

THE  
PASTON FAMILY  
IN THE  
FIFTEENTH CENTURY

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*Fastolf's will*

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# INTRODUCTION

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## I

What did the Pastons think of Joan the Meatless? Thomas Netter, who died in 1430, wrote:<sup>1</sup>

I will cite a case from our own time and experience. In the northern part of England, called Norfolk, which is very rich in both temporal and spiritual things, there recently lived a devout Christian girl called in the vulgar tongue Joan the Meatless, because it was proven that she had not tasted food or drink for fifteen years, but only fed with the greatest joy every Sunday on the sacrament of the Lord's body.

Agnes and William Paston no doubt encountered Joan. She is not, however, in the Paston Letters. Why not? Was she not sufficiently sensational? I miss the point. The point is that Joan the Meatless lived (and no doubt died) in unsensational Norfolk, humdrum, homely Norfolk, as unlike, apparently, Huizinga's fifteenth-century universe as Caroline Walker Bynum's twentieth-century world. Yet there Joan was. She makes me think that I might have mistaken the Norfolk of the Pastons, or indeed the Pastons themselves.

When reading the Paston Letters it is easy to slip into the Dickensian view of English history, a view epitomised by Dickens' attitude towards English law: 'The one great principle of the English Law is, to make business for itself. There is no other principle distinctly, certainly, and consistently maintained through all its narrow turnings.'<sup>2</sup> Is the English past, like the English present, nothing but business? The Pastons make us think so; Joan the Meatless impels us to think otherwise. It is in an endeavour to think otherwise about the Pastons that I have written the first chapter of the book. Thereafter the narrative is more business-like; it is about the business of Fastolf's will, which, nonetheless, was much more (much, much more) than a matter of business. The narrative is dogged. There are few digressions or diversions: more Blaise Pascal or Thomas More than Norman Mailer. Here is

<sup>1</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast. The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Los Angeles and London, 1987), pp. 91–2.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Dickens, *Bleak House* (Penguin edn, 1971), pp. 603–4.

Pascal: 'Cet ordre consiste principalement à la digression sur chaque point qu'on rapporte à la fin, pour la montrer toujours.'<sup>3</sup> Whereas here is Mailer: 'Baby, the way you make it is on the distractions.'<sup>4</sup> If I 'make it' at all in the present volume it is not even on digressions.

The Pastons, among themselves at any rate, were not as bad as the Flytes:<sup>5</sup>

'Really,' I said, 'if you are going to embark on a solitary bout of drinking every time you see a member of your family, it's perfectly hopeless.'

'Oh, yes,' said Sebastian with great sadness. 'I know. It's hopeless.'

Although the Flytes were Catholics, they were inescapably modern; the Pastons were not: they never ran out of hope. For that reason alone, if for no other, and there are many others, they are not a family, even in the matter of Fastolf's will, who drive me to drink. I have no need, as Georges Perec has phrased it, 'To seek in the fertility of his [one's, my] imagination resources against the sterility of history.'<sup>6</sup> The Pastons are imaginative enough for me. What carries me away is them. Proust has warned against what he saw as a diversion; 'truth', he wrote, 'no longer appears to us as an ideal . . . but as something material, deposited between the leaves of books . . . which we need only take down from the shelves of libraries'. Ah, libraries; ah, archives: for Proust, temptation was a document in the archive of a convent in Dordrecht; for me it is the documents in the archive of a college in Oxford. All that discovering the Pastons, their friends, and their enemies at Magdalen means to me is best caught in Proust's sublime passage:<sup>7</sup>

Then it is some secret document, some unpublished correspondence, some memoir, that may shed light on certain characters, but which can be communicated to us only with difficulty. What happiness, what respite for a mind weary of seeking the truth within, to tell itself that the truth is located outside, in the sheets of an in-folio jealously guarded in a convent in Holland, and that, though it may cost us some effort to come by it, that effort will be purely material, will be for the mind no more than a charming relaxation. To be sure, it will mean taking a long journey by passenger barge across fenlands moaning with the wind, while on the banks the reeds bow and straighten by turns in a ceaseless undulation; it will mean stopping in Dordrecht, whose ivy-clad church will be mirrored in the net-work of dormant canals and in the golden, tremulous Meuse, in which, of an evening, the boats as they glide by disturb the linear reflections of the red roofs and the blue sky; and having arrived at last at the end of our journey, we shall still not be certain of being given the truth. For that, powerful influences must be brought into play and friends made with the venerable archbishop of Utrecht, with his fine square face like that of an ancient Jansenist, and with the pious keeper of the archives in Amersfoot. In cases such as this, the conquest

<sup>3</sup> Louis L. Martz, *Thomas More. The Search for the Inner Man* (New Haven and London, 1990), p. 35; Martz goes on to discuss Thomas More, who 'never lost sight of the end'.

<sup>4</sup> Norman Mailer, *Why Are We in Vietnam?* (Panther edn, 1970), p. 7.

<sup>5</sup> Evelyn Waugh, *Brideshead Revisited* (Penguin edn, 1962), p. 137.

<sup>6</sup> Georges Perec, '53 days' (Eng. trans., 1992), p. 133.

<sup>7</sup> Marcel Proust, *On Reading*, trans. and ed. John Sturrock (Penguin Books, 1994), pp. 36–9.

of the truth is conceived of as the success of a sort of diplomatic mission in which the journey was not without its difficulties nor the negotiation its hazards. But what matter? All those members of the little old church in Utrecht, on whose goodwill we are dependent if we are to enter into possession of the truth, are charming folk whose seventeenth-century faces make a change from those we are accustomed to and with whom it will be so agreeable to remain in touch, at least by letter. The esteem with which, from time to time, they will continue to send us the evidence, will elevate us in our own eyes and we shall keep their letters as a certificate and as a curiosity. And we shall not fail one day to dedicate one of our books to them, which is certainly the least one can do for people who have made one a gift of the truth. And as for the few researches, the brief labour we shall be obliged to undertake in the library of the convent and which will be the indispensable prelude to the act of entering into possession of the truth – the truth on which, for greater prudence and so as not to risk its escaping from us, we shall take notes – it would be graceless of us to complain of the trouble they may have cost us: the coolness and tranquility of the old convent are so exquisite, where the nuns are still wearing the tall wimples with white wings that they have on in the Roger van der Weyden in the visitors' room; and as we work, the seventeenth-century carillons affectionately take the chill off the artless waters of the canal, which a little pale sunlight is sufficient to cause to dazzle us between the double row of trees, bare since the end of summer, which brush against the mirrors hanging from the gabled houses on either bank.

There are no nuns at Magdalen; there is, however, the generous-hearted and ever-courteous archivist, Janie Collis. It is with Proust's prose in mind that I wish to thank Mrs Collis for her graciousness on my many visits to the college archive. She will appear again in the Conclusion. There are other archivists (and librarians, but no archbishops) who also deserve my gratitude and gladly are given it here: those at Norwich and Ipswich particularly, but those also in the Manuscripts Room of the British Library, at the Public Record Office, in Duke Humfrey at the Bodleian Library, and at Keele University Library; especially at the latter, Martin Phillips, who allowed me to keep that library's copy of Blomefield's *Norfolk* in my room for eighteen months. I thank you all for being the bringers of pleasure, as well as for being the bearers of truth, over thirty-five years.

## II

There is more to history than reading it in peaceful places; writing it is a different matter entirely; as Proust knew only too well, writing can become life itself, is life itself. How does the historian avoid that fate? By listening to Wittgenstein as well as Proust. By listening to Wittgenstein talking to himself. For example: 'Nur sich nicht von Fragen überhäufen lassen; nur es sich bequem machen!'<sup>8</sup> The historian might translate: Don't get carried

<sup>8</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Notebooks 1914–1916*, ed. G.H. von Wright and G.E.M. Anscombe, with an English translation by G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford, 1969), p. 5.

away by analysis; just take it easy!' He might do so because of what Wittgenstein went on to say a quarter of a century later:<sup>9</sup>

People who are constantly asking 'why' are like tourists who stand in front of a building reading Baedeker and are so busy reading the history of its construction, etc., that they are prevented from seeing the building.

We can go one step further with Wittgenstein; in the *Tractatus* itself he defines what my narrative of the affair of Fastolf's will intends:<sup>10</sup>

One name stands for one thing, another for another thing, and they are combined with one another. In this way the whole group – like a tableau vivant – presents a state of affairs.

Little more need be said: let the narrative speak for itself. And, dear reader, just take it easy.

The little consists of the following. One historian has written in an introduction to his book: 'An author owes it to his readers to explain what his book is about and why it was written.'<sup>11</sup> I could not agree less. Any more than Ruskin would have: 'The moment a man can really do his work he becomes speechless about it.'<sup>12</sup> The craze for explanation on the part of artists, writers, and (even it appears) historians, has to be associated with an emphasis on analysis. Is this because we are children of the Age of Analysis? It may also be, and because we are, that we lack confidence to allow the work to speak for itself. We are certainly not in the Age of Ruskin, nor that of his great pupil Proust, whose advice to writers has been rigorously adhered to here:<sup>13</sup>

When we work in order to please others, we may fail to succeed, but the things we have done to satisfy ourselves always have a chance of interesting someone else. It is impossible that there should be no one who takes any pleasure in what has given me so much.

Not that I, or anyone else, these days, these latter days, the Age of Samuel Beckett and emphatically not the Age of Proust, would put it with such confidence; nevertheless, I would put it, as Beckett does: 'No future in this. Alas yes. It stands. See in the dim void how at last it stands.'<sup>14</sup> Thus: let the work stand for itself; however much alas.

<sup>9</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, ed. G.H. von Wright, in collaboration with Heikki Nyman, translated by Peter Winch (Oxford, 1980), p. 40.

<sup>10</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness (1974), p. 22.

<sup>11</sup> Richard Bessel, *Germany After the First World War* (Oxford, 1933), p. v.

<sup>12</sup> John Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies* (Tenth edn, 1895), p. 176.

<sup>13</sup> Marcel Proust, *On Reading Ruskin*, trans. and ed. Jean Autret, William Burford, and Phillip J. Wolfe (New Haven and London, 1987), p. 10.

<sup>14</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Worstward Ho* (1983) p. 10. My thanks to Thomas Richmond for introducing me to this work of the master.



Beckett shall also speak on my behalf to thank all those who have continued saying 'Alas yes' when I have been saying to myself 'No future in this.' Here he is:<sup>15</sup>

The words too whosoever. What room for worse! How almost true they sometimes almost ring! How wanting in inanity! Say the night is young alas and take heart. Or better worse say still a watch of night alas to come. And take heart.

Thank you Margaret Aston, Barrie Dobson, and Anthony Smith, all of whom out of friendship and not through a sense of duty also read the text, John Bossy, Andrew Charlesworth, Cliff Davies, Rees Davies, Edmund Fryde, Richard Godden, Ralph Griffiths, Gerald Harriss, Isobel Harvey, Rhian Hughes, Richard Marks, Carol Meale, David Morgan, Philip Morgan, Myrna Richmond, Felicity Riddy, and Peter Rycraft for encouraging me, both with words and by example, to take heart. I am also grateful to Bernard Finnemore for compiling the index once again, and to William Davies for supporting me throughout (once more).

### III

If there is room for explanation, to answer the question not why does he write about the Pastons, but why write about the Pastons, then it has to be along the lines of Michael Riviere's poem, 'On Lady Katherine Paston's Tomb at Oxnead':<sup>16</sup>

And since we put the resurrection  
Even of annual crops to chance,  
Eternity of blood's no longer, as once,  
Any man's confident possession.

We do with less than that:  
The uncertain hope that someone not yet born  
May saunter here on a remote June morning  
To find the key under the mat.

Whatever one may think of the false claims of the English gentry to 'eternity of blood', especially the Paston claim, the gentry's confidence is not to be questioned. Moreover, that class's claim to possession (of property, of other men's lives and souls, of virtue) was also confident. Gentry pride is nowhere more evident than in the story of the Pastons and Fastolf's will, even if it came before, and may have led to, a great fall. Indeed, that story may be the story of Humpty-Dumpty, albeit with the proviso that in this case Humpty was put together again. How the Pastons were patched together after 1469

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 20–1.

<sup>16</sup> *East Anglia in Verse*, ed. Angus Wilson (Penguin edn, 1984), p. 75.

is told here; it was self-patching principally by John II, aided by his uncle William II. The complete putting together again after 1485 by John III and John, Earl of Oxford will be a story told in a third volume.<sup>17</sup> Whatever the nature of the English gentry, and of my ambition to exhibit them without their clothes, I write in the hope that others will look for the key and not take my word for where precisely it lies under the mat. Beyond that I wish only to repeat what another historian has written in his introduction: 'I have described what I saw, in honesty, and I have tried to understand, where I have no experience.'<sup>18</sup>

Those who have helped me, if not to be honest at any rate to be solvent, also require thanks. I am grateful to the Leverhulme Trust for a second time for the fellowship which enabled me to have two semesters free of teaching. I thank also the British Academy for a grant towards travel and research; indeed, I need to thank them twice, having forgotten to do so for a similar grant towards the work for *The first phase*. I hope this will make amends.

#### IV

A final, and the fullest, debt requires acknowledgement. Ernst Cassirer has described Immanuel Kant:<sup>19</sup>

It must have been the effect of Kant's conversation and personal relationships that earned him [this] respect, just as later, when all his major philosophical works had finally appeared, his most intimate friends and pupils were adamant in their assertion that in personal intercourse and in his lectures Kant was 'far more genial than in his books,' and had squandered 'an immeasurable wealth of ideas'. The special mark of his originality they found just here, for with the run-of-the-mill academician, the book is commonly more learned than its author, whereas the depth and special quality of the 'true independent thinker' manifests itself precisely in that his writings do not rank above their author but remain subordinate to him.

For Immanuel Kant read Bruce McFarlane. It seems to me all of a piece with run-of-the-mill academics that the talk is of squandering time. *The Paston family in the fifteenth century* is because McFarlane was prodigal with his.

<sup>17</sup> A sudden thought: was John Paston II named for John de Vere? Both were born in 1442. The Paston connection with the earls of Oxford was close, perhaps closer than it was with the Dukes of Norfolk; see below, p. 118, fn. 40.

<sup>18</sup> Malcolm Lambert, *Franciscan Poverty* (1961), p. xv.

<sup>19</sup> Ernst Cassirer, *Kant's Life and Thought* (New Haven and London, 1981), pp. 40–1.