

CHAPTER TEN

Oral Tradition

Where there is no penman to record the memorable acts and passages of times,
the memory of them is swallowed up in the gulfe of oblivion.

(Sir Thomas Widdrington, *Analecta Eboracensia*, c.1660¹)

IT IS OFTEN overlooked that early modern antiquaries relied to a great extent not only on manuscript and archaeological material, but also on a variety of oral sources ranging from popular traditions to the personal recollections of the aged. The purposes of this final chapter are to examine more closely the uses to which oral traditions were put between 1500 and 1700; to explore the changing attitudes of the recorders to the content and sources of such traditions; and to offer an interpretation of their declining status as historical sources in the seventeenth century and their eventual exile to the wilderness of folklore and vulgar error. I shall argue that this decline can be attributed to a number of contemporaneous developments. These include changing attitudes to historical evidence as *historical* evidence (what historians of history are usually interested in); broader reconceptualizations of the nature of truth; the related, widening division between learned and popular cultures; and the evolving agenda of antiquarian research.

The subject of oral traditions has recently attracted the attention of several students of early modern social history.² Yet most accounts of English antiquarianism have little to say on the topic, either ignoring oral traditions altogether or summarily dismissing them as an example of lingering medieval credulity in otherwise forward-looking scholars. The reason why this should be so is clear

¹ BL MS Egerton 2578, fo. 8^v (also included in the printed edition by C. Caine, 1897). The present chapter is a revised version of my article, 'The "Common Voice": History, Folklore, and Oral Tradition in Early Modern England', *Past and Present*, 120 (Aug. 1988), 26–52. I am grateful to Prof. Michael Hunter for a helpful critique of the original essay, and to Dr Adam Fox for several useful exchanges on the subject.

² See especially A. Fox, 'Remembering the Past in Early Modern England: Oral and Written Tradition', *TRHS*, 6th ser., 9 (1999), 233–56; id. *Oral and Literate Culture in England* (Oxford, 2000); P. Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (1978), 91–115; B. Reay (ed.), *Popular Culture in Seventeenth-Century England* (1985), introduction and *passim*. For the general position of oral tradition in European culture after the Renaissance, Giuseppe Cocchiara's classic study, first published in 1952, remains useful, especially for the period after 1700: *The History of Folklore in Europe*, trans. J. N. McDaniel (Philadelphia, 1981), 2–3, 203–5. For the fate of oral culture in the nineteenth century, see D. Vincent, 'The Decline of the Oral Tradition in Popular Culture', in R. D. Storch (ed.), *Popular Culture and Custom in Nineteenth-Century England* (1982), 20–47, and id. *Literacy and Popular Culture: England 1750–1914* (Cambridge, 1989), 181 ff.

enough: most modern historians place little stock in oral sources when they study anything more remote than their grandparents' generation. We have, in increasing volume as the past approaches the present, a multitude of books, documents, letters, manuscripts, coins, funeral urns, paintings, and maps from which to reconstruct history. Such 'hard' evidence is to be preferred, where it can be found, to the 'soft' evidence of folk tale, unwritten and undatable local custom, and ancestral tradition, because only the former is both tangible and more easily verifiable through reference to other sources. But the early modern antiquary could not always be so fussy.

FORMS OF EARLY MODERN ORAL TRADITION

Recent scholars such as Ruth Finnegan have argued against making universalizing claims about the 'nature' or form of oral tradition, or about the manner in which it reacts when it comes into contact with writing.³ Early modern oral traditions were much more informal and far less structured than the modern, performative African traditions to which they bear a superficial resemblance.⁴ Nor is there anything in English oral tradition that rivals the contemporary Inca dynastic memory that the Spaniard Cieza de León found in Peru. This included a story 'that the Indians who told it to me say that they heard [it] from their ancestors, who in like manner heard it in the old songs which they received from very ancient times'. These were presented in public ritual performances around images of previous rulers, and principally concerned the events of their reigns, entrusted successively by each king to 'three or four old men, known for their intelligence and ability, who were instructed to retain in their memory all the events that happened in the provinces . . . so that the history of the reign might be had in remembrance in after times.'⁵ Garcilaso de la Vega, 'El Inca', the mestizo historian who described the Inca empire's origins and fall at the beginning of the seventeenth century, similarly reported how the Incas and other Peruvian peoples 'invented endless stories of the origin and beginning of their earliest ancestors'. Seventeenth-century readers of Garcilaso, whose *Royal Commentaries* was first translated into English by Paul Rycaut in 1688, would have learned that the Incas preserved entire speeches, embassies, and accounts of military feats in their memories, 'taught by tradition to their successors and descendants from father to son'. *Amautas* or 'sages' turned these into longer, didactic stories, and

³ R. Finnegan, *Literacy and Orality: Studies in the Technology of Communication* (Oxford, 1988), 87–91, 144–6.

⁴ On the African 'griots', descendants of those first reported by Ibn Battuta in the fourteenth century, see T. A. Hale, *Griots and Griottes: Masters of Words and Music* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, Ind. 1998), esp. pp. 59–113.

⁵ Pedro de Cieza de León, *La chronica del Peru* (Anvers, 1554), trans. and ed. C. R. Markham as *The Travels of Pedro de Cieza de León, A.D. 1532–50, Contained in the First Part of his Chronicle of Peru*, Hakluyt Soc., 33 (1864), part 2, pp. 5, 17, 32.

haraucicus or poets made ‘short compressed poems, embracing a history, or an embassy, or the king’s reply’.⁶ Numerical facts of births, deaths, and numbers killed in particular battles were recorded on a monthly basis in *quipus* or knots, the Inca equivalent of statistics. Garcilaso’s commentary on these methods of commemorating the past, though admiring of his Indian ancestors’ ingenuity, reveals doubts about their accuracy impressed upon him by his Spanish upbringing:

Thus they remembered their history. But as experience has shown, all these were perishable expedients, for it is letters that perpetuate the memory of events. But as the Incas had no knowledge of writing, they had to use what devices they could, and treating their knots as letters, they chose historians and accountants, called *quipucamayus* (‘those who have charge of the knots’) to write down and preserve the tradition of their deeds by means of the knots, strings, and colored threads, using their stories and poems as an aid.⁷

The weakness of this system was that, without genuine Western-style writing, those who did not have possession of the oral traditions were in no position to make sense of the knots. Moreover, oral cultures have little sense of a relative past and either do not assign dates to events in their tradition, or forget large parts of the past. The transmitters of such traditions thereby ‘telescope’ their own history and provide a chronology which, though it is comprehensible to the members of their group, will mislead outside observers conditioned to dealing in firm dates. Cieza found something like this in the recitation of Inca traditions during the public *taquis*, wherein cowardly, lazy, or vicious kings were ordered not to be mentioned.⁸ Datelessness is a frequent, though not invariable, feature of English traditions about the past, and this would not assist in their longer-term adoption by a historical culture oriented towards precise chronology. Garcilaso’s own ambivalence towards tradition and his repeated appeals to the ‘authority’ of printed Spanish histories resembles in many ways the rejection of tradition that would occur in seventeenth-century England.⁹

⁶ Garcilaso de la Vega, *The Royal Commentaries of Peru, in two parts*, trans. P. Rycout (1688); I cite from *Royal commentaries of the Incas, and general history of Peru*, trans. Harold V. Livermore (Austin, Tex. 1966), 49, 62, 89, 130.

⁷ *Ibid.* 332.

⁸ *The Travels of Pedro de Cieza de Leon*, ed. Markham, pt. 2, p. 29. On ‘telescoping’ and other aspects of chronology, see D. Henige, *The Chronology of Oral Tradition* (Oxford, 1974); J. Vansina, *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology*, trans. H. M. Wright (Chicago, 1965); cf. Vansina’s revisions to this work, ‘Once Upon a Time: Oral Traditions as History in Africa’, *Daedalus*, 100 (1971), 442–68, and a more thorough rethinking in his *Oral Tradition as History* (1985); R. Finnegan, ‘A Note on Oral Tradition and Historical Evidence’, *History and Theory*, 9 (1981), 196–201.

⁹ D. A. Brading, ‘The Incas and the Renaissance: The Royal Commentaries of Inca Garcilaso de la Vega’, *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 18 (1985), 1–23; R. L. Kagan, ‘Clio and the Crown: Writing History in Habsburg Spain’, in R. L. Kagan and G. Parker (eds.), *Spain, Europe, and the Atlantic World: Essays in Honour of John H. Elliott* (Cambridge, 1995), 73–99; F. Salomon, ‘Chronicles of the Impossible: Notes on Three Peruvian Indigenous Historians’, in R. Adorno (ed.), *From Oral to Written Expression: Native Andean Chronicles of the Early Colonial Period* (Syracuse, NY, 1982), 9–21; this essay notes the disparity between the native Andean’s idea of a ‘relación’ and the superimposed Spanish version of the *crónica*.

A British example that comes close to Inca traditions is the *eisteddfodau* of the Welsh bards. Briefly revived under Elizabeth and again in the early eighteenth century, these were praised by the poets Henry Vaughan and Michael Drayton for providing an unbroken oral narrative of the past. In Drayton's view, tradition preserved the history of the long-dead British bards and Druids, and was far more durable than the corruptible book:

For, when of ages past we looke in bookes to reade,
 Wee retchlessly discharge our memory of those.
 So when injurious time, such monuments doth lose
 (As what so great a worke, by time that is not wrackt?)
 Wee utterly forgoe that memorable act:
 But when we lay it up within the minds of men,
 They leave it their next age; that, leaves it hers agen.
 So strongly which (me thinks) doth for tradition make,
 As if you from the world it altogether take,
 You utterly subvert antiquitie thereby.¹⁰

But with the possible exception of the *eisteddfodau*, which were a Welsh national rather than a genuinely local practice, there were no 'village remembrancers', men assigned the task of transmitting a stable, 'official' local tradition to succeeding generations.¹¹ The memories of old people on matters of boundaries, property, and custom were a much more informal resource, as noted above. They were also, most often, traditions of stasis ('since time out of mind'), rather than change, and their status as information depended entirely on the disposition of the judicial bodies that employed them as evidence. There were, however, specific beliefs associated with particular places and events, and, at least initially, Tudor antiquaries regarded these as useful evidence.

¹⁰ *Works of Henry Vaughan*, ed. L. C. Martin, 2nd edn. (Oxford, 1957), 696 (Henry Vaughan to John Aubrey, 9 Oct. 1694); Michael Drayton, *Poly-Olbion*, x, lines 234–58, 267–77 ff., in *Works of Michael Drayton*, ed. J. W. Hebel, K. Tillotson, and B. H. Newdigate, 2nd edn., 5 vols. (Oxford, 1961), iv. 207 ff. J. E. Curran Jr., 'The History Never Written: Bards, Druids, and the Problem of Antiquarianism in *Poly Olbion*', *Renaissance Quarterly*, 51 (1998), 498–525. Cf. John Selden's note (*Poly-Olbion*, ed. cit., p. 83) on the *eisteddfod* (which Selden calls a *stethva*). Significantly, Selden (who ordinarily had no use for oral sources) thought that such a *formalized* type of tradition, involving a complete, orderly narrative, would assist historical accuracy by allowing regular correction of inaccuracies by the witnesses to public recitations of community history. The mid-Tudor antiquary and fierce defender of British antiquity Sir John Price used Welsh manuscripts to support the historicity of Geoffrey of Monmouth, but he also made appeal to oral tradition to attack Polydore Vergil in his *Historiae brytannicae defensio* (published posthumously in 1573): J. W. Binns, *Intellectual Culture in Elizabethan and Jacobean England: The Latin Writings of the Age* (Leeds, 1990), 183. The Winchester antiquary John Trussell referred to Druid doctrines as *non literis sed tradita memoria fuit*, which a later annotator of his manuscript rendered as 'the truth of history transferred by tradition'. Hants. RO W/K1/11/1, fos. 9^r, 17.

¹¹ R. Suggett, 'Vagabonds and Minstrels in Sixteenth-Century Wales', in A. Fox and D. Woolf (eds.), *The Spoken Word: Oral Culture in Britain, 1500–1850* (Manchester, 2002), 138–72. On the eighteenth-century revival of the *eisteddfodau*, see G. H. Jenkins, *The Foundations of Modern Wales, 1642–1780* (Oxford, 1987), 229–31, 241–53. For a comparable Scottish example, see James Kirkwood, *A Collection of Highland Rites and Customes*, annotated by Edward Lhwyd and ed. J. L. Campbell (Cambridge and Totowa, NJ, 1975), 55, from Bodl. MS Carte 269.

THE 'COMMON VOICE'

The types of oral evidence exploited by Herodotus, the 'father of history' in the fifth century BC continued to provide a rich source of information for historians and chroniclers through some two millennia after his travels.¹² Many medieval chroniclers used evidence garnered from eyewitnesses to events, as well as traditional tales that were often associated with miracles, or with the cult of a particular saint. Eadmer, writing at the end of the eleventh century, based his *Historia Novorum* on 'things which I have seen with my own eyes and myself heard'. William of Malmesbury reported what he had 'heard from credible authority' and borrowed from old songs to fill out gaps in the written record, while Orderic Vitalis frequently passed on things he had 'learned from the oldest monks and from other people he encountered'.¹³ In most cases, medieval writers exercised due caution in accepting reports, though they generally accepted those which came from men of blameless character: thus Orderic could report without hesitation the testimony of 'a trustworthy man of upright life' while remaining sceptical of many miraculous tales when he himself had seen no 'solid proof of any such things'.¹⁴ Gerald of Wales referred often to 'vulgar tradition', and was impressed by the ability of the Welsh to commit their royal genealogies to memory. It was precisely these memorized traditions which spawned romances such as Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* and vernacular chronicles such as the *Brut*. At the end of the fifteenth century, William Worcestre sought information on places of interest from monks, hermits, and, on occasion, common people. On visiting Bristol in 1480, Worcestre recorded that one 'Dynt, by craft a pumpmaker of the city of Bristol, told several men that he had heard from old people who used to tell him

¹² M. I. Finley, 'Myth, Memory and History', *History and theory*, 4 (1965), 279–302; A. Momigliano, 'Historiography on Written Tradition and Historiography on Oral Tradition', in his *Studies in Historiography* (1966), 211–20, at p. 214. Modern oral historiography is dealt with in P. Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* (Oxford, 1978) and D. Henige, *Oral Historiography* (New York and Lagos, 1982). The theoretical debates on the historical relationship between oral tradition and writing are of only secondary concern here, but it is worth noting at least the following division of opinion. An older school, led by Albert B. Lord and reinforced by subsequent writers such as Marshal McLuhan, sets oral societies in stark contrast to literate ones and romanticizes the democratic qualities of the former. More recent scholars such as Ruth Finnegan have pointed out both that societies which are exclusively literate or illiterate are very rare, and that genuinely oral societies are not necessarily inherently democratic as McLuhan claimed: R. Finnegan, *Oral Poetry* (Cambridge, 1977). Rosalind Thomas has similarly pointed out that ancient Athens was an oral society in many respects but also relied on record-keeping, while reminding us that the written histories of classical Greece were largely based on oral tradition: R. Thomas, *Oral Tradition and Written Record in Classical Athens* (Cambridge, 1989), 2–3. Useful surveys may be found in B. A. Rosenberg, 'The Complexity of Oral Tradition', *Oral Tradition*, 2 (1987), 73–90; and J. Goody, *The Interface between the Written and the Oral* (Cambridge, 1987), esp. pp. 59–109.

¹³ Eadmer's *History of Recent Events in England*, trans. G. Bosanquet (1964), 1; William of Malmesbury, *Chronicle of the Kings of England*, trans. J. A. Giles (1847), 4; *The Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis*, ed. M. Chibnall, 6 vols. (Oxford, 1969–80), iii. 7, 291. R. Crosby, 'Oral Delivery in the Middle Ages', *Speculum*, 11 (1936), 88–110, remains a useful overview of medieval orality.

¹⁴ Orderic, *Ecclesiastical History*, ii. 19, iv. 243, 261. The destruction of many irreplaceable documents by Danish incursions also forced him to heed 'the oral traditions of old men'. See B. Stock, *The Implications of Literacy* (Princeton, NJ, 1983), 76.

that they had seen a tree called in English a hawthorn growing in the High Street in the place where the splendid Cross stands.¹⁵

By the time John Leland, the first important Tudor antiquary, conducted his own tours during the reign of Henry VIII he had extensive precedent for seeking out and recording oral information. He differed from medieval writers only in the degree to which he made the traditional nature of much of his evidence explicit. It was not that Leland was 'credulous' and did not know better than to rely on oral testimony. On the contrary, he knew very well that the manuscripts, books, and archives to which he devoted most of his career as a humanist did not by themselves provide a sufficiently full record of the past.¹⁶ When Leland ascribed information to an oral source, he frequently used the phrase *in hominum memoria*. In general this denoted for contemporaries the memory of men living—what we would call oral history—rather than received tradition.¹⁷ At Queen Camel, or Camallat, Somerset, he reported the recent discovery of Roman coins, adding, 'Ther was found *in hominum memoria* a horse shoe of sylver at Camallate.' At Lostwithiel he discovered that 'in tyme of memorie of men lyving' the local stone bridge had gradually sunk deeper and deeper into the sand.¹⁸ Leland was not uncritical of the information that he garnered, and he discriminated among his sources. The ideal subject was an articulate, literate man who had lived in an area for some time: monks, priests, and merchants, for example. Visiting Bewdley in Worcestershire, he 'asked a merchant there of the ancientnesse of the towne'. The merchant replied that it was a new town, whose liberties were granted by Edward IV, a fact that Leland could not have gathered by looking at its considerably older buildings.¹⁹ He prefaced his account of the history of

¹⁵ Gerald of Wales (Giraldus Cambrensis), *The Itinerary through Wales and the Description of Wales*, ed. W. L. Williams (1908), 19, 33, 109, 128, 157–8; William Worcester, *Itineraries*, ed. J. H. Harvey (Oxford, 1969), 119, 193, 199–201, 261, 331. C. S. L. Davies has commented usefully on the somewhat misleading notion of 'credulity' in the primarily oral late medieval environment, pointing out that 'men were too conscious of the limitations of their own experience to dismiss a tale too readily': *Peace, Print and Protestantism* (1977), 38; cf. L. Febvre, *The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century: The Religion of Rabelais*, trans. B. Gottlieb (Cambridge, Mass. 1982), 438–51. An early attempt to interpret English Renaissance responses to the marvellous, while remaining almost entirely at the level of elite culture and concerned principally with the natural rather than the historical world, is of relevance here: M. Doran, 'On Elizabethan "Credulity": With Some Questions Concerning the Use of the Marvellous in Literature', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 1 (1940), 151–76.

¹⁶ C. E. Wright, 'The Dispersal of the Monastic Libraries in the Sixteenth Century', in F. Wormald and C. E. Wright (eds.), *The English Library before 1700* (1958), 148–75; T. D. Kendrick, *British Antiquity* (1950), 49, 53–5, 63; M. McKisack, *Medieval History in the Tudor Age* (Oxford, 1971), 11. On the deplorable condition of the public records until the late sixteenth century and its only very slow improvement thereafter, see R. B. Wernham, 'The Public Records in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries', in L. Fox (ed.), *English Historical Scholarship in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (1956), 11–30.

¹⁷ *The Laborious Journey and Serche of Johan Leylande for Englandes Antiquities*, ed. John Bale (1549), now republished in *Leland's Itinerary*, vol. i, pp. xxxvii–xlxiii; *Joannis Lelandi Antiquarii de Rebus Britannicis Collectanea*, ed. Thomas Hearne, 3 vols. in 4 pts., plus 2 vols. of appendices (Oxford, 1715), which also includes a number of Leland's miscellaneous and poetical works.

¹⁸ *Leland's Itinerary*, i. 151, 206; for other examples, see *ibid.* i. 143, 156, 163, 186, 254, iii. 27, v. 73, 100. Queen Camel also had strong Arthurian traditions, reported by Leland, which derived from the conflation of its Cadbury Castle with Camelot.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* ii. 88.

Gloucester Abbey by stating his source: 'these notable things following I learned of an ould man, made lately a monke of Gloucester'. Often he suspected that a recent building had replaced a more ancient one on the same or a different site. It was no chronicle but the testimony of its monks which told him that 'the old Abbey of Bardeney [Lincolnshire] was not in the very same place wher the new ys, but at a graunge or dayre a myle of'.²⁰

But besides the opinion of the learned and literate, another sort of oral testimony rated highly by Leland's standards. This was the 'common voice' or 'common fame': what almost everyone in the area agreed had happened in the past. Leland may have made the error of taking each individual testimony as an independent source, but he had little reason to doubt what people who had lived in an area all their lives concurred upon, unless he had external evidence which contradicted or clarified it. He happened upon a small pool in rural Carnarvonshire, 'wher they say that Idwalle Prince of Wales was killid and drounid'.²¹ At Oxenhall, near Darlington in Durham, locals recalled the long-standing tradition of a 'horrible noyse' in which the earth had raised itself up and then collapsed, leaving a huge crater, which country folk called 'Hell Kettles'. Leland suspected that this was the earthquake of 1179, recorded in twelfth-century chronicles, an opinion later endorsed by his Jacobean reader, William Burton.²² William Harrison, in discussing the same site in 1577, noted that locals believed the souls of sinners were 'seethed' in this 'bottomless hole', a belief discredited in good Royal Society fashion in the 1690s, when Jabez Kay tested its depths on behalf of Edmund Gibson, editor of the 1695 edition of Camden's *Britannia*.²³ The common voice was sometimes to be trusted, at other times dismissed. At Winchelsea, by Leland's time a decayed town, the common voice blamed French and Spanish raids for the end of better days when the town had twenty aldermen, all 'marchaunts of good substaunce'. This he recorded without further comment. But in Rutland, where the 'commune fame' was that one Rutter had been given as much land as he could ride around in one day on a wooden horse, which he did by magic, thereby founding the tiny county, Leland was more sceptical. 'This is very like a lye,' he wrote with some understatement, 'and more lykelihood it is that for Rotherland, or Rutherland, it is shortely caullid Rutlande'.²⁴

²⁰ *Leland's Itinerary*, v. 36.

²¹ *Ibid.* iii. 76, 83; cf. iv. 4. Defoe would also use the phrase 'common fame' to denote accepted facts about a community's past, nearly two centuries later: *A Tour Thro' the Whole Island of Great Britain*, ed. G. D. H. Cole, 2 vols. (1927), i. 281; cf. ii. 460 for Defoe's reference to 'the voice of the people'.

²² William Burton, *The Description of Leicester Shire* (1622), 270, citing the MSS of the *Collectanea*, vol. i, fo. 418 (ed. Hearne, i. 327). Defoe makes no mention of this tradition. He believed that the Hell Kettles were 'nothing but old coal pits filled with water by the river Tees': *Tour*, ii. 657.

²³ *Camden's Britannia* (1695), col. 774; Harrison, 'The Description of Britaine', in R. Holinshed, *The First and Second Volumes of Chronicles* (1587), 130. Traditions regarding this site and the earthquake continued into the nineteenth century: J. Weston, *Albion: A Guide to Legendary Britain* (1985), 333.

²⁴ *Leland's Itinerary*, iv. 89, 113, 124, 127; cf. i. 30, 110, 276, ii. 66, 75. Variants of the Rutter story occur elsewhere: for a similar tradition in Dunster, Somerset, where 'a grand lady obtaind of her husband so much ground for the inhabitants' as she could compass barefoot in a day, see BL MS Stowe 1048 ('Observations of Warwickshire'), fo. 68^v (vol. reversed).

The Elizabethan and early Stuart antiquaries who developed the genre of chorography adopted Leland's approach to oral sources just as they followed him in his study of monastic manuscripts.²⁵ William Lambarde found that many tales of the Kentish past had survived in both oral and written forms. He recounted the tales of popish impieties in St Nicholas's chapel near Hythe, putting in writing 'some such of them as I have learned, either by the faithfull report of honest persons that have seen and known the same, or els out of such written monuments as be yet extant and ready to be shewed'.²⁶ Of all the Elizabethan antiquaries, Lambarde came closest to putting his finger on the problem that most frustrates the oral historiographer today, that of 'feedback', which occurs when writing influences, distorts, or even creates outright an oral tradition.²⁷ Lambarde came across a good example of this in the folk tale surrounding Earl Godwin of Wessex, the father of King Harold II. According to tradition, Godwin choked to death on a piece of bread, shortly after which his land sank into the sea. What Lambarde suspected was not the integrity of the honest people he spoke to, but the origins and purity of these particular tales. 'Neither were these things continued as memorie, by the mouthes of the unlearned people onely, but committed to writing also, by the hands and pens of monks, frears, and others of the learned sort.' Over the centuries the written version had so completely infested the traditional version that it gave the tales an unwarranted and misleading credibility, 'so that in course of time, the matter was past all peradventure, and the things beleaved for undoubted veritie'.²⁸

William Camden knew the island of Britain in much less detail than Lambarde knew his native county, and like Leland he was forced to exploit the common

²⁵ There is much literature on the development of the chorographies, none of it dealing with the matter at issue here: among recent treatments, see A. McRae, *God Speed the Plough: The Representation of Agrarian England, 1500–1660* (Cambridge, 1996), 231–61; G. Parry, *The Trophies of Time* (Oxford, 1995); R. Helgerson, *Forms of Nationhood: The Elizabethan Writing of England* (Chicago and London, 1992). S. A. E. Mendyk, 'Speculum Britanniae': *Regional Study, Antiquarianism, and Science in Britain to 1700* (Toronto, 1989), as its subtitle suggests, comes closest to discussing the relations between antiquarianism and knowledge, but its definition of the latter is too narrow and is also linked to the same positivist model of the development of historical methods that has seriously distorted the history of history as a whole.

²⁶ William Lambarde, *A Perambulation of Kent* (1576), 173. Leland had accepted as authoritative the memory of informants who had read old books or records: *Leland's Itinerary*, i, 12.

²⁷ D. Henige, "'The Disease of Writing': Ganda and Nyoro Kinglists in a Newly Literate World', in J. C. Miller (ed.), *The African Past Speaks* (Folkestone, 1980), 240–61; Finnegan, *Literacy and Orality*, 117–20, for Polynesian examples. A good nineteenth-century instance of feedback comes from James Henry Dixon's collection of ballads and songs published in 1846. Following in the tradition of earlier gatherers of popular songs such as Ritson and Percy, Dixon transcribed one ballad, *The Bold Pedlar and Robin Hood* (included in no previous collection) which he thought of 'considerable antiquity, and no doubt much older than some of those inserted in the common garlands'. He took this from the oral recitation of 'an aged female in Bermondsey [Surrey]' who in turn had heard her grandmother sing it. The old woman claimed that it had never been printed, but Dixon soon discovered several copies at a bookseller's stall. *Ancient Poems, Ballads, and Songs of the Peasantry of England*, ed. J. H. Dixon, Percy Soc. 17 (1846), 71.

²⁸ Lambarde, *Perambulation*, 105. For an Oxfordshire example, an oral tradition noted by White Kennett as originating in an error in the 1607 Latin edition of Camden's *Britannia*, see Fox, *Oral and Literate Culture*, 242–3.

memory in order to remedy his ignorance. Though he ‘poured upon many an old rowle and evidence’, he felt no shame in admitting that he had also wandered over England and ‘conferred with the most skillful observers in each country’.²⁹ Like Leland, he spoke both to the common folk and to learned residents who had themselves garnered morsels of local lore, generally attempting to verify their statements with reference to a document such as the Antonine Itinerary, a crucial source for the identification of Roman towns.³⁰ As in Leland’s case, the traditions encountered by Camden frequently derived from the perception of local people that at some time in the past their community had enjoyed a level of economic prosperity and commercial or political importance now greatly declined, but of which ruins and other antiquities remained to testify. These beliefs were thus by-products of the broader sensitivity to environmental and material change with which this book began. In Croydon, the inhabitants pointed out a place where ‘in old time’ a royal house had once stood. The tiny village of Overburrow (or Burrow), Lancashire, had a tradition that it had once been a large city until a famine reduced it to poverty. ‘This tradition’, Camden observed, ‘they received from their ancestours, delivered as it were from hand to hand unto them.’ Camden thought the locals might be correct, for the plenitude of engraved stones and Roman coins, and the chequerboard paving pattern, suggested that this had once been a Roman camp. Here, physical evidence supplied the chronology lacking in the tradition, while Camden’s documentary source, the Antonine Itinerary, provided further reinforcement and suggested possible Roman names for the place.³¹ Of the foundation of the college at Bunbury, Cheshire, Camden wrote that he had been orally informed that this had been established by the Egerton family; subsequent ‘autenticall prooffe’ revealed instead that Sir Hugh Calvely had founded it in 1388.³² Camden’s inclusiveness of oral information was so considerable that in 1695 it was argued in one legal dispute that *Britannia* ‘amounted to as much as the sayings of an old man’.³³

Other travellers and topographers, many of them more dependent on local information than the learned antiquaries, continued to report orally based data, primarily concerning buildings, inscriptions, landscape features, and the history of local families, well into the seventeenth century. A lieutenant on tour in the western counties in 1635 recorded numerous traditions and beliefs in his travel diary, noting with disappointment that he could ‘neither see nor hear’ any information

²⁹ Camden, *Britain*, ‘To the Reader’.

³⁰ F. J. Levy, ‘The Making of Camden’s *Britannia*’, *Bibliothèque d’humanisme et renaissance*, 27 (1964), 70–97; Stuart Piggott, ‘William Camden and the *Britannia*’, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 37 (1951), 199–217.

³¹ William Camden, *Britain*, trans. P. Holland (1610), 302, 590, 753; for some other examples, see pp. 194, 428, 525, 587, 590, 753, 795.

³² Bodl. MS Smith 19 (Camden’s ‘A Supplement of the Topographical Description of Britain published MDCX’), p. 18, a correction intended for p. 687 of Holland’s 1610 edition.

³³ R. W. Baker, *The Hearsay Rule* (1950), 108–9, discussing the case of Steyner v. Burgess of Droitwich (1695). Ironically, while the principle of the admissibility of sayings by deceased ancient persons was granted in this instance, the *Britannia* itself was excluded on the grounds that to give credence to it would be to afford similar status to other historians ‘and there would not be any certainty’.

concerning the benefactors of Ely Cathedral, 'but onely those old and weather-beaten kings, in their durable freestone robes, whose statues are mounted on the west frontispiece of this fabricke'.³⁴ Marching with the royalist forces in 1645, Richard Symonds took down various descriptions of church monuments and arms, many newly destroyed by the ravages of the civil war. The unnamed statue of a bishop at Llangothlyn church, Denbighshire, was called 'Bishop Cuthlyn' by the locals; Worcestershire people provided him with similar information. Thomas Gerard, describing South Petherton in Somerset, recorded of a long-vanished palace that he was 'beholding to histories to tell us [there] was one here, and to tradicion to point out the place, for the very footeings of it are soe farr lost that noe man would ever believe a pallace stood in that place'. The Elizabethan biographer John Smyth noted the memories, then a century old, of the final skirmish between the feuding Lords Berkeley and Lisle in 1469 at Nibley, Gloucestershire, where he was the Berkeleys' long-serving estate steward. Smyth still heard locals

relate the reports of their parents, kinsfolks and neighbours present at this skirmish, some with the one lord, and others with the other; and of such as carryed victualls and weapons to some of those companies . . . and afterwards climbed up into trees, (being then boys of twelve and sixteen yeares,) to see the battle.³⁵

Like the popular beliefs about the past of which it was a major vessel of transmission, oral tradition was very closely tied to objects and visible features, either natural or man-made. If they vanished, the popular memory often disappeared within a generation or two, or became vague as to details. Hearne would note at the beginning of the eighteenth century that the fall or destruction of churches led to the rapid forgetting of the benefactions behind them, and his contemporary Browne Willis found only the barest tradition of the medieval abbey at Wincombe destroyed after the Reformation.³⁶ A hundred years earlier, when Sir John Oglander took up his inheritance on the Isle of Wight in 1607, he set about excavating the great Cistercian abbey that had once stood on his lands. But he had difficulty locating its foundations. 'I went to Quarr, and inquired of divors owld men where ye greate church stood.' One Father Pennie, 'a verye owld man' told him that the foundations were to be found in a nearby cornfield, but Oglander's attempts to dig them up proved unsuccessful.³⁷ William Burton was luckier; he found a vivid memory of the battle of Bosworth field among its locals early in the seventeenth century, a memory reinforced by discoveries in 1602 of a 'great store' of armour, arrowheads, and weapons on a nearby enclosed field.

³⁴ Anon. (attrib. to one Lieutenant Hammond), *A Relation of a Short Survey of the Western Counties made by a lieutenant of the military company in Norwich in 1635*, ed. L. G. W. Legg, *Camden Miscellany*, 16, Camden Soc., 3rd ser., 52 (1936), 91.

³⁵ BL MS Harl. 944 (Richard Symonds's observations), fos. 30^v, 58^r; Thomas Gerard, *The Particular Description of the County of Somerset*, written c.1632, ed. E. H. Bates, Somerset Rec. Soc., 15 (1900), 115; John Smyth, *The Berkeley Manuscripts*, ed. J. Maclean, 3 vols. (Gloucester, 1883–5), ii. 114.

³⁶ Both examples cited in Fox, *Oral and Literate Culture*, 219.

³⁷ S. Piggott, 'Antiquarian Thought in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries', in Fox (ed.), *English Historical Scholarship*, 105.

This was both oral tradition and oral history, since Burton had the testimonies of some ancient men who had seen the battle fought, 'of which persons my selfe have seene some, and have heard of their discourses, though related by second hand'.³⁸ The inhabitants of Hornchurch in Essex told John Weever that their parish church, formerly a priory, had originally been called 'Whore-church'. It had received its modern, more decorous name by the grace of 'a certaine King, but by what king they are uncertaine'.³⁹

THE WRITTEN RECORD AND THE BEGINNINGS OF REACTION

Like the artefacts studied in previous chapters, traditions circulated both among the inhabitants of local communities and beyond their boundaries through antiquaries and other travellers. In this way they entered the pool of historical knowledge available for inclusion in the works of the learned and for repetition or discussion by educated readers. The process of circulation itself changed very little in the two centuries between Leland and Stukeley. What profoundly shifted, however, was the intellectual status of tradition relative to other types of historical source. There are signs as early as the end of the sixteenth century of a growing discomfort with the use of oral traditional evidence. Some of this is no doubt attributable to a wider Protestant distrust of 'unwritten verities'. Throughout Elizabeth's reign, the orientation of established religion towards the authority of Scripture and away from 'tradition' (in the specific sense of the received practices and prescriptions of the medieval Church) sharpened hostility towards assertions about the past not based on written texts.⁴⁰ This remained a theme in religious controversies during the next century: both Bishop Joseph Hall in 1628 and Archbishop John Tillotson two generations later denounced the appeal to oral tradition in the religious sphere.⁴¹ The Catholic position on the traditional basis of religion generally ran to the contrary, the polemicist John Sargeant deeming 'tradition oral and practical to be the rule of faith'.⁴²

³⁸ Burton, *Description of Leicester Shire*, 47.

³⁹ John Weever, *Ancient Funerall Monuments* (1631). A visual reference to the name of the parish of Hornchurch (though with no trace of the Whore-church tradition) was placed on the eastern gable of the chancel at St Andrew's church; by 1610 there is reference to 'points of lead fashioned like horns' (cf. *VCH, Essex*, vii. 48) and some form of horns has been fixed there ever since. M. K. McIntosh, *A Community Transformed: The Manor and Liberty of Havering, 1500–1620* (Cambridge, 1991), 226. John Aubrey encountered a rival tradition at Hornchurch in the 1670s, according to which the name derived from the horns of a hart having been kept in the church for several centuries: *Anecdotes and Traditions Illustrative of Early English History and Literature*, ed. W. J. Thoms, Camden Soc., os 5 (1839), 106.

⁴⁰ Ironically, as Linda Colley points out, much of the belief about Catholic atrocity that circulated in the early nineteenth century and proved an obstacle to Catholic emancipation was in the form of oral tradition: *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837* (New Haven, 1992), 333.

⁴¹ These and other examples are given in A. Fox, 'Custom, Memory and the Authority of Writing', in P. Griffiths, A. Fox, and S. Hindle (eds.), *The Experience of Authority in Early Modern England* (London and New York, 1996), 89–116, at p. 91.

⁴² John Sargeant, *Sure Footing in Christianity, or Rational Discourses on the Rule of Faith* (1665), mentioned in *The Journal of James Yonge [1647–1721] Plymouth Surgeon*, ed. F. N. L. Poynter (1963), 159.

Yet differing Protestant and Catholic positions on Scripture versus tradition do not provide sufficient explanation for the shift in attitude, since they did not automatically carry over into other spheres such as the secular past. Moreover, there is no reliable correlation between Catholicism and a predisposition to accept tradition in contexts where religious truth was not at stake. Camden, a Protestant, inclined to use them liberally, while among the earliest explicit critics of tradition as a historical source one finds his two contemporaries Sampson Erdeswicke, the son of a Staffordshire papist, and Thomas Habington, a Worcestershire recusant. Erdeswicke expressed reservations about a local tradition concerning a monument at Burton Abbey in Staffordshire, 'which monument, the common fame (of the unskillful) reports to have been of the first founder Wilfricus [i.e. Ulfricus] Spot, and that cannot in any wise be so'. Since the monument was made of alabaster, fashioned into armour of the post-Conquest period, 'something like to our new monuments', Erdeswicke thought it no older than the reign of Edward III, though he admitted that it might be a fourteenth-century reconstruction of an earlier monument to the founder or another benefactor.⁴³ Habington, a Catholic exiled to his county after the Gunpowder Plot, admitted that written sources such as heraldic pedigrees were 'often farced with untruthes', yet he consistently preferred written evidence to traditions 'reported by the vulgar' and inveighed against those who relied upon them.⁴⁴ John Stow, born in the 1520s and at best ambivalent about reformed religion, makes surprisingly little use of tradition in his *Survey of London*, though this may be because the London environment provided a richer source of written and architectural evidence than did many rural parishes.⁴⁵

Many other early critiques of oral tradition or endorsements of the superiority of the written word can be adduced from the late Elizabethan and Jacobean antiquaries. In Great Yarmouth, Henry Manship (the sometime town clerk whom we have already met as a reformer of record-keeping) went to some lengths to follow the origins of the town only through its documents, supplemented on occasion by information from recent books like Camden's *Britannia* and John Speed's *Theatre of the empire of Great Britaine*, and by his own 'reasonable conjecture'. He thought the pursuit of his or any town's remotest beginnings a lost cause, as unseeable as the head of a river, even if, like a river, one knew it had to have a head. He made no effort in this regard to fill in the blank with oral tradition.⁴⁶

⁴³ Sampson Erdeswicke, *A Survey of Staffordshire* (1717), 169–70 (mispaginated as p. 180), 214.

⁴⁴ Thomas Habington, *A Survey of Worcestershire*, ed. J. Amphlett, 2 vols., Worcestershire Historical Soc. (Oxford, 1893–9), i. 468–70, ii. 34, 226–7, 242; BL MS Add. 28564, fo. 236^v (Habington to Symon Archer, 7 Dec. 1635).

⁴⁵ John Stow, *The Survey of London*, ed. H. B. Wheatley (1912; repr. 1980), 176, for a rare instance where Stow repeats a story told by his father and another old man. Many London traditions and customs had already found their way into script, thanks to the city's well-established practice of chronicle-writing and record-keeping.

⁴⁶ Henry Manship, *The History of Great Yarmouth*, ed. C. J. Palmer (1854), 20; the sole exception to his reliance on documents, which was already anticipated in the earlier collections of his older contemporary Thomas Damet (above, Ch. 8) is Manship's repeating of the story of a relatively recent great catch of mackerel of which he heard 'very credibly reported' (ibid. 97).

Elsewhere in East Anglia, Robert Reyce found no written evidence of mineral discoveries in old Suffolk. He had heard 'that in ancient time there was a mine of gold oare', but this struck him as 'an unprobable heare say'. The people of Tottenham High-Cross in Middlesex attributed the refusal of an old walnut tree to grow to the burning of a religious martyr on the site, but whether this was a Marian or an earlier martyr remained unknown. The tale's vagueness was too much for William Bedwell: 'But who it was, and when it should be done, they cannot tell, and I finde no such thing in our stories upon record, and therefore I do not tell this for a truthe.'⁴⁷ Reginald Bainbrigg praised his friend and fellow North Country antiquary, John Denton of Cardew, for his study of the antiquities of Carlisle, a work which 'goes by no hearesaies, but by ancient recordes'.⁴⁸

In the seventeenth century, a further influence on the declining interest in and growing mistrust of oral sources would emerge in legal thinking, especially in the work of jurists such as John Selden and Sir Matthew Hale. Common lawyers in general were well acquainted with the study and criticism of oral testimony. Hale himself was an early exponent of the notion that the formal swearing of a witness did not *ipso facto* make that witness credible, and that only moral rather than absolute certainty was ever possible with regards to things past.⁴⁹ It is true that the English judicial system steadily relied upon—and generated—increasing quantities of written evidence, case records, and legal reports. But the transition to a system dependent predominantly upon the written rather than the spoken word was neither sudden nor thorough, and it encountered a good deal of resistance along the way.⁵⁰ 'All courts of justice', commented Bishop Burnet, 'proceed upon the evidence given by witnesses; for the use of writings is but a thing more lately brought into the world.'⁵¹ As we have seen, human memory was accepted as valid evidence in cases of property and land disputes, and the same was true for the very recent past involved in criminal proceedings.

Increasingly, however, such testimony ran into scepticism deriving from the belief that an illiterate witness was *ipso facto* an unreliable witness.⁵² Jurors were

⁴⁷ Robert Reyce, *Suffolk in the XVIIth Century*, ed. F. Hervey (1902), 26 f.; William Bedwell, *A Brief Description of the Towne of Tottenham High-Crosse* (1631), sig. E^v.

⁴⁸ T. H. B. Graham, 'Analysis of the Denton Pedigree', *Transactions of the Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society*, ns 34 (1934), 1–16; C. W. James, 'A Copy of John Denton's MS in the Possession of the Earl of Leicester at Holkham', *ibid.*, ns 23 (1923), 103–8.

⁴⁹ B. J. Shapiro, *Probability and Certainty in Seventeenth-Century England* (Princeton, 1983), 180–6.

⁵⁰ The short-lived statute 11 Hen. 7 c. 3 (1495), for instance, represents an early, unsuccessful, attempt by the Crown to avoid the use of a grand jury in non-capital cases by allowing prosecutions on information; it was repealed in 1509; T. A. Green, *Verdict According to Conscience* (Chicago, 1985), 115–16.

⁵¹ Gilbert Burnet, *Some Passages of the Life and Death of . . . John Earl of Rochester* (1680), 74; Shapiro, *Probability and Certainty in Seventeenth-Century England*, 183–4; *id.* *A Culture of Fact: England, 1550–1720* (Ithaca, NY, 2000), 8–33.

⁵² Juries were often criticized, perhaps wrongly, in the later seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, for their members' alleged credulity, which was generally linked to low social status and marginal literacy; a character in *Humphry Clinker* refers to them as 'illiterate plebeians, apt to be easily misled': P. J. R. King, '“Illiterate Plebeians, Easily Misled”: Jury Composition, Experience and Behavior in Essex, 1735–1815', in J. Cockburn and T. Green (eds.), *Twelve Good Men and True* (Princeton, 1988), 254, 278–80, 302. King points out that this putative illiteracy and low degree were often only relative, jury members being drawn, even at quarter sessions, from the middling sort of farmers and artisans.

expected to be able to discern believable from unbelievable and, according to Hale, were permitted to pronounce verdict against testimony if they lacked faith in a witness.⁵³ The mechanics of a criminal jury system which still depended heavily upon verbal information and accusation, and on memory or even hearsay as evidence, ensured that those skilled in the law were obliged to develop critical standards for evaluating the spoken and written word alike. It was the later seventeenth century that first adumbrated the 'hearsay rule' for juries, according to which jurors with prior knowledge of an event were required to be sworn as witnesses, and could no longer simply act upon information known only to themselves. The testimony of witnesses was at the same time weighted in favour of direct knowledge of events, with third-party information given only corroborative status, and by the 1720s it was more or less accepted that 'a mere hearsay is no evidence'.⁵⁴ Lawyers, unlike jurors, were also first and foremost students of the documentary and legible. During the sixteenth century, textbook study gradually supplanted the legal readings that had formed the basis of the law student's education for centuries, much to the grief of Sir Edward Coke.⁵⁵ Those lawyers who were influenced by the best of Continental learning and philological rigour, and who turned from the practice of law to legal history, were even less likely than the majority of the profession to place great faith in, let alone actively pursue, oral evidence in their researches.

The heralds were also familiar with oral testimony and its hazards. Like the lawyers, they were unable to dispense with it but had come by 1600 to prefer the document or artefact to personal testimony, and it is not surprising that a well-known 'historical controversy' of Elizabeth's later reign revolved in large measure around the value of oral evidence in the verification of family genealogies. When Ralph Brooke, the aggressive York herald, attacked William Camden for a number of genealogical errors in the early editions of *Britannia*, he was attacking Camden's method as much as any specific factual errors. Brooke was concerned that Camden was insufficiently skilled in the study of such documents and that he took too much on 'hearsay'.⁵⁶ Camden was unquestionably the greater scholar of the two, and his attractive personality tempts us to defend him against

⁵³ P. Lawson, 'Lawless Juries? The Composition and Behavior of Hertfordshire Juries, 1573–1624', in Cockburn and Green (eds.), *Twelve Good Men and True*, 119 ff., 142.

⁵⁴ Baker, *The Hearsay Rule*, 9–10. However, note the continued admission of hearsay throughout the eighteenth century in cases of pedigree or descent: *ibid.* 98–108 and above, Ch. 3 (p. 78n.20).

⁵⁵ Edward Coke, *The First Part of the Institutes of the Lawes of England* (1628), fos. 280r–v; cf. George Buck's comments on lectures and readings, already in decline when he wrote in the 1610s: *The Third Universitie of England*, appended to John Stow, *Annales*, ed. Edmund Howes (1631), 1074. On legal education at this time see L. A. Knafla, 'The Law Studies of an Elizabethan Student', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 32 (1969), 221–40; R. J. Schoeck, 'Lawyers and Rhetoric in Sixteenth-Century England', in J. J. Murphy (ed.), *Renaissance Eloquence: Studies in the Theory and Practice of Renaissance Rhetoric* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1983), 274–91.

⁵⁶ Ralph Brooke, *A Discoverie of Certaine Errours Published in the Much-commended Britannia* (1594), 'To Maister Camden'. Camden replied in 'Ad Lectorem', appended to the 1600 edition of *Britannia*; F. J. Levy, *Tudor Historical Thought* (San Marino, 1967), 157; W. Rockett, 'Britannia, Ralph Brooke, and the Representation of Privilege in Elizabethan England', *Renaissance Quarterly*, 53 (2000), 475–99.

the cantankerous Brooke. Yet it is worth remembering that, when this controversy began in the 1590s, Brooke had been a herald for over a decade and had acquired a good deal of experience in sifting through genealogical evidence, oral and written. This was experience that Camden (who became a herald only in 1597, and was at this point still a London schoolmaster) manifestly lacked, for all his prodigious classical learning and Continental connections.

The Brooke–Camden dispute fumed on for three decades, leading finally to an attack by one of Camden’s own protégés, Augustine Vincent, on Brooke’s 1619 *Catalogue of the nobility*.⁵⁷ When Vincent published his own *Discoverie of Errours* in 1622, a year before Camden’s death, the formidable antiquary John Selden intervened. Selden, a lawyer like Matthew Hale (his junior by a generation) provided a commendatory epistle that amounted to a brief manifesto of historical research methodology, synthesizing the techniques of the legal philologist and the herald. Selden praised Vincent’s industry and diligence in reading not only published authors, but also ‘the more abstruse parts of history which lie hid, either in private manuscripts, or in the publick records of the kingdom’. He extolled the use of Exchequer documents and of judicial records; he commended the great libraries of his day—the Royal, Cottonian, Bodleian, and several others. But of oral sources, even the ones that Vincent himself must surely have encountered on his heraldic visitations, Selden said not a word.⁵⁸

The library-bound Selden was no peripatetic antiquary, so his experiences in dealing with tradition, in particular rural tradition, would have been rather limited. Even so, his private views on popular sources may in fact have been more ambivalent than this hard-headed endorsement of the written text suggests. He had a taste for ballads and is said to have remarked that ‘there was more truth in them than there was in many of our historians’.⁵⁹ His posthumously published *Table-talk* similarly asserts that ‘More solid things do not show the complexion of times so well, as ballads and libels’, while also endorsing both proverbs and tradition.⁶⁰ But his published remarks ran in the opposite direction, and their influence can be felt in the antiquarian writings of the middle and later seventeenth century, the authors of which were all acquainted with Selden’s works. The great Anglo-Saxon scholar William Somner frequently cited oral tradition in his early work, *The Antiquities of Canterbury*. At one point he found that common tradition was so unequivocal that it rendered citations from the records

⁵⁷ Ralph Brooke, *A Catalogue and Succession of the Kings, Princes, Dukes, Marquesses, Earles, and Viscounts of the Realme of England Since the Norman Conquest to this Present Yeare 1619* (1619).

⁵⁸ John Selden, ‘To my Singular Good Friend, Mr Augustine Vincent’, in Vincent, *A Discoverie of Errours in the First Edition of the Catalogue of Nobility Published by Ralph Brooke, Yorke Herald, 1619* (1622), sigs. a–a^v; cf. the preface to the second, enlarged edition of Selden’s *Titles of Honor* (1631) for similar comments.

⁵⁹ Anthony Wood, *Athenae Oxonienses*, ed. P. Bliss, 4 vols. (Oxford, 1813–20), iii, col. 366 and n.; *The Diary of Abraham de la Pryme, the Yorkshire antiquary*, ed. C. Jackson, *Surtees Soc.*, 54 (1870), 67, where Selden’s remark is quoted. The remark is credible given Selden’s family connections to oral culture: he is supposed to have been the son of a Sussex minstrel or fiddler.

⁶⁰ *Table-talk: being the discourses of John Selden, Esq.*, ed. R. Milward, 2nd edn. (1698), 93, 153, 155.

unnecessary. 'Because tradition keeps it yet in memory with some', he could afford to cite only one record as additional proof. For Somner, however, oral tradition was to be used as a last resort, and even then it required further verification: 'as a thing uncertaine I leave it with a *fides penes lectorem esto*, untill further enquiry shall inable me to give him better satisfaction'.⁶¹

Similar examples of the priority accorded to written materials can be found throughout the remainder of the seventeenth century. The Cheshire engraver Daniel King, who wrote the introduction to a collective investigation of Cheshire antiquities entitled *The Vale-royall of England*, thanked his friends for providing information 'either of their own knowledge, or the relation of their elders'. The actual authors of the book, however, relied almost entirely on written sources (which by this time increasingly included the works of earlier and contemporary scholars), clearly distinguishing between the questionable authority of 'old tales' and the more convincing evidence in 'writers both ancient and modern'.⁶² Richard Butcher corrected a number of traditions that he found in Stamford, many of which had been reported by Leland or Camden.⁶³ Dugdale seems to have believed that what did not survive in manuscript or inscription was lost for ever. In *The History of St Paul's Cathedral*, he comments that 'the dismall ruins' of some tombs in the cathedral 'have put an end to any future discovery, that can be made of them'. His own *Antiquities of Warwickshire* quotes from Selden's letter to Augustine Vincent and wholeheartedly adopts Selden's bias in favour of the written. Dugdale could report oral traditions for amusement, but he took a pedantic, almost malicious, delight in correcting or disproving them from the manuscript sources that he knew so well. Tradition told him that Richard Boughton, sheriff of Warwick, had died at Bosworth field in 1485, but inquisitions *post mortem* revealed that Boughton had been killed two days before the battle, probably in a preliminary skirmish.⁶⁴ He was less scrupulous on this point when not writing for publication. The notes of his journey about the fens in 1657 mention the tradition that 'Audrey Causey' had been built by William the Conqueror while he besieged the Isle of Ely. They also record the belief at Littleborough Ferry on Trent that a Roman station had once been there

⁶¹ William Somner, *The Antiquities of Canterbury* (1640), 34–5; Somner also notes (p. 62) that as reputable a medieval historian as Bede derived information from 'tradition of his elders'.

⁶² Daniel King, *The Vale-royall of England or, the County Palatine of Chester Illustrated* (1656), 2, 118. Anthony Wood records (on information from Dugdale, who denounced King, the son of a baker, as 'a most ignorant, silly fellow') that the true authors were William Webb, William Smith, Samuel Lee and the regicide James Chaloner: *Athenae Oxonienses*, ed. Bliss, iii, col. 503; *DNB*, sub 'King, Daniel'; the section by Smith was completed in the 1590s.

⁶³ Richard Butcher, *The Survey and Antiquitie of the Towne of Stamford, in the County of Lincolne* (1646), 26, 27; cf. Camden, *Britain*, 534; *Leland's Itinerary*, iv, 89.

⁶⁴ Sir William Dugdale, *The History of St Paul's Cathedral in London* (1658), 48; Dugdale, *The Antiquities of Warwickshire* (1656), preface and p. 66. Dugdale did, however, settle at least one pedigree dispute by reference to 'divers aged people': K. Thomas, 'Age and Authority in Early Modern England', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 62 (1976), 1–46, at p. 234. For earlier examples of the use of oral evidence for family genealogy, see Thomas Westcote, *A View of Devonshire in 1630* (Exeter, 1845), xvi, 449; Richard Carew, *The Survey of Cornwall* (1602), fo. 117.

‘as tis sayd’, a supposition in this case supported by regular discoveries of Roman coins.⁶⁵

Dugdale’s attitude reveals a widening but not unbridgeable gap between scholarly and popular views of the past, in which oral sources were relegated to second-class evidence or were quoted only for interest, but were not dispensed with altogether. By the 1640s, the document and the inscription had achieved an unquestionable priority over the common voice. The distance between a methodical student of records such as Dugdale and a talented amateur like Sir Thomas Browne is equally apparent. Browne’s brief study of monuments in Norwich Cathedral, the *Repertorium*, owed a great deal to oral evidence, largely because Browne’s documentary knowledge was thinner than that of a Dugdale or a Selden. Browne unhesitatingly reported information given him orally by two ancient cathedral officials. Some of this information was personal recollection; the rest was traditional. Sir Thomas thought that many bishops might have been buried in the cathedral, ‘and wee find it so asserted by some historicall accounts, butt there remaining no historie or tradition of the place of their enternement, in vayne wee endeavour to designe and poynt out the same’. Rather than let perish the memory of some inscriptions no longer extant, he ‘tooke the best account I could of them at the Kings returne from an understanding singing-man of 91 yeares old and sett them downe in a booke’. Yet even Browne distanced himself from his vulgar sources, and devoted one of his most celebrated treatises to the repudiation of popular errors, believing the common people to be ‘the most deceptible part of mankind’.⁶⁶ Citing Browne as his example a few decades later, Edward Lhwyd, who was proposing a natural history of Wales, issued a folio sheet of heads of questions in 1697 to which he wished gentry to return answers. His categories included natural history (foliage, rocks, plants, rivers), Roman antiquities, architecture, medieval and other artefacts and, finally, the ‘vulgar errors’ of the ignorant.⁶⁷ This movement of popular beliefs out of the category of source and into that of subject of study is an important point to which we will return further on.

TRUST, TRUTH, AND AUTHORITY

It is very tempting to see in the reactions of document-oriented lawyers, humanist-trained philologists, and sceptical heralds the principal cause of the

⁶⁵ BL MS Lans. 722 (Dugdale’s Itinerary into the Fens, 1657), fos. 29^r, 37^r. It is perhaps also worth observing that the thicket of citations from manuscript sources in the margins of his *Baronage of England*, 2 vols. (1675–6) thins considerably as its successive family accounts approach his own time, in contrast to the accounts themselves, suggesting considerable—and undeclared—use of oral information.

⁶⁶ Thomas Browne, *Repertorium, or Some Account of the Tombs and Monuments in the Cathedrall Church of Norwich, 1680*, in *Works of Sir Thomas Browne*, ed. G. Keynes, 4 vols. (1964), iii. 123–42; *The Letters of Sir Thomas Browne*, in *Works*, iv. 373–4 (Browne to John Aubrey, 24 Aug. 1672); Browne, *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, ed. R. Robbins, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1981), i. 15 and *passim*. Most of the ‘vulgar errors’ Browne discusses are, however, errors of the educated, with classical and literary rather than popular origins: Doran, ‘Elizabethan “Credulity”’, 159.

⁶⁷ E. Lhwyd (or Lhuyd), *Parochial Queries in Order to a Geographical Dictionary, a Natural History &c. of Wales* (1697), 1–4.

devaluation of oral tradition as a legitimate historical source during the seventeenth century. Certainly the influence of Selden and others in this regard was considerable, since they did in fact set up rubrics of method that would be adhered to by the antiquaries and historians of the second half of the century and beyond. It should also be noted that the changing tactics of the Restoration and Augustan antiquaries, from Aubrey to Lhwyd, Woodward, and eventually Stukeley, in the direction of observation and comparison, rendered oral sources useless for most purposes, both because they could 'explain' only individual objects rather than assist in their categorization, and also because many objects so studied, unlike churches and ruined castles, had origins lying well before the span of human memory.

But we are in danger of tracing back a false pedigree of historical method along purely intellectual lines. Other factors need to be considered. Foremost among these are the cultural underpinnings of trust and authority—that is, of the right to be believed. This, scholars such as Steven Shapin and Lorraine Daston have shown, was itself in flux during the seventeenth century. 'Far from embracing the ideal of the interchangeable observer,' writes Daston, 'seventeenth- and eighteenth-century scientists carefully weighted observation reports by the skill and integrity of the observer.'⁶⁸ Elsewhere, she has suggested that the word 'fact' in its modern sense of a datum of experience (as opposed to the older sense of a 'deed' or 'act') first entered usage in English about the time of Bacon, and 'the most important factor in the ready acceptance of Baconian facts, despite their strangeness and/or irreplicability, was trust, extended almost *carte blanche* to at least a small circle of respected colleagues or informants'.⁶⁹ Shapin's study makes much the same point, arguing that 'truth' in the seventeenth century was not a free-standing absolute but a relative and movable value, attachable to statements of empirical or inductive fact when the speaker or writer was deemed worthy of belief. A variety of circumstances and factors could intrude themselves on the way to acceptance of a particular claim as true, such as the claimant's gender. The lack of contemporary acceptance of the scientific ideas of the duchess of Newcastle thus may have had as much to do with her sex as with any intrinsic lack of coherence with reality, or faults in logic. Above all, social status and reputation were critical in endowing truth-claims with authority.⁷⁰ The experimental culture of the Royal Society was dominated by men whose claims to credibility were supported by their gentility or nobility. Since most experiments were not repeated for verification, the word of a gentleman thus played a

⁶⁸ Daston places the origins of what she calls 'aperspectival objectivity' in the later eighteenth century, seeing it as deriving from moral and aesthetic philosophy rather than the natural sciences: Daston, 'Objectivity and the Escape from Perspective', *Social Studies of Science*, 22, special issue on the social history of objectivity (1992), 597–618, esp. p. 610.

⁶⁹ Daston, 'Baconian Facts, Academic Civility, and the Prehistory of Objectivity', *Annals of Scholarship*, 8 (1991), 337–63, quotation at p. 349; cf. Shapiro, *Culture of Fact*, 49–62; M. Poovey, *A History of the Modern Fact: Problems of Knowledge in the Sciences of Wealth and Society* (Chicago, 1998), 7–21.

⁷⁰ For the contemporaneous role of reputation in ensuring trust or 'credit' in the economic sphere, and at all social levels, see C. Muldrew, *The Economy of Obligation: The Culture of Credit and Social Relations in Early Modern England* (New York, 1998), 148–57.

significant role in defining what should be believed. At the same time, lying and cognitive unreliability were also becoming increasingly associated with the poor and servile, a theme prominent in seventeenth-century courtesy literature.⁷¹

By the time of Robert Boyle and the early Royal Society, arguments from fact were fast supplanting more traditional scholastic and Renaissance arguments from authority. The ‘canons of human testimony’ that Zachary Coke, following the Continental logician Bartholomew Keckermann, adumbrated in his 1654 *Art of Logic*, are an odd mixture of the old and new. On the one hand, Coke continued to venerate oldness in a thoroughly unmodern way. His fifth canon had it that ‘old testimony is worth more than new’. His eighth, that ‘testimonies historical, of approved historians, are firm’ was a formal assertion already well out of step with the sort of scepticism towards *all* historical knowledge that was occasionally mooted in the sixteenth century, and that became all the more common as readers became increasingly aware of contradictions of detail, to say nothing of partisanship and ideology. On the other hand, Coke made social distinctions in the ranking of sources of testimony—that of ‘skillful artizen’ being preferable to that of an unskilful one, ‘however famous otherwise’; and he limited the probative authority of Church Fathers to ‘theological conclusions’ only, not to ‘humane’.⁷²

The rhetoric of argumentation was, in certain spheres of knowledge, beginning to consider the massive citation of authorities (as opposed to direct first-hand evidence) as having a secondary and informative value only, rather than possessing probative power in itself: Bacon’s natural history called for the abandonment of what he collectively called ‘philology’. A few decades later Boyle would make a show of *not* using ‘passages in classick or other authors, that may either give some authority to our thoughts’ where reason or first-hand experience would be more compelling; where he appealed to other writers at all it was as supportive ‘witnesses’ not as decisive ‘judges’.⁷³ The rethinking of what sorts of argument had persuasive value thus links our earlier account of the transition in attitudes to antiquity and ancestry very directly to the declining status of oral tradition considered as a species of argument from the past.

A distinction was often drawn between truth, which was unitary, and falsehood, which had many different voices. The very multiplicity of testimony that previously seemed to attest to the truth of a statement—Leland’s ‘common voice’, for example—had come by the late Elizabethan period to be seen as a

⁷¹ S. Shapin, *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England* (Chicago, 1994), 74–95. For women, the additional criterion of sexual honour or ‘honesty’ was a factor in evaluating credit-worthiness: L. Gowing, *Domestic Dangers: Women, Words, and Sex in Early Modern London* (Oxford, 1996), 128–9.

⁷² Zachary Coke, *The Art of Logic* (1654), 163–4; I owe this reference to Richard Serjeantson. Only three years earlier Thomas Hobbes had distinguished deference towards the great men of the past from belief in the historians who reported their deeds: ‘If Livy say the Gods made once a cow speak, and we believe it not; we distrust not God therein, but Livy.’ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, bk. 1, ch. 8, ed. M. Oakeshott (Oxford, 1946), 42.

⁷³ Boyle, *Certain Physiological Essays, written at Distant times, and on several occasions* (1661), 28–9.

liability. Richard Hooker, borrowing from Galen, thought it unreasonable that opinions be accepted on the basis of rumour and report purely because they were repeated several times, and Restoration writers such as Stillingfleet and Boyle picked up on this theme in connection with religion and natural philosophy.⁷⁴ Problems also arose from the circumstances in which an event was observed and from the nature of the event itself. Witnesses examined long after a particular occurrence such as a crime or murder were known to be less accurate and more likely to conflict on details than those examined immediately after, in contrast to the more general consensus they produced on general points of enduring custom. This is a point that has been supported by modern psychological investigations of the reliability of eyewitness testimony, which note that violent events or sudden changes are less accurately recalled by witnesses than routine or mundane, non-disruptive matters.⁷⁵

Those who still wanted to be able to accept some statements as true without conducting experiments or making observations themselves thus had to steer a course between the sucking vortex of credulity and the even more threatening dragon of extreme doubt. In order to work out an effective compromise between error and truth in areas such as eyewitness testimony, lawyers and judges began to work out early ideas of 'probability', a word that in turn connects etymologically with the 'probity' of witnesses. Barbara J. Shapiro has demonstrated that a concern with probability connected a wide spectrum of activities from the law to history, literature, and religion.⁷⁶ In a similar vein, Steven Shapin suggests that the concept of 'moral certainty' was adumbrated by Boyle and other Restoration authors not only to establish what could be believed but also to protect against the opposite threat of complete doubt, the sort of pyrrhonist scepticism of *any* truth that could be found in the French *libertin* tradition from la Mothe le Vayer to Bayle.⁷⁷ Boyle conceded that for certain areas of knowledge, including law, commerce, religion, and history, testimony (whether written or oral) was the principal source of knowledge, since truth concerning these matters could not be self-evident. 'It is by this we know, that there were such men as Julius Caesar and

⁷⁴ Hooker, cited in Shapin, *Social History of Truth*, 232–3; for an older account of Boyle's views (which regrettably separates his scientific and religious views), see H. Van Leeuwen, *The Problem of Certainty in English Thought 1630–80* (Leiden, 1963), 91–106.

⁷⁵ 'It is by now a well-established fact that people are less accurate and complete in their eyewitness accounts after a long retention interval than after a short one': E. F. Loftus, *Eyewitness Testimony* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979), 53; Loftus shows that perception of a violent event is *less* accurate than of an ordinary, unemotional one (p. 31). Cf. I. M. L. Hunter, *Memory* (1957), 169–75. Matters of trust in social interaction are raised on the basis of a discussion of courtroom procedure in A. Brannigan and M. Lynch, 'On Bearing False Witness: Credibility as an Interactional Accomplishment', *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 16 (1987), 115–46: 'Even when there may be good reason to question the "truthfulness" of someone's conduct, everyday interaction does not offer many occasions to undertake such inquiries in an open and unambiguous way' (p. 116).

⁷⁶ Shapiro, *Probability and Certainty in Seventeenth-Century England*, *passim*; J. A. I. Champion, *The Pillars of Priestcraft Shaken: The Church of England and its Enemies, 1660–1730* (Cambridge, 1992), 42–6.

⁷⁷ Shapin, *Social History of Truth*, 214; R. H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza*, rev. edn. (Berkeley, Calif., 1979).

William the Conqueror, and that Joseph knew that Pharaoh had a dream, which the Egyptian wise men could not expound'. But testimony was not self-evident and needed to be evaluated by reason, according to strict criteria which included the moral reputation of the witness.⁷⁸

The philosopher John Hardwig has argued in connection with modern knowledge that 'In most disciplines, those who cannot trust cannot know.' Trust indeed precedes evidence as the basis of knowledge. Certain authors are recognized as 'authorities' in their subjects today, and we accept certain types of documentary evidence as better than or more reliable than others on the basis of our trust in their authenticity, which in turn can derive from their authorship, chronology, or provenance.⁷⁹ Peter Dear has made a similar point about both natural philosophy and history in the early modern period. Aside from his reputation as a scholar or a gentleman, the mark of authority in many historians, so far as eighteenth-century readers were concerned, was the author's lack of 'interest' in lying or twisting the truth.⁸⁰ This was the 'impartiality' claimed by post-civil war historians such as Rushworth, Nalson, Fuller, and Clarendon, their writings compromised by the ideological baggage of the events they described and the inclinations of their readers. So long as they could be shown not to be grinding personal axes or pursuing obvious self-promotion, a degree of trust could be reposed in their accounts.⁸¹

The activities of the Royal Society, many of whose members had antiquarian interests arising from the more comprehensive virtuoso habits of the earlier seventeenth century, played a direct role in the ranking of written testimony over oral, just as they ranked the claims of gentlemen over those of the humbler sort. In 1699 a member of the Royal Society attempted to work out a mathematical formula with which to compare the reliability of oral and written testimony, and found that the written document would 'not lose half of its certainty' for 7,000 years. 'Oral tradition', he remarked, was in contrast 'subject to much casuality' and would lose much of its reliability within two decades.⁸² This attempt at

⁷⁸ Robert Boyle, *The Christian Virtuoso*, quoted in Van Leeuwen, *Problem of Certainty*, 98.

⁷⁹ J. Hardwig, 'The Role of Trust in Knowledge', *Journal of Philosophy*, 88 (1991), 693–708.

⁸⁰ P. Dear, 'From Truth to Disinterestedness in the Seventeenth Century', *Social Studies of Science*, 22, special issue on the social history of objectivity (1992), 619–31, esp. p. 625. In contrast to extreme pyrrhonism about knowledge of the past as represented by Henry Cornelius Agrippa in the early sixteenth century and Pierre Bayle in the late seventeenth, 'most people, who simply wanted to do the best they could with what was available, were happy with more or less elaborate rules for determining lack of bias in historical writers. And disinterestedness was the most important characteristic a historian could have.'

⁸¹ J. H. Preston, 'English Ecclesiastical Historians and the Problem of Bias, 1559–1742', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 32 (1971), 203–20; Champion, *Pillars of Priestcraft Shaken*, 32–52.

⁸² Anon., 'The Credibility of Human Testimony', *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society*, 21 (1699), 359–65. The term 'oral tradition' figures in common parlance by the early eighteenth century: apologizing to his friend the Revd George Plaxton for merely sending oral greetings of respect via a third party instead of writing a proper letter, Francis Skrimsher of Forton wrote 'it is highly unbecoming my duty and obligations for Mr Wisdon to carry hence only a few oral traditions of respect'. Staffs. RO D593/K/1/1/7 (Skrimsher to Plaxton, 24 Dec. 1714).

a quantitative measure of the credibility of testimony thus makes a distinction between recent memory and remote tradition, the former being proportionately more reliable. Thus William Stukeley was able to justify the irony—which he himself did not recognize—of searching in Grantham and neighbouring villages for biographical materials on the society's most distinguished late fellow, Sir Isaac Newton; he found some of his missing information 'among antient people, from their own knowledge or unquestionable tradition'.⁸³

Perhaps even more significant than these attempts to work out a basis for evaluating testimony was the society's adoption of an explicit analogy between true 'civil history' of the Baconian variety and true science, emanating from the same fount. In his 1667 *History of the Royal Society*, Thomas Sprat made clear his view that the inductive method of natural philosophy, which was supposed to rid the scholarly world of metaphysical error, had in the writing of history an exact parallel. History, he optimistically projected, would itself achieve a new perfection under the restored monarchy following centuries of 'naked breviaries' by monks and city magistrates (a passing shot at the chronicles), just as it had peaked in Augustan Rome following the late republican civil wars. He even conceded that 'Of all the labors of mens wit, and industry, I scarce know any, that can be more useful to the world, then civil history', calling for a history of the troubled 1640s on Baconian principles.⁸⁴ Most compelling, however, is his likening of the new natural philosopher to the civil historian, an 'exploder' of the historical errors contained in romances:

In this there is a neer resemblance between natural and civil history. In the civil, that way of romance is to be exploded, which heightens all the characters, and actions of men, beyond all shadow of probability . . . The same is to be affirm'd of natural history. To make that only to consist of strange, and delightful tales, is to render it nothing else but vain, and ridiculous knight-errantry . . . The first may be only compar'd to the fables of *Amadis*, and the *Seven Champions*: the other to the real *histories* of Alexander, Hannibal, Scipio, or Caesar.⁸⁵

This treatment does not address oral testimony or oral tradition as such, and in fact Sprat goes on to concede that this is only an analogy since the subjects of science and history 'do not cross each other'.⁸⁶ But it is further evidence of the notion that it was the duty of the upright, learned scholar to preserve history from the fabulous, an attitude that comes across more and more clearly from the 1660s to the 1730s. Half a century after Sprat this opinion is well established in the efforts of the Catholic antiquary Charles Eyston to disprove traditions related by a

⁸³ Nichols, *Literary Illustrations*, iv. 25 (Stukeley to Richard Mead, 16 June 1727).

⁸⁴ T. Sprat, *The History of the Royal Society*, ed. J. I. Cope and H. W. Jones (St Louis, Mo., 1958), 29, 43.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.* 214–15. Sprat returns to this analogy between civil history/fable and good and bad philosophy at p. 414.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.* 325.

Glastonbury innkeeper concerning Joseph of Arimathaea.⁸⁷ The remarks of Eyston's editor, the formidable Thomas Hearne, in themselves constitute a devastating critique of traditional evidence redolent of Royal Society principles:

Tho' the vulgar are generally incapable of judging of antiquities, yet there are hardly any of them, but are very attentive, when things of this nature are talked of, especially if the discourse happens to be of the church which themselves are parishioners. Hence 'tis, that there are so many old stories of the original of some churches, and of their being translated from one place to another. Whatever foundation there might have been at first for such stories, they have, however, been mightily improved by the constant additions that have been made to them, as cannot otherwise but happen, when history is only convey'd by tradition. There is not the least probability in some of these stories; and yet the most incredible of them are often times listened to with greater attention, than to the most rational and solid discourses in divinity.

Hearne noted that the 'vulgar' tended to forget the details surrounding churches when these fell or were destroyed, an interesting perception of the collective forgetting of irrelevant details of the past which modern oral historians call 'structural amnesia'. He himself had encountered many curious local tales, but these only reinforced his rigid distinction between 'uncertain tradition' and the 'authentick chronicles' of which he was a tireless transcriber and editor.⁸⁸

The comments of Augustan antiquaries, heralds, and historians lend further weight to the impression that the written record had, by 1700, elbowed oral tradition aside as an acceptable historical source. But there is more to the decline of oral tradition than this. The remarks of Hearne, Dugdale, and others, and even of relatively sympathetic writers like Browne and Wood, suggest the emergence of a *social*—as distinct from a merely *intellectual*—bias against such sources. To an extent, this had always been there. Leland himself had preferred priests to peasants, while at the end of the sixteenth century Sir William Wentworth advised his son, the future earl of Strafford, to beware the tales of servants, even 'auncyentt honest servants', because 'such men do mistake and misreport matters for wantt of lerning and sounder judgementt, though they be honest and meane truth'.⁸⁹ But while specific traditions were often questioned by Tudor antiquaries, there is little evidence prior to 1600 of a more general hostility to 'vulgar' traditions *because* they were vulgar, as opposed to being merely in conflict with a written source. The tone of dismissal had also sharpened since Camden's sympathetic reference to the 'good honest men' of Manchester and their tale of Danish resistance.⁹⁰

⁸⁷ [Charles Eyston], *A Little Monument to the Once Famous Abbey and Borough of Glastonbury*, in *The History and Antiquities of Glastonbury*, ed. Thomas Hearne (Oxford, 1722), 1–2, 80, 104; *A Relation of a Short Survey of the Western Counties*, 79, for an earlier report on the Glastonbury legends, c.1635.

⁸⁸ *History and Antiquities of Glastonbury*, ed. Hearne, pp. vii–viii, xiv, xxvi. On structural amnesia, see J. A. Barnes, 'The Collection of Genealogies', *Rhodes-Livingston Journal: Human Problems in British Central Africa*, 5 (1947), 48–56; J. Goody and I. Watt, 'The Consequences of Literacy', in J. Goody (ed.), *Literacy in Traditional Societies* (Cambridge, 1968), 32–3.

⁸⁹ *Wentworth Papers 1597–1628*, ed. J. P. Cooper, Camden Soc., 4th ser., 12 (1973), 15.

⁹⁰ Camden, *Britain*, 746–7.

The England of the later seventeenth century had become much more radically stratified, economically, socially, and culturally, than that of two centuries earlier. Elite forms of entertainment, literature, and art had grown increasingly remote from popular forms throughout the seventeenth century. Although there remained considerable cross-fertilization between the two (the ballad collections of Wood and Pepys, for example), the historical tastes of gentle and aristocratic readers had evolved sufficiently over two centuries to allow relatively little room to vulgar memories and tales.⁹¹ At the very end of our period, William Stukeley, who regularly repeated elite oral traditions, especially those involving his own family, was considerably more sceptical of their popular cousins. In his 'Iter Oxoniense' (c.1710), he noted on the Rollright Stones (overlooking Long Compton on the border of Warwickshire and Oxfordshire) that nearby was a single large stone, nine feet high, 'called King Stone by the country people'. He notes the 'many fabulous storys related of 'em by the neighbours', and locals annually had, by old custom, a picnic in a square cut out of the grass by the King Stone.⁹² At virtually the same time, the very first number of the *Spectator* contained Addison's mock-characterization of his own origins in an estate which according to 'the tradition of the village where it lies, was bounded by the same hedges and ditches in William the Conqueror's time that it is at present, and has been delivered down from father to son whole and entire, without the loss or acquisition of a single field or meadow, during the space of six hundred years'.⁹³

The social bias against tradition's credibility was reinforced, paradoxically, just as often by those who accepted it grudgingly as by those with stronger antipathies. A good example of this comes from a satirical piece in another early eighteenth-century periodical, *The Guardian*, in which the ancient topos of barbers being the best sources of information is mocked. Wanting to know the history of a particular place, and especially what had happened in the civil war, the pseudonymous author sought out

a certain barber, who for his general knowledge of things and persons, may be had in equal estimation with any of that order among the Romans. This person was allowed to be the best historian upon the spot; and the sequel of my tale will discover, that I did not chuse him so much for the soft touch of his hand, as his abilities to entertain me with an account of the Leaguer Time, as he calls it, the most authentick relations of which, thro' all parts of the town, are derived from this person.⁹⁴

⁹¹ Charles Sackville, sixth earl of Dorset (1643–1706) was another famous collector of ballads, referred to by Addison in *Spectator*, 85 (7 June 1711), ed. D. F. Bond, 5 vols. (Oxford, 1965), i. 363. Paradoxically, ballads which likely *did* derive ultimately from oral sources increasingly legitimized themselves by anchoring their tales in an implied written text. Thus the ballad, recorded by Elias Ashmole in the late seventeenth century, and which recounts the murders of Lewes and Edmund West by two sons of George, Lord Darcy, in the 1550s cites as its authority 'historyes of olde': thereby a written version of an oral ballad is vested with the mantle of writing: Bodl. MS Ashm. 48, fos. 31^r–35^r.

⁹² Bodl. MS Top. gen. e. 61 (Stukeley, 'Iter Oxoniense'), fo. 76^r (vol. reversed); H. Bett, *English Myths and Traditions* (1952), 41–3; L. Spence, *Minor Traditions of British Mythology* (New York, 1972), 139–41.

⁹³ *The Spectator*, 1 (1 Mar. 1711), ed. Bond, i. 1–2.

⁹⁴ *The Guardian*, 50 (7 May 1713), ed. J. C. Stephens (Lexington, Ky., 1982), 196.

A real-life example of information accepted grudgingly and with apologies comes from the Hanoverian traveller Jeremiah Milles, who was prepared to believe an innkeeper's information about Roman walls in Wales because, despite his humble station, he 'seemed to be a sensible man; pretty well acquainted with the country, and in all appearance not a Romancer'.⁹⁵

Perennial early modern concerns for social order, felt most intensely in the century between the accession of Elizabeth and the Restoration, contributed to a deepening suspicion of much popular discourse, complete with its occasional memories of local folk heroes and even rebellions against authority. This cultural division did not close with the return of an uneasy and tenuous stability following the tumultuous 1640s and 1650s. The association of oral traditions with socially marginal groups (ballad-singers and strolling players, for instance) and with the 'gossip' of old women, did nothing to endear them to the educated, who increasingly began to lump all such popular discourse under the same category which embraced superstitions and 'vulgar errors'.⁹⁶ Even the majority of harmless, amusing tales from the past, expressed in colourful rural language, could irritate refined Augustan sensibilities.

The implications for historical knowledge of this reshaping of truth are not difficult to see. Documents were certainly preferable to oral tradition because they represented a kind of ultimate authority, testable and often externally verifiable. But oral testimony about the past, even the remote past, could still be acceptable if it came from trustworthy (that is, educated or propertied) sources. This helps to explain the continued willingness of antiquaries and historians throughout the eighteenth century to accept the word of learned informants on points of detail about history, even as second-hand sources for information that could be found independently in manuscripts. This is the sort of trust that permits us now to rely on reputable historians' works without personally rechecking every fact they cite. One scholar's miscellaneous recollections might become another's reference tool. Biographical writers such as Fuller would rely on the information of other 'credible' persons throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁹⁷ Dugdale was convinced that a family deed, no longer extant, had once existed because 'one Mr Mathew Manwaring of Namptwich (a very old man)' could recount having shown it several decades earlier to the Elizabethan antiquary Sampson Erdeswicke.⁹⁸ Champion Branfill, an Essex gentleman, vaguely recalled hearing of a monument in Kelvedon church to the Petty family, in whom William

⁹⁵ BL MS Add. 15776 (travel notes of Jeremiah Milles), fo. 152'.

⁹⁶ Joshua Childrey's *Britannia Baconica* (1661), for example, is an early attempt 'for the use of the vulgar', though mainly to teach them to believe new scientific and natural discoveries instead of their own superstitions (pref. sig. A'). On the concept of vulgar error, see K. Thomas, *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England, 1500–1800* (1983), 70–81.

⁹⁷ Fuller, for example, reported of the Cambridge poet William Alabaster that at the performance of his tragedy *Roxanna* 'a Gentle-woman present thereat' had gone mad because of the play and never recovered her senses: 'Reader I had it from an Author whose credit is sin with me to suspect': *The History of the Worthies of England*, ed. J. Nichols, 2 vols. (1811), ii. 353 (sub 'Suffolk').

⁹⁸ Dugdale, *Life, Diary and Correspondence*, 209.

Holman was interested. The puzzle of some missing manuscripts was solved for Anthony Wood with the aid of an elite oral tradition nearly a century old. The manuscripts had disappeared in the mid-sixteenth century from the Merton College library. Wood had heard, from a scholar named John Wilton, that Thomas Allen, the Jacobean antiquary of Gloucester Hall, had in turn told him years earlier 'that old Garbrand the bookseller, that lived where Bowman the bookseller doth now, bought them of the college'. Allen had purchased several of the manuscripts as a young man, and his collections passed at his death to the Bodleian, where Wood soon found them.⁹⁹

Family oral traditions survived among the elite, sometimes across more than two generations. Although people rarely survived into their grandchildren's adulthood, James Whitelocke heard an account from his wife's grandfather of the latter's baptism, at the time of the monastic dissolution, as told to him by his own father.¹⁰⁰ William Stukeley recorded in his memoirs many remarks about his grandfather William (1623–75), who had died twelve years before the great antiquary's own birth: 'I have heard my father say that he was mighty fond of making ex tempore jokes', he noted, and 'My aunt Dodson once repeated to me some verses which he made upon a great eclipse of the sun which were not contemptible.'¹⁰¹ Young scholars learned from their parents, from older colleagues, and from strangers of their own social position. The commonplace book of William Johnson, a fellow of Clare College, Cambridge, in the 1650s, contains numerous anecdotes related to him by acquaintances. Johnson put a series of 'once upon a time' tales together in one section of the book, some of which derived from his reading but others from conversation. Many tales are taken second- or third-hand. 'In ffrance, studying ye law I learned of a scholler this story who had it from the gentleman himself', Johnson noted next to his rendition of one tale.¹⁰² The author of an unpublished letter of advice to a newly matriculated Oxford student urged his protégé to study Scripture regularly, citing an anecdote he had heard of a 'good old Churchman' who had read the Bible from start to finish annually for eighty years.¹⁰³

This double standard for oral sources was not unique to England. All over western Europe a combination of epistemological scepticism and socially based distaste was targeting the traditional selectively, in particular when it issued from common mouths. Jacques Revel has commented that 'To be denounced for error or false belief now meant to be socially discredited. Popular beliefs were no longer the sign of epistemological nonconformity, as they had been in the preceding stage;

⁹⁹ Essex RO D/Y/1/1/42 (Champion Branfill to William Holman, 9 Nov. 1720); for a similar example of papers heard of but not seen, see Essex RO D/Y/1/1/87 (Thomas Cox to Holman, 15 Dec. 1716); Wood, *Life and Times*, i. 424.

¹⁰⁰ *Liber Famelicus of Sir James Whitelocke, a Judge of the Court of King's Bench, in the Reigns of James I and Charles I*, ed. J. Bruce, Camden Soc., os 70 (1858), 24.

¹⁰¹ Bodl. MS Eng. misc. c. 533 (Stukeley notes), fos. 1^r, 2^r.

¹⁰² Bodl. MS Top. Camb. e. 5 (commonplace book of William Johnson, 1652–63), fos. 38^v–41^r.

¹⁰³ Bodl. MS Top. Oxon. d. 344 (Anon., 'Letters of advice to a young Gentleman', written 1684–5), fo. 7^v.

they had become the source of obfuscation and misunderstanding.¹⁰⁴ First Bayle and then Voltaire would declaim against tales and legends reported from oral sources. According to Boyle, tradition was nothing but ‘the assertion of two or three persons repeated by a numberless throng of credulous people’.¹⁰⁵ So far as Voltaire was concerned, reliance on tradition represented a fundamental failure of historiography from the era of Herodotus to his own day. Lorraine Daston has pointed out that in mid-seventeenth-century France, at least, there was a close connection between the discounting of popular tradition, much of it oral, and legal measures that inverted medieval jurisprudence’s preference for oral over written testimony (and especially for oral testimony by witnesses over written testimony composed well after the fact). ‘The belief that written testimony, even of an event centuries remote, counted as more reliable than the oral testimony of an eyewitness reflected changing canons of both legal and, especially, historical evidence’, Daston argues. Learned writings increasingly became the corrective to popular beliefs, and this had obvious implications for diminishing the evidentiary force of oral tradition, their principal vessel of transmission.¹⁰⁶

THE SELECTIVE USE OF ORAL TRADITION, 1640–1730

Although oral sources never entirely disappeared from the antiquaries’ fishing-pond, references to them become steadily sparser as the seventeenth century wanes. There is no reference to tradition in the manuscript collections, written in the early 1650s, of the Suffolk antiquary Philip Candler, though he frequently noted broken or eradicated inscriptions; the same may be said for the church notes of Hannibal Baskerville of Sunningwell, Berkshire. Elias Ashmole relied very little on oral evidence for his *Antiquities of Berkshire*, though he could not resist repeating a graphic traditional tale, recorded in the writings of Anthony Wood, of the ‘murder’ of Sir Robert Dudley’s unfortunate wife, Amy Robsart, a century earlier.¹⁰⁷ Wood himself, though reluctant to lean too heavily on tradition, thought that it should not always be dismissed out of hand. At a rural Oxfordshire church he found an old monument the inscription of which was ‘gone and quite out of remembrance’. The ‘country people’ told Wood that it commemorated ‘one, or three, daughters’ who had been ‘antiently co-heires of this lordship’. An air of

¹⁰⁴ J. Revel, ‘Forms of Expertise: Intellectuals and “Popular” Culture in France (1650–1800)’, in S. L. Kaplan (ed.), *Understanding Popular Culture: Europe from the Middle Ages to the Nineteenth Century* (Berlin, New York, and Amsterdam, 1984), 256–73, esp. p. 262.

¹⁰⁵ Pierre Bayle, *Pensées diverses* (Rotterdam, 1683), cited in Cocchiara, *History of Folklore in Europe*, 62, who points out that Bayle, like Browne, paradoxically ended up making a major collection of that which he affected to despise.

¹⁰⁶ L. Daston, *Classical Probability in the Enlightenment* (Princeton, 1988), 320–1, including the opinions of Bayle and Voltaire.

¹⁰⁷ Bodl. MS Tanner 324 (Suffolk collections), fos. 1–143’ *passim*; H. Baskerville, ‘Certain Remembrances of monuments yt I have seene in some churches’, Bodl. MS Rawl. D. 859, fos. 89’–92’; Elias Ashmole, *The Antiquities of Berkshire*, written c.1666, 3 vols. (1719), i. 52, ii. 486. For Wood’s version of the story as told him by friends, see Bodl. MS Wood D. 4, fos. 99–100’.

willingness to believe hangs about his treatment of the traditions surrounding a sacred well near Seacourt:

If I should tell you of the enriching of a towne hereabouts by the continuall resort to this place, you would perhaps scarce beleive me; and yet it is a constant tradition among the good people here . . . All which, you'll say, *comming from the mouths of rusticks*, may be accounted noe truer then the tales of Robin Hood and Little John. But, however such constant tradition from each other among them may have something in the bottome thereof of truth; though much of it lost by the longinquity of time since acted.¹⁰⁸

A highly sceptical Georgian observer such as Jeremiah Milles thought reasonable the tradition that William the Conqueror had landed at Bulverhythe, five miles from Hastings, rather than at Hastings itself, the site of the famous battle. He was less impressed by local claims that William had dined at Bulverhythe on a certain large stone, and by the tradition that Hastings itself was named for a Danish pirate.¹⁰⁹

Other writers, who avoided oral traditions as a general rule, cited them incidentally on particular points. Sporadic references can be found in the works of Robert Plot (Oxfordshire), Robert Thoroton (Nottinghamshire), Sir Peter Leycester (Cheshire), Silas Taylor (Harwich and Dovercourt), James Wright (Rutland), Henry Chauncy (Hertfordshire) and Robert Atkyns (Gloucestershire).¹¹⁰ White Kennett was prepared to accept a traditional story if he could find some corroborating evidence in documents or ruins. The rigorous Ralph Thoresby distrusted the yarns of the vulgar but nevertheless turned to tradition as an aid in reconstructing the state of the parish church of Leeds on the eve of the Reformation, two centuries earlier. He could even refer to a certain family's pedigree as 'only conjectural (though highly probable) from Tradition &c.'¹¹¹ The revisers of Camden's *Britannia* in 1695 actually used traditions to clarify or

¹⁰⁸ Anthony Wood, 'Survey of the Antiquities of the City of Oxford' (written 1661–6), in *Wood's City of Oxford*, ed. A. Clark, 3 vols., Oxford Historical Soc., xvii, xix, xxxvii (Oxford, 1889–99), i. 325; cf. i. 186, 215–16, 248–9, 426 (emphasis added). Wood's friend and contemporary Nathaniel Greenwood (fellow of Brasenose 1654–81) compiled his own record of the monuments, epitaphs, and arms in Oxford parish churches in 1658, with no reference at all to oral traditions: Bodl. MS Top. Oxon. e. 286 ('Nathaniel Greenwood, his booke'), fos. 1–142.

¹⁰⁹ BL MS Add. 15776 (travel notes of Jeremiah Milles), fo. 208^r.

¹¹⁰ Robert Plot, *Natural history of Oxford-shire* (Oxford, 1677), 325–6, 337, 341, 351–2; Robert Thoroton, *The Antiquities of Nottinghamshire* (1677), ed. John Throsby, 3 vols. (Nottingham, 1790–6; repr. 1972), i. 103, ii. 27, 167; Sir Peter Leycester, *Historical Antiquities* (1673), 249–50, and his 'A short view of Greate Brettain and Ierland ffrom the beginning' (written 1670 and the source for book 1 of his *Antiquities*'), Cheshire RO DDX 180; Silas Taylor (alias Domville), *The History and Antiquities of Harwich and Dovercourt, Topographical, Dynastical and Political*, written c.1676, ed. Samuel Dale (1730), 16, 81; James Wright, *The History and Antiquities of the County of Rutland* (1684), 1 (William Stukeley, the annotator of the Bodleian Library copy (shelfmark Gough Rutland 3), also noted (p. 62) traditions from the area as late as 1734); Sir Henry Chauncy, *The Historical Antiquities of Hertfordshire* (1700), 32; Sir Robert Atkyns, *The Ancient and Present State of Glostershire* (1712; repr. 1974), 214, 248, 503.

¹¹¹ White Kennett, *Parochial Antiquities*, ed. B. Bandinel, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1818), i. 36, 56, ii. 156, 284, 295; Ralph Thoresby, *Ducatus Leodiensis: or, the Topography of the Ancient and Populous Town and Parish of Leedes* (1715), 81, 106; cf. his *Vicaria Leodiensis: or, the History of the Church of Leedes in Yorkshire* (1724), 51; *The Diary of Ralph Thoresby*, F.R.S., ed. J. Hunter, 2 vols. (1830), i. 89–90.

correct their great predecessor, and they were even able to exploit the writings of European antiquaries, such as Olaus Wormius, to bring a comparative approach to the study of rural folk tales.¹¹² The early eighteenth-century student of cathedral antiquities, Browne Willis, also reported local traditions, some of which had originated only in the preceding century.¹¹³

If we turn from published works of famous scholars, who were increasingly cautious about hitching their reputations to the cart of unprovable local traditions for all the world to see, and look instead at the private correspondence of local antiquaries and at their unpublished notes, a rather different picture emerges. This demonstrates considerably greater ambivalence towards tradition, and a greater willingness to trust in it as a supplement to gaps in the record. Thomas Ford, an antiquary with a particularly strong distaste for vulgar error, described the 'Weeping Cross' near Bodicote, Oxfordshire, with reference to two conflicting traditions, the first that the town's inhabitants had been obliged to carry their dead to nearby Adderbury 'because (as they say) their own church yard (which is ample enough) is not consecrated'. The cross had apparently been used time out of mind to rest caskets on during the burial procession, providing another occasion for 'weeping'. Ford was less willing to accept the second explanation, that the cross had been the point at which Banbury mothers had said farewell to the children going to London as apprentices. This seemed 'less probable, yett because asserted by many with great assurances I shall not omitt to insert it'.¹¹⁴ In a similar case, Benjamin Orwell, writing to William Holman in 1724, was cautious but curious in reporting what might be a vanished church near Great Chesterford:

About 2 miles from the Town, close to the Road leading from thence to Neumarket, is a place called Sunkin Church: of which I never could meet with any account from any author. The Inhabitants are told (but it is only Tradition) that there a church sunk into the ground: I have gon to the place and could find stones and mortar; some building there has been . . . perhaps a Crosse or ffort, or mark for the bounds of the countys of Essex and Cambridgeshire. I can't think it a Church. I write this because perhaps some of your Ancient Historians may give some light into it. It seems to have taken up about a Rod of ground.¹¹⁵

Browne Willis's collections for his *Antiquities of Buckinghamshire* record of Chetwode the tradition that their parish church was a priory before the dissolution, while at the parish church of Ivinghoe in the same county was an effigy 'which

¹¹² *Camden's Britannia*, ed. Edmund Gibson (1695), cols. 355, 802, 814; compare Camden, *Britain* (1610), 439.

¹¹³ Browne Willis, *A Survey of the Cathedrals of York, Durham, Carlisle, Chester, Man, Lichfield, Hereford, Worcester, Gloucester and Bristol*, 2 vols. (1727), i. 17, 22, ii. 694; cf. Willis's *A View of the Mitred Abbeys*, in *Joannis Lelandi Antiquarii de Rebus Britannicis Collectanea*, ed. Hearne, appendix, vol. ii, p. 166. Willis's contemporary, Samuel Gale, thought that the man-made mound in Catterick, near the site of a Roman encampment, that the inhabitants called 'Palat Hill' was simply a corruption of 'Palatin[e] Hill'. Bodl. MS Top. gen. c. 66 (fragmentary diary of Samuel Gale, undated), fo. 29f.

¹¹⁴ CUL MS Mm. 6.50 (Covel correspondence), fos. 194–5 (Ford to John Covel, 12 Aug. 1697).

¹¹⁵ Essex RO D/Y/1/1 (unfoliated Holman letters, Neville-Prideaux volume, Orwell to Holman, 16 June 1724); cf. Essex RO D/Y/1/1/87 (Cox to Holman 14 Dec. 1716) for another example.

all the inhabitants say is a cardinall'.¹¹⁶ Even 'Honest Tom' Martin of Palgrave, an exceptionally uncompromising sceptic, went actively hunting for traditions that might explain the two stone coffins on the north aisle of Burford church once all recourse to documents had failed.¹¹⁷

Many early eighteenth-century landowners and citizens could not resist the temptation to memorialize the traditions of their communities for posterity, unproven or otherwise. In 1705 an anonymous inhabitant of Tottenham, who was not a native of the place, wrote such an account of the parish to render it 'what civil returns I can' for its hospitality to him, in part because other writers had no good guide, though a chorography of the town had been published by William Bedwell in 1631. He noted, however, that reliance on oral information was a risky necessity for those not well acquainted with a community. 'Strangers who cannot stay long in a place and must take many things upon trust or hearsay . . . may be misled by vulgar reports or conjecture and give an erroneous or at best but a dubious account of what they publish for truth.'¹¹⁸ Samuel Dale of Braintree, normally a harsh critic of error, speculated to William Holman that an unidentifiable grave marked by a brass plate at his parish church was perhaps that of a chantry founder, 'but who he was we have no tradition, nor is there any remembrance here any further then by the escocheons carved on the beams of the roof'. A field trip to Raine church revealed only one gravestone, which 'hath no inscription remaining, but the tradition is, that it's for one Mr Thomas Woods, whose daughter Marie was the wife of John Goodday of Braintree'.¹¹⁹

Another, rather different, form of oral tradition also remained largely immune from contempt, namely the proverb.¹²⁰ Local proverbs invited speculation as to their origins throughout the Restoration and eighteenth century. Sir Peter Leycester, the respected historian of Cheshire, also wrote a 'short view of greate Brettaine and Ierland ffrom the beginninge' in 1670, expressing curiosity as to a saying such as 'Every man is not born to be the vicar of Bodon', which he ventured might be a reference either to the living's profitability, 'or else of the learning & piety of some former vicar there'.¹²¹ The general hostility to oral tradition as a historical source did not extend to popular wisdom as contained in proverbs, however traditional, since they were not generally the sort of oral utterance that could be used as evidence for a particular historical fact and since, too, they were much more free-floating and usually less tied to particular localities.

¹¹⁶ Bodl. MS Willis 6 (c.1710–20), fo. 35^v; MS Willis 2 (c.1710), fo. 22^v.

¹¹⁷ Bodl. MS Top. gen. e. 85 (Thomas Martin of Palgrave, 'Some Remarks and Observations taken in a Journey from Eton near Windsor to Oxford', 1724), p. 5.

¹¹⁸ Bodl. MS Gough Middlesex 5 (dated 1705, with a continuation dated 1710), fos. 1–25.

¹¹⁹ Essex RO D/Y/1/1/97 (Dale to Holman, 11 Apr. 1712). It should be noted that recent traditions such as this are rarely identified as to source, making a gentry rather than popular origin a distinct possibility. The information provided to Holman by the Revd Samuel Adamson on a chapel at Northend, Great Waltham, was derived from 'trustees or feoffes who take care of the chapel' who were of respectable if not gentle status: *ibid.* D/Y/1/1/5 (Adamson to Holman, 14 May 1723).

¹²⁰ Fox, *Oral and Literate Culture*, ch. 2.

¹²¹ Leycester, 'A short view', Cheshire RO DDX 180, fo. 54^v. Browne Willis collected numerous 'country proverbs' in the early 1700s, arranging them alphabetically by county: Bodl. MS Willis 2, fos. 84^{r–v}.

This made them easily adaptable to writing, like the classical adages and commonplaces printed by Erasmus and other humanists. James Howell, the first Historiographer Royal, was an admirer of nobility and learning whose political works regularly deplore the many-headed monster, yet he had a sufficiently high regard for the ‘people’s voice’ as handed down in proverbs to bother assembling a collection of such wisdom.

The Peeples voice, the Voice of God we call
 And what are Proverbs but the peeples voice?
 Coin’d first, and current made by common choice,
 Then sure they must have weight and truth withall.
 They are a publick heritage entayld
 On every nation, or like Hireloomes mayld,
 which passe from Sire to Son, and so from Son
 Down to the Granchild till the world be done;
 They are Free-Denisons by long Descent,
 Without the grace of prince or parlement,
 The truest commoners, and inmate guests,
 We fetch them from the Nurse and Mothers breasts;
 They can prescription plead gainst King or Crown,
 And need no Affidavits but their own . . .¹²²

Howell was followed in 1670 by the great naturalist John Ray and in 1732 by the physician Thomas Fuller.¹²³ Yet even proverbial wisdom, by the end of the seventeenth century, was becoming subject to a social bias, and, by the middle of the eighteenth century, a minority position that held such knowledge as conservative, vulgar, and out of step with polite society, was rapidly permeating the attitudes of elite commentators, such as the earl of Chesterfield, who denounced ‘proverbs, and vulgar aphorisms’ as inappropriate to ‘a man of fashion’.¹²⁴

TRADITION INTO FOLKLORE

I suggested in earlier chapters that as print spread through the countryside local communities were gradually caught up in a national historical tradition that competed with popular beliefs and often syncretistically affected them with

¹²² Preface to James Howell: ‘Of Proverbs and Adages’, in his *Παροιμιογραφία. Proverbs* (1659); Fox, *Oral and Literate Culture*, 133 ff.; A. Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 1999), 96–106, on the frequency of oral episodes containing cautionary tales of divine punishment.

¹²³ John Ray, *A Collection of English Proverbs* (Cambridge, 1670); Thomas Fuller, M. D., *Gnomologia: Adagies, Proverbs, Wise Sentiments, and Witty Sayings, Ancient and Modern, Foreign and British* (1732). We find a similar enthusiasm in the normally snobbish Addison for another traditional form, ‘the songs and fables that are come from father to son, and are most in vogue among the common people of the countries . . . An ordinary song or ballad that is the delight of the common people, cannot fail to please all such readers as are not unqualified for the entertainment by their affectation or ignorance.’ *Spectator*, 70 (21 May 1711), ed. Bond, i. 297–8.

¹²⁴ Fox, *Oral and Literate Culture*, 169.

extraneous material from learned culture.¹²⁵ That many popular beliefs about the past have survived at all is owed to Restoration and eighteenth-century antiquaries who forswore oral tradition as a source for details of local history (unlike most of their Tudor predecessors) but were often willing to preserve it for other ends. In other words, they no longer wished to record it so much as to filter and channel it, confining its impact on historical awareness to the margins and footnotes of learned texts built on written documents. Alternatively, some of them hived it off altogether into the earliest examples of works specifically devoted to what we would now call 'folklore', beginning with Browne's *Pseudodoxia epidemica* (principally about natural rather than historical beliefs) and John Aubrey's *Remains of Gentilisme and Judaisme*. In some ways, this simply carried forward the ethnographic strand in sixteenth-century chorographies and in early modern travel literature, studying beliefs and traditions less for the sake of history than to understand a popular culture that seemed increasingly alien, even anachronistic. The result was the preservation of much oral lore about the past in printed form, now safely quarantined from true history.

Perhaps no one better illustrates the changing relationship between history, folklore, and tradition than John Aubrey himself, who has generally been underrated both as an antiquary and as an ethnographer.¹²⁶ As a boy, Aubrey 'did ever love to converse with old men, as living histories', rather as Maurice Halbwachs, in the early part of the twentieth century discusses having learned of the Paris commune and the Second Empire from 'a good old woman, full of superstition and prejudice'. Aside from works such as the *Remains*, much of Aubrey's *Brief Lives* derives from oral testimony. His unfinished study of the antiquities of Surrey (which does not incline to the archaeological methods of his comparable work on Wiltshire) in some ways resembles earlier works such as *Britannia* in its mixture of the oral and the documentary. At Petersham he encountered the familiar tradition of a vanished religious house, and at Stretham a recumbent figure in white marble, said by tradition to be John of Gaunt.¹²⁷ At Addington the inhabitants spoke much of their town's ancient prosperity; a similar nostalgia existed at Ewell, though 'History being silent in this affair' Aubrey believed that 'little can be depended on our weak conjectures'.¹²⁸

¹²⁵ A suggestive parallel may be drawn from the fate of traditional folk carols which ceased to be created in the seventeenth century and were ultimately superseded by the text hymnbooks of Isaac Watts and others: A. L. Lloyd, *Folk Song in England*, rev. edn. (1969), 134–8; cf. V. Gammon, '“Babylonian Performances”: The Rise and Suppression of Popular Church Music, 1660–1870', in Eileen and Stephen Yeo (eds.), *Popular Culture and Class Conflict, 1590–1914* (Brighton, Sussex, 1981), 62–88.

¹²⁶ M. Hunter, *John Aubrey and the Realm of Learning* (1975), 39–40, 154–70, has been to date the most persuasive attempt to rehabilitate Aubrey as a pan-sophic scholar.

¹²⁷ John Aubrey, *The Natural History and Antiquities of the County of Surrey*, written 1673–92, 5 vols. (1719; Scolar Press facs. edn., Dorking, 1975), i. 53, 82, 190, 201; M. Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, trans. F. J. Ditter and V. Y. Ditter (New York and London, 1980), 62.

¹²⁸ Aubrey, *Natural History . . . of Surrey*, ii. 39, 219–20. For another version of this tradition, see Bodl. MS Top. gen. e. 80, fo. 1^{r-v}, Edward Steele of Bromley's parish notes, c.1710. Steele was more credulous with regard to tradition than Francis Taverner, the Jacobean antiquary of Hexton, Herts., who lived a century earlier and whose works Steele liberally transcribed into his own collections. Taverner's

Aubrey's fascination with the supernatural, with prophecies, apparitions, and ghosts, also made him rather more open than most of his Restoration contemporaries to anecdotes and traditions that could not be documented, in contrast to the more stringent stance taken by his younger contemporary, Thomas Sprat.¹²⁹ Recalling the thunderclouds that he had seen gather minutes after the execution of Christopher Love, the Presbyterian conspirator, in 1651, Aubrey added the 'report' of a similar incident in 1685.¹³⁰ No less believable, because he had heard it from 'persons of honour' was the tradition that Protector Somerset had observed 'a bloody sword come out of the wall', prophesying his own decapitation, or the parishioners' tale, endorsed by Aubrey's friend Pepys, that the bells of St Mary Overy had originated in the ruined abbey of Merton in Surrey.¹³¹ Yet the significant feature here is surely Aubrey's emphasis on the social status of his informants; he was much less credulous of the sayings of 'vulgar people' than of educated sources such as the Welsh assize judge George Johnson, 'a serious person, and *fide dignus*', on whose word he accepted an account of a skeleton found in a quarry. Aubrey repeats the story of Thomas and Edith Bonham of Great Wishford, Wiltshire, who had produced seven children at one birth, because he found it written in the parish register by the parish's curate, Roger Powell, in 1640.¹³² A tale connected with conjuring up apparitions, from Henry VIII's reign, came to Aubrey from his maternal grandfather, who had in turn heard it from 'old father Davis'.¹³³

Much of the information that Aubrey records falls into the category of colourful and entertaining, but there is absolutely no evidence that he believed all that he wrote down, any more than a modern anthropologist either accepts his subjects' information at face value or disregards it entirely. Just as Aubrey discounted the transformation of St Oswald into 'St Twasole' in eastern Gloucestershire and parts of Wiltshire, so he remained sceptical of tales of fairies, elves, giants, and historical personages, all of which issued from popular sources. 'The vulgar

view of a tradition at Hexton, with reference to a vanished castle, was distinctly sceptical: 'if that had byn soe, then some remaynes of the foundations of brick or stone would have byn plowed up. And some chronicle or record would have mentioned who were the builders or at some tyme since Lords thereof'. Bodl. MS Top. gen. e. 80, fo. 127^v.

¹²⁹ Sprat, *History of the Royal Society*, 6 and elsewhere.

¹³⁰ John Aubrey, *Miscellanies upon Various Subjects*, 4th edn. (1857), 45.

¹³¹ *Ibid.* 72, 77–8, 112–13; Aubrey, *Natural History . . . of Surrey*, i. 226. Cf. Sir John Percival, *The English Travels of Sir John Percival and William Byrd II: The Percival Diary of 1701*, ed. M. R. Wenger (Columbia, Mo. 1989), 44, for an oral tradition concerning the history of Chelmsford, accepted by Percival because it came from John Ouseley (1645–1708), rector of Panfield, near Braintree. Daniel Featley believed an account of the appearance of an apparition before a Knight of the Bath, Sir Thomas Wise, primarily because of the latter's 'ancient descent', but also because of Wise's 'large revenues', which enhanced Featley's willingness to accept an unlikely tale: Bodl. MS Rawl. D. 47 (Featley papers), fo. 42^v (Featley to Archbishop Abbot, n.d.) also printed in Wood, *Athenae Oxonienses*, ed. Bliss, iii, cols. 166–8.

¹³² John Aubrey, *The Natural History of Wiltshire*, ed. J. Britton, Wiltshire Topographical Soc. (1847), 71 (both the skeleton and the Bonham story); Aubrey, *Miscellanies*, *passim*, for stories variously fostered on such authorities as Elias Ashmole and Sir William Dugdale.

¹³³ Aubrey, *Remains of Gentilisme and Judaisme*, ed. J. Britten (1881), 52.

have a tradition', he noted of Blechingley, 'that I know not what duke of Buckingham was arrested by a royal precept in one of the galleries here.'¹³⁴ In the vestry of Frensham church he viewed a huge cauldron 'which the inhabitants say, by tradition, was brought hither by the fairies, time out of mind' from a nearby hill. Aubrey believed the cauldron to be an ancient utensil from the era of pre-Christian revels, and he could scarcely conceal his amusement at the traditional explanation: 'These stories are verily believ'd by most of the old women of this parish, and by many of their daughters, who can hardly be of any other opinion; so powerful a thing is custom, joyn'd with ignorance.'¹³⁵

Aubrey was convinced not just that traditional tales could legitimately be preserved without being believed, but also that there was some urgency in so doing. He was nearly unique among his contemporaries in observing that they had declined in popularity even among the common people since his childhood. Aubrey even offered a remarkably perceptive explanation for this decline, which he associated with increasing literacy in the countryside (and especially with the growth in female literacy) occasioned by the mid-century turmoil. 'In the old, ignorant times, before women were readers,' he observed, 'the history was handed downe from mother to daughter.' Aubrey's nurse had given him the history of England 'from the Conquest downe to Carl. I in ballad', and rural folk had told him many old tales as he grew up. Since then, however, such stories had been disappearing. 'Before printing, Old wives' tales were ingeniose; and since printing came in fashion, till a little before the civill warrs, the ordinary sort of people were not taught to reade.' From the 1640s and 1650s, however, books had become more common, 'and most of the poor people understand letters; and the many good bookes, and variety of turnes of affaires, have putt all the old fables out of doors'. Aubrey unquestionably overstated the degree to which print had destroyed an oral culture of ballads and tales: the growing number of broadsides and chapbooks could reinforce as much as undercut spoken versions of those stories. Yet there is a kernel of truth to his observation, at least in so far as the *subject* of these oral tales are concerned. Those that continued to weave tales of the past now devoted increasing attention to recent affairs such as the civil war, giving proportionately less emphasis to the deeds and personalities of more remote times. It was thus not print on its own but memories of Oliver and tales of the past two centuries that 'frighted away Robin-good-fellow and the fayries'.¹³⁶ There were indeed sufficiently horrific new events of national or regional importance to make the

¹³⁴ Aubrey, in *Anecdotes and Traditions*, ed. Thoms, 83, 87; Aubrey, *Natural History . . . of Surrey*, iii. 87; *Wiltshire. The Topographical Collections of John Aubrey, F.R.S.*, ed. J.E. Jackson (Devizes, 1862), 417.

¹³⁵ Aubrey, *Natural History . . . of Surrey*, iii. 366–7. Aubrey compared this belief to similar traditions about Camelot or Queen Camel in Somerset.

¹³⁶ Aubrey, *Remains of Gentilisme and Judaisme*, 67–8; id. *Natural History . . . of Surrey*, iii. 93, 99, 102, 106, 115–16. Half a century later, Lewis Theobald thought that such stories lingered like an infection, spread by the 'garrulity of nurses and servants', whence they travelled 'from the cottage to the farm, from the farm to the Squire's Hall': *The Censor*, 3 vols. (1717), i. 75–6. On old wives' tales, see Fox, *Oral and Literate Culture*, 173–212.

supernatural give ground to the historical in ballad and tradition alike. Where Aubrey remembered the fairies, the young Thomas Babington Macaulay a century and a half later heard 'tales of terror' in Somerset, the oral remains of Sedgemoor and the Bloody Assizes.¹³⁷

Although Aubrey exaggerated the extent to which rural literacy had improved in his lifetime, his explanation supports the arguments advanced earlier in this book about the implications of print for local memory. The 'variety of turnes of affaires' in the second half of the seventeenth century undoubtedly gave birth to a new stock of stories that may have superseded traditions of longer standing. By the early eighteenth century, yarns from the Great Rebellion were sufficiently commonplace at all levels of society to merit satire in the literary periodicals. The unknown author of an essay in *The Guardian* commented that everyone at the inns of court seemed to have lost a relation at Marston Moor or Edgehill, and that he was having recourse to written history to help him understand these tales, spending his time reading Rushworth and Clarendon because each of the members 'has a story which none who has not read those battles is able to taste'.¹³⁸ *The Tatler* tells us of the ancient members of the Trumpet club, civil war veterans most of them, including Major Matchlock, 'who served in the last civil wars, and has all the battles by heart. He does not think any action in Europe worth talking of since the fight of Marston-Moor; and every night tells us of his having been knock'd off his horse at the rising of the London 'prentices'.¹³⁹ During his short-lived emigration to New England in the 1680s, the publisher John Dunton had stayed with an ex-roundhead near Boston, who exhausted him with recollections of his glory days. 'Captain Marshal is a hearty old gentleman, formerly one of Oliver's souldiers, upon which he very much values himself; he had all the *History of the Civil Wars* at his fingers ends, and if we may believe him, Oliver did hardly any thing that was considerable without his assistance.'¹⁴⁰ Henry Prescott, the Chester diarist who was normally fond of sitting up late with his history books, his friends, and his liquor, endured the reminiscences of an old man's adventures at the battle of Preston and his wife's confinement by guards to her house.¹⁴¹ One of Joseph Addison's correspondents complains of the 'dull

¹³⁷ Macaulay quoted in R. Palmer, *A Ballad History of England* (1979), 36. One example of a modern oral tradition which appears to date right back to the civil war links the death of John Hampden (of wounds sustained at Chalgrove) with a local charity: the versions vary, but the story tells how he spent the night before the battle in Watlington at an inn, today known as the Hare and Hounds. After Hampden's death, officers appeared looking for a trunk of his with soldiers' pay. This was not found, but soon after the innkeeper, one Robert Parslowe, yeoman, began to buy land, presumably with the missing money. When he died, he left a charitable bequest which continues today and is locally believed to be founded on Parslowe's guilty conscience. *The Diary of Bulstrode Whitelocke 1605-1675*, ed. R. Spalding (Oxford, 1989), 147 n. 1.

¹³⁸ *The Guardian*, 44 (1 May 1713), ed. Stephens, p. 178.

¹³⁹ *The Tatler*, 132 (11 Feb. 1710), ed. D. F. Bond, 3 vols. (Oxford, 1987), ii. 266.

¹⁴⁰ John Dunton, *Life and Errors* (1705), 175.

¹⁴¹ *The Diary of Henry Prescott, LL.B., deputy registrar of Chester Diocese*, ed. J. Addy, J. Harrop, and P. P. McNiven, 3 vols., Rec. Soc. of Lancashire and Cheshire, vols. 127, 132, 133 (Chester, 1987-97), ii. 308 (28 Apr. 1711), 516 (24 June 1716).

generation of story-tellers', gentlemen who bore their fellows at coffee-houses and clubs with prolix accounts of battles and other events, which 'murder time'.¹⁴²

It was in this anecdotal form, suitable for conversation, entertainment, or illustration, rather than as history, that some writers continued to garner oral traditions into the eighteenth century, their attentiveness much greater if they were themselves attached to the place whence the traditions arose. Richard Gough's history of Myddle is replete with traditions and the recollections of 'antient persons'.¹⁴³ Abraham de la Pryme enjoyed talking with his parishioners as much as reading. His many informants included other antiquaries and parsons as well as poorer folk. When noting the death of 'Old Richard Baxter' in 1694 he added a character of the great puritan 'as far as my accounts can reach, as well oral as printed'. The 'oldest parishioners' in the village of Caistor gave him much information about an old Roman road 'commonly call'd amongst them the High Street Way'.¹⁴⁴ Yet Pryme was, despite his relative isolation, no country bumpkin himself but a fellow of the Royal Society and a promising young scholar in touch with the leading antiquaries of his day. He had one foot in the world of rural tradition and another in that of Augustan scholarship.

Daniel Defoe had few such local ties and was no historian, despite his vast publication of journalistic lives and memoirs. His usage of oral tradition was motivated very clearly by a desire to bring national customs and points of interest back out of the realm of the learned chorography and natural history and make it attractive to a wide audience. With Defoe's *Tour thro' the Whole Island of Great Britain*, first published in three volumes between 1724 and 1727, we have come almost full circle. Defoe's frequent accounts of traditional tales and of the recollections of country folk connect him with Leland and Camden, and with the folkloric and ethnographic interests of Aubrey half a century earlier, rather than with the documentary zeal which by now fired the souls of historians and antiquaries. The difference is that no one (including himself) regarded Defoe as a serious scholar. Intent on writing for the entertainment of a wide audience, Defoe persistently denies any claim to the title of antiquary: his task is to describe Britain's towns, countryside, and people as these appear in the present. It was precisely this lack of deep concern for the scholarly side of English antiquities, coupled with a boundless curiosity about everything he encountered, that allowed Defoe to adopt Leland's interest in local lore, and to share his caution towards specific points of tradition rather than the general scepticism and distaste of a century of scholars, from the recusant Thomas Habington to the non-juror Thomas Hearne.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴² *Spectator*, 371 (6 May 1712), ed. Bond, iii. 309; for another example of old men swapping tales of the civil wars, no. 497 (30 Sept. 1712), ed. Bond, iv. 262.

¹⁴³ Richard Gough, *The History of Myddle*, ed. D. Hey (Harmondsworth, 1981), 54, 56, 77, 81, and *passim*.

¹⁴⁴ *Diary of Abraham de la Pryme*, 47, 71, 79 ff.

¹⁴⁵ Defoe, *Tour*, i. 116, ii. 429–30; for other examples, cf. *ibid.* i. 16, 188, 216, 243, 257, 278, ii. 452, 463, 634, 662, 768.

Defoe's book appeared at virtually the same time as another work which similarly marks an Aubreyesque interest in popular traditions about the past, and much else, for their own sake, namely Henry Bourne's *Antiquitates vulgares*.¹⁴⁶ The work of a sometime glazier's apprentice turned curate, the influence of Bourne's book was relatively slight in the first half of the century, when it had to contend with the dismissive attitude of periodicals such as the *Gentleman's Magazine*. This denounced tales of ghosts, based on 'a motley mixture of low and vulgar education' provided by nurses, and stories of cities 'famous for their antiquity and decays'.¹⁴⁷ In the later eighteenth century, however, it once again became fashionable to study popular traditions, superstitions, and practices, again if only for their quaintness, under the rubric of 'popular antiquities'. At the same time, European writers such as Rousseau were also commenting on the detrimental effects of writing and on the innate superiority of speech.¹⁴⁸ In France, Jacques Revel has shown, popular culture began to be understood by French intellectuals as 'a social artifact produced in particular conditions, not as the negative product of a system of invalidation'. In short, they began to approach it with something like the detachment of anthropologists, their interests eventually culminating in the use of oral sources by as respected a post-Napoleonic historian as Jules Michelet.¹⁴⁹ Across the Channel, coinciding with the new-found interest in ballads of Bishop Thomas Percy and Francis Grose's attention to vulgar speech, John Brand's investigations into this subject were able to pick up where Bourne had left off. This pointed the way towards a more systematic study of folklore in the Victorian era, when students such as W. Carew Hazlitt, who in turn edited and updated Brand, listened afresh to the 'common voice'. From there the road leads fairly directly to twentieth-century folklorists while also forking out into the local history and popular cultural studies of the past two or three decades.¹⁵⁰

Although the nature and the context of historical writing and research had changed profoundly in two centuries, there is a certain resemblance between the sixteenth-century view of tradition and that of one Victorian collector, Robert Chambers, according to whom 'the value of popular tradition as evidence in antiquarian inquiries cannot be disputed, though in every instance it should be received

¹⁴⁶ Henry Bourne, *Antiquitates vulgares; or, The antiquities of the common people* (Newcastle, 1725); R. Sweet, *The Writing of Urban Histories in Eighteenth-Century England* (Oxford, 1997), 19.

¹⁴⁷ *Gentleman's Magazine*, 2 (Oct. 1732), 1001–2. Another writer thought ballads, that other popular vehicle for history, as 'the bane of all good manners and morals, a nursery for idlers, whores, and pickpockets, a school for scandal, smut and debauchery, and ought to be entirely suppressed, or reduced under proper restriction': *ibid.*, 5 (Feb. 1735), 93.

¹⁴⁸ N. Hudson, *Writing and European Thought 1600–1830* (Cambridge, 1994), 92–114; *id.* 'Constructing Oral Tradition: The Origins of the Concept in Enlightenment Intellectual Culture', in Fox and Woolf (eds.), *The Spoken Word*, pp. 240–55.

¹⁴⁹ Revel, 'Forms of Expertise', 267; for Michelet and oral history, see Thompson, *The Voice of the Past*, 41 f.

¹⁵⁰ Cocchiara, *History of Folklore in Europe*, 145–50, on Ritson, Percy, and the revival of interest in ballads.

with the greatest caution'.¹⁵¹ And an even more positive attitude would be taken by Kenneth Beacham Martin, ex-sailor and historian of the Cinque Ports, in 1832, who opined that

Oral tradition must have had some source more worthy of credit than the love of the marvellous, or the idle inventions of mankind; and in days long past it was regarded with extreme veneration; the names and places of things were carefully preserved, and transmitted from generation to generation, as an unfailing register of sudden casualties and extraordinary events.

He professed a high degree of faith in the reliability of his own ancestors:

My grandfather, also, was fond of reciting to us all he knew of ancient traditions from his father, who was a doctor and a scholar; and as my venerable ancestor was born in the reign of Queen Anne, and remembered Dover before the innovations of the first American war, which levelled some of its old ruins to erect batteries, we were highly interested by his descriptions.¹⁵²

Martin's defence of tradition is romantic and fanciful, but at the dawn of nineteenth-century historicism and of the rebirth of interest in local antiquities, he had recognized the status that tradition had once held as a historical source.¹⁵³ Once again it is instructive to turn to a more famous literary representation of antiquarianism from the same decade, Sir Walter Scott's *The Antiquary*. Jonathan Oldbuck may be closer to the kind of balance between hard-edged critical scholarship and interest in legitimate traditions that characterized the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (and also the sixteenth—Oldbuck quotes from Leland). He regards Edie Ochiltree, the mendicant ex-soldier, as a 'rascal', a lingering specimen of the 'mendicant who . . . was the news-carrier, the minstrel, and sometimes the historian of the district'. He nevertheless prizes Edie's stock of 'old ballads and traditions' rather more highly than the fake Celtic lore in *Ossian* much admired by his bellicose highland nephew, Hector M'Intyre. Oldbuck has a particular distaste for stories of ghosts and fairies, as opposed to historical

¹⁵¹ John Brand, *Observations on Popular Antiquities, Chiefly Illustrating the Origins of Our Vulgar Customs, Ceremonies, and Superstitions*, ed. H. Ellis, 2 vols. (1813); see esp. ii. 259–72 for beliefs connected with wells, fountains, and other places of interest; W. Carew Hazlitt, *Brand's popular antiquities of Great Britain. Faiths and Folklore; a Dictionary of National Beliefs, Superstitions and Popular Customs, Past and Current, with their Classical and Foreign Analogues, Described and Illustrated*, 2 vols. (1905); R. Chambers, 'Tradition and Truth', in *The Book of Days: A Miscellany of Popular Antiquities*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh, 1869), i. 337; T. S. Knowlson, *The Origins of Popular Superstitions and Customs* (1930), is largely derived from Brand.

¹⁵² K. B. Martin, *Oral Traditions of the Cinque Ports and their Localities, compared with Antiquarian Researches, Natural Causes, and their Effects* (1832), 1, 12, 23.

¹⁵³ Nineteenth-century authors of popular historical works, and in particular of textbooks for children, often hedged about the traditional with the phrase 'it is said', permitting them to make considerable use of material that one of their number, Charlotte Mary Yonge, referred to as 'the beautiful, half-traditional stream that flows along beside the graver course of our history'. C. M. Yonge, preface to *The Kings of England* (1852), quoted in R. Mitchell, *Picturing the Past: English History in Text and Image 1830–1870* (Oxford, 2000), 76. Charles Dickens, in *A Child's History of England*, 3 vols. (1852–4) was most reluctant to give up a good story in the face of historical facts: see Mitchell, *Picturing the Past*, 80.

ballads; he nearly tosses his servant Caxon out a window for claiming to see a ghost, but as Edie himself tells us, the laird will listen all day to tales of William Wallace, David Lindsay, and Blind Harry. We find him later in the story enthusiastically recording “a historical ballad” . . . “a genuine and undoubted fragment of minstrelsy!” of a sort that could be accepted as authentic by Percy or Ritson. Moreover, Oldbuck is not as wise as he pretends, a fact recognized by the aged beggar: ‘he wad believe a bodle to be an auld Roman coin, as he ca’s it, or a ditch to be a camp, upon ony leasing that idle folk made about it’. And as Edie himself admits, ‘I hae garr’d him trow mony a queer tale mysell, gude forgie me.’¹⁵⁴

ORAL TRADITION AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF
HISTORICAL CULTURE

The vicissitudes in the fate of oral tradition over several centuries bring us back to the general mutations in historical culture between 1500 and 1730, and especially to the break that, I have suggested, occurred in the mid-seventeenth century. It is a story less of a single, linear development than of change, adaptation, and rediscovery. Above all, it is a further illustration of the shifts in the social and epistemological attitudes that underlie adjustments of genre, such as the detachment of history and scholarship from folklore, and modifications in historical method. It was certainly the later seventeenth-century antiquaries, heralds, and philologists themselves who exiled the oral from mainstream historiography by discounting its value, helping to push local memory outside the broader, national historical tradition and into the graveyard of rural antiquarianism. But they would not have done so if the general tendency of English culture had not been leaning increasingly towards the expulsion of popular tradition from civilized discourse, and towards doubting the information it contained because it came from vulgar mouths. The derisory treatment of both traditions and their tellers by scholars such as Hearne mirrors the attitude of his educated contemporaries to the finders of physical antiquities, the low men and women in the ‘archaeological economy’.

The neglect of oral sources from the middle of the seventeenth century was thus not the mark of methodological progress magically conjured up by humanist philology, but a function of the increasing availability and reliability of written material, of which philology and the enshrinement of the documentary in print were simply by-products. The written and visible may render the remembered and spoken unnecessary, but where the past exists only in the mouths of the people, the modern folklorist, the student of African history, and the recorder of working-class memories must still turn to the ‘common voice’. If such evidence is now treated with a more rigorous degree of scepticism and is checked and rechecked against external sources, it is not simply because modern practitioners

¹⁵⁴ Walter Scott, *The Antiquary* (Edinburgh, 1886), 44, 157, 208–9, 367.

are free of credulity but because they often have more with which to work. Those Tudor and Stuart antiquaries, from Leland and Camden through Aubrey, who balanced scepticism in recording traditions with an attitude of inclusiveness and respect, deserve our gratitude, but not just for the reasons that are usually mentioned. They helped to keep open not one road to the past, but two.