the amount of sheer knowledge that they convey is considerable. One can distinguish two main methods employed: either the chronicler assembled the facts and events of one year after another (as was the habit of Matthew Paris or Edward Hall), or he wrote a series

¹ Galbraith, *Historical Research*, 6.

² See, e.g. Luard's edition of Cotton's *Historia* (15, n. 4) which very illuminatingly uses different type to distinguish wholesale borrowing from original writing.

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of individual and distinct stories (as did Roger Wendover or Henry Knighton). Both types, however, really proceed straightforwardly through the years, as indeed they were bound to do when describing contemporary events, a fact which inhibits these writers from ever achieving a structured narrative. Fundamentally, they record only. Analysis and explanation are very rare, a criticism which must apply even to Polydore who at least does tell the story. But even in their mere record the differences are marked. The very brief and scrappy notes of the Bury St Edmunds chronicle, for instance, which give even to the striking events of 1258 a mere few lines squeezed between a remark on the weather and a note on the election of a local prior, would seem to suggest what many believe—that monkish chroniclers could not be expected to know even what went on in their own time outside their immediate vicinity. But a few pages later the chronicle blossoms forth, and the Barons' War gets a very full treatment. The St Albans chroniclers lived in one of the lively centres of England, met many travellers, and (as Matthew Paris records) made it their business to learn all they could; here the events not only of England but of the greater world, too (pope and emperor, France and the Levant) find record. Knighton gives a long and personal account of Wycliffe and Lollardy which fills over forty pages in print; Adam of Usk tells the story of the 1388 Parliament from personal experience and in vivid detail. The newsletters incorporated in the Anonimale Chronicle preserve not only a good account of the 1381 Peasants' Rebellion (this one might not wonder at) but also the inside story of the Good Parliament of 1376 in a manner not matched again until Edward Hall, a burgess of the Reformation Parliament, came to describe events there. The contemporary parts of these major chronicles are therefore always as important to the historian as the rest is negligible.

This means that for the thirteenth, fourteenth and sixteenth centuries we possess a reasonable account of events which can be reconstructed from the words of contemporary writers. The fifteenth is in a much less happy condition: no writer of