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Understanding flooding in early modern England

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Abstract

Flooding was a recurrent part of rural life in early modern England. Explanations of the historical understanding of floods have traditionally relied on religious and providential arguments made in popular printed literature. In this paper, popular printed accounts of flooding are brought together with under-exploited archival sources to provide a different description of perceptions of flooding in early modern England. Local manuscript accounts of flood events are found in the marginal notes inserted into local registers of baptisms, marriages and burials. Institutional records of commissions of sewers provide another perspective on floods, as community-staffed bureaucracies recorded and attempted to manage the damage caused by overflowing rivers and raging seas. Brought together, these local narratives provide a new and different view of the experience of flooding. Paying close attention to the ways in which flood events were narrativized, this paper explores the customary, religious, personal and productive narrative frames invoked by contemporaries. By using underappreciated and traditional archival sources in new ways, this paper provides a rereading of early modern attitudes towards geographical phenomena previously derived from print.

Keywords: Flooding; Narrative; Providence; Commissions of sewers; Parish registers

On 30th January 1607 southwest England and Wales experienced some of the worst flooding in British history. A huge surge of salt and freshwater forced its way up the Bristol Channel and lower River Severn, crushing and overtopping flood defences in Devon, Somerset, Gloucestershire, Glamorgan and Monmouthshire. Thousands of farm animals and hundreds of people lost their lives.[1] The surge inundated 570 kilometres of coastline, leaving floods of between 1.5 metres and 3.5 metres in parts of England, reaching as far inland as the foot of Glastonbury Tor (22 kilometres).[2] The anonymous author of a contemporary printed account of the flood took it as a sign from God that England was sinning, and that worse was to come should the nation not repent. He hoped his fellow countrymen would prepare for

> some tempest in one kind or another, as terrible unto us as that hath been to them, knowing that these prodigious overflowings of the waters, howsoever natural causes (as God's instruments do claim their parts in them yet they proceed from the Lord's own direction), who by His punishing of others with them, doth threaten grievous calamities, even against our vice, unless I say speedy repentance and amendment do avert his fearful wrath and judgement from us.[3]

In the inundated Severnside parish of Henbury, the curate John Owen and the two churchwardens William Mattock and the illiterate Thomas Smith came together to write their own description of this flood. Together, using the Old Style dating convention, they noted in their parish register that, 'The salt marsh was over flowed with the sea water on Tuesday the 20 January 1606 with great loss of all sort gotten beside men, women and children'.[4]

On 12th February a group of local lords, knights and worthies gathered in the untroubled north Gloucestershire village of Weston-sub-Edge. They sought powers to direct the recovery

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[1] E.A. Bryant and S.K. Haslett, Catastrophic wave erosion, Bristol Channel, United Kingdom: impact of tsunami?, *The Journal of Geology* 115 (2007) 253–269; S.K. Haslett, *Earthquakes, Tsunami and Nuclear Power: Relevance of the 1607 Flood in the Bristol Channel*, Usk, 2011; K. Horsburgh and M. Horritt, The Bristol Channel floods of 1607 – reconstruction and analysis, *Weather* 61 (2006) 272–277.

[2] Bryant and Haslett, Catastrophic wave erosion (note 1), 255; M. Williams, *The Draining of the Somerset Levels*, Cambridge, 1970, 87.

[3] Anon., *Lamentable News out of Monmouthshire in Wales Containing, the Wonderful and Most Fearful Accidents of the Great Overflowing of Waters in the Said County*, London, 1607, B4v.

[4] Quoted in S.D. Cole, *The Sea Walls of the Severn*, Bristol, 1912, 23. The authors use the 'Old Style', Julian calendar dating convention, in which the new year began on 25th March, not 1st January. The Julian calendar used in England (until 1752) was also ten days behind the Julian calendar in 1607.

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operation, and wrote to the Privy Council describing the 'great hurt and damage by the rage and overflowing of the sea… within this county of Gloucestershire' and the 'great loss and damage likely to ensue if speedy remedy be not provided to prevent the danger'.[5]

This paper attempts to account for the contrast between these understandings of the same flood. Written by a London scrivener and by flood survivors, and in a public, commercial genre, a more insular community resource and a political appeal respectively, these accounts of one of Britain's largest floods present us with contrasting views of a damaging natural event, and invite us to consider why the same event was seemingly understood so differently. Reading these dissonant texts together, this paper offers an insight into the hydrographic cultures of early modern England through flood narratives, and uses the narrativisation of damaging natural events as a way to understand early modern human-environment relationships.[6]

With every flood comes an explanation, and, in public discussions of events, often exhortation and blame. In early modern England ballads, broadsides and chapbooks reported floods in a public, saleable genre, whilst local flood victims wrote their own narratives in a variety of manuscripts.[7] These survive in personal correspondence and, importantly for this article, as marginal notes in parish registers and testimony given to local flood control organisations – texts with communal audiences. In what follows, explanations and understandings of flooding in public media are contrasted with local accounts to understand how early modern English people experienced flooding, and what they took floods to mean. Particular attention is paid to the ways in which local communities wrote their relationships to rivers, relationships that were rooted in local custom, family, history, work and political economy.

Research into floods and damaging natural events more broadly is currently flourishing. 'Natural disasters' have emerged from this literature as complex events with a multiplicity of causes and effects, and are only seen as natural insofar as they involve geophysical, meteorological or other physical processes.[8] The impacts of these forces are unevenly socially distributed, and so-called 'natural' disasters are jointly 'physical events and social or cultural occurrences', constructed by socio-economic and cultural conditions.[9] Disasters occur as two 'separate trajectories' collide: hazards, such as rivers or tides, meet with the socio-cultural complex of a human population.[10] Thus culture has a crucial role to play in the construction of floods and their histories.[11]

Narratives and artifactual memorialisations of disasters are part of communal coping strategies and shape processes of remembrance and recovery. As 'embedded' cultural objects that do more than report events, they are 'significant social actions' that 'cannot avoid a covert exercise of power'.[12] The narrativisation of an event mediates how it is experienced and represented, as stories and experiences become mutually reinforcing parts of an 'intertextual chain of associations'.[13] Narratives 'presuppose meaning', produce it through explanation and description, and, particularly in the wake of trauma, attempt to 'create meaning from non-meaning'.[14] Cultural geographer Yi-Fu Tuan has argued that integrating the experience of shock into one's 'homeplace' is an important element in reappropriating 'landscapes of fear'. Thus the historically contingent stories societies tell to explain shocking events serve as 'shelters built in the mind' against 'chaos' and 'doubt'.[15] The creation and performance of stories that seek to explain 'what went wrong in the interaction between culture and nature' play a key role in societies' attempts to cope with such shocks.[16]

By reading stories told about flooding in this way we can understand them as parts of communities' experiences and interpretations of the natural environment. Differing frames of reference structure elements of communities' coping strategies. The narrative frames invoked in water management 'mobilise the values against which "risks" and… "problems" are judged to exist.'[17] Languages and registers employed in narrative description limit and constitute the conceptual range available for meaningful discussion, making them crucial in shaping understanding and subsequent action.[18] The link between the experience of flooding and its narrative framing has been made by McEwen and Werritty. Investigating the 1829 'Muckle Spate' flood in Highland Scotland, they show that in a society with variable literacy rates, high religiosity and no centralised flood defence provision, interpretations of flooding invoked divine explanations more than where flood defence is provided by the state.[19] Grattan and Brayshay have also shown how interpretive frameworks could act as markers of social distinction. In responding to the volcanic eruption of the Laki fissure in Iceland in 1783, elite observers of European weather conditions shunned religious interpretations as a means of distancing themselves from the majority of the population.[20] The frames within which floods are narrativised are then important both for understanding the communal experience of natural phenomena, and the direction of coping strategies.

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[5] Gloucestershire Court of Sewers: General Minutes 1583–1606[8] D272 1/1 21, Gloucestershire Archives [hereafter GA].

[6] Simon Schama introduced the phrase 'hydrographic culture' in *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age*, London, 1988, 44.

[7] B. Capp, Popular literature, in: B. Reay (Ed), *Popular Culture in Seventeenth-Century England*, London, 1988, 204.

[8] M. Juneja and F. Mauelshagen, Disasters and pre-industrial societies: historiographical trends and comparative perspectives, *The Medieval History Journal* 10 (2007) 5.

[9] C. Mauch, Introduction, in: C. Mauch, C. Pfister (Eds), *Natural Disasters, Cultural Responses: Case Studies Toward a Global Environmental History*, Plymouth, 2009, 4; G. Massard-Guilbaud, Introduction: the urban catastrophe – challenge to the social, economic, and cultural order of the city, in: G. Massard-Guilbaud, H.L. Platt, D. Schott (Eds), *Cities and Catastrophes: Coping With Emergency in European History*, Frankfurt, 2002, 10; U. Lübken and C. Mauch, Uncertain environments: natural hazards, risk and insurance in historical perspective, *Environment and History* 17 (2011) 4.

[10] G. Bankoff, quoted in Massard-Guilbaud, Introduction (note 9), 4.

[11] G. Bankoff, Time is of the essence: disasters, vulnerability and history, *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters* 22 (2004) 29.

[12] S. Greenblatt, *Learning to Curse: Essays in Early Modern Culture*, New York, 1990, 164; W. Cronon, A place for stories: nature, history, and narrative, *The Journal of American History* 78 (1992) 1350.

[13] A. Stock and C. Stott, Introduction: narratives of disaster, in: A. Stock, C. Stott (Eds), *Representing the Unimaginable: Narratives of Disaster*, Frankfurt am Main, 2007, 11.

[14] H. Marchitello, *Narrative and Meaning in Early Modern England: Browne's Skull and Other Histories*, Cambridge, 1997, 4–5; Bill Luckin has advocated a similar approach, referring to the 'social, psychological and symbolic system or systems within which accidents occur and through which meaning is bestowed upon them', see B. Luckin, Accidents, disasters and cities, *Urban History* 20 (1993) 182.

[15] Y-F. Tuan, *Landscapes of Fear*, Oxford, 1979, 6.

[16] F. Mauelshagen, Disaster and political culture in Germany since 1500, in: Mauch, Pfister (Eds), *Natural Disasters, Cultural Responses* (note 9), 67.

[17] I. Scrase and W. Sheate, Re-framing flood control in England and Wales, *Environmental Values* 14 (2005) 117.

[18] B. Williams and A. Matheny, *Democracy, Dialogue, and Environmental Disputes: The Contested Languages of Social Regulation*, New Haven, 1995, 6.

[19] L. McEwen and A. Werritty, 'The Muckle Spate of 1829': the physical and societal impact of a catastrophic flood on the River Findhorn, Scottish Highlands, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 32 (2007) 85.

[20] J. Grattan and M. Brayshay, An amazing and portentous summer: environmental and social responses in Britain to the 1783 eruption of an Iceland volcano, *The Geographical Journal* 161 (1995) 130.