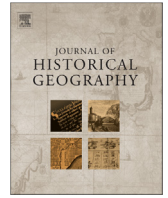


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Fragments from a medieval archive: the life and death of Sir Robert Constable



Briony McDonagh

School of Geography, University of Nottingham, Nottingham NG7 2RD, UK

Abstract

This article asks what we can know of historical individuals in pre-Reformation England. While recognizing the challenges of writing medieval biography, it points to the opportunities offered by a range of under-utilized sources for engaging both with medieval individuals and the pre-modern world more generally. Using the records of numerous property disputes and related cases litigated at the Westminster equity courts, it examines the actions and attitudes of one individual: Sir Robert Constable of Flamborough (c. 1478–1537), a Yorkshire landowner who was frequently brought before the courts for his involvement in local property disputes and ultimately implicated in the Pilgrimage of Grace. It explores Constable's activities through the multiple and often contradictory versions of events presented to the king, his advisors and the law courts, assessing his motivations and character while also recognizing that the fragmentary nature of the evidence means that Constable will always be an uncertain subject. In focussing on Constable and his connections to the lives and landscapes around him, the article also highlights much about the experiences and agency of the medieval men and women who shared his world. It considers the local personalities and community politics surrounding episodes of enclosure, building on recent work by social historians, archaeologists and historical geographers in order to draw attention to the roles played by ordinary and not-so-ordinary individuals in shaping the landscape. The paper not only underlines the importance of thinking geographically about the pre-modern world, but also goes some way towards 'peopling' the medieval countryside, conceptualizing it as a landscape brought into being through the attitudes and actions of those living and working within it.

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As Stephen Daniels and Catherine Nash note, the arts of geography and biography have long been intertwined. In the introduction to a special issue of the *Journal of Historical Geography*, they highlight a range of historical engagements between biographical and geographical writing arguing that 'life histories are also... life geographies'.¹ In following their lead, we may point to two developing areas of research in which the biographical and the geographical impulse are seen to interact. Firstly, a number of geographers have drawn attention to 'the difference that thinking geographically makes to the writing of a life', an idea echoed by biographers and historians influenced by the wider 'spatial turn' in the humanities.²

Thus, for example, the medieval historian David Gary Shaw has argued that 'in considering people, we need to know *where* their social selves were', arguing for a physical and geographical perspective which takes bodies, families, property, places and social networks into account in exploring the lives of individuals.³ Secondly, geographers have themselves engaged with biographical approaches to the past. The last twenty years have witnessed a proliferation of books and articles drawing on geo-biographical perspectives, often as a tool for examining the histories of the discipline, the historical geographies of empire and women's histories and geographies, and sometimes accompanied by critical

E-mail address: Briony.McDonagh@nottingham.ac.uk

¹ S. Daniels and C. Nash, *Lifepaths: geography and biography*, *Journal of Historical Geography* 30 (2004), 459–58, especially 450.

² F. Driver and E. Baigent, *Biography and the history of geography: a response to Ron Johnston*, *Progress in Human Geography* 31 (2007), 101–6, see note 102 for the quote; N. Thomas, *Exploring the boundaries of biography: the family and friendship networks of Lady Curzon, Vicereine of India 1898–1905*, *Journal of Historical Geography* 30 (2004), 496–519. On the spatial turn, see in general B. Warf and S. Arias, *Introduction: the reinsertion of space into the social sciences and humanities*, in: B. Warf and S. Arias (Eds.), *The Spatial Turn: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, Abingdon, 2009, 1–10. For examples of the influence of geographical thinking on scholarship about the medieval world, see K. Lavezzo, *Angels on the Edge of the World*, New York, 2006; N. Lozovsky, *The Earth is Our Book: Geographical Knowledge in the Latin West c. 400–1000*, Michigan, 2000.

³ D.G. Shaw, *Social selves in medieval England: the worshipful Ferrour and Kempe*, in: N. Partner (Ed.), *Writing Medieval History*, London, 2005, 3–21, especially 12.

reflections on how the researcher's own 'self' intersects with the subject's.⁴

Yet for geographers at least, biographical approaches to the past have predominantly been an exercise in modern historiography, only rarely touching on pre-modern lives. Most of the existing geobiographies take nineteenth- and twentieth-century individuals as their subjects, although notable examples from the eighteenth century and earlier can also be identified.⁵ Far fewer in number are the geographers who have engaged with medieval or sixteenth-century individuals, a reflection in part of geography's recent neglect of the Middle Ages more generally.⁶ Thus the royal and saintly lives discussed by historical geographers like Rhys Jones and David C. Harvey are very much the exception to the geobiographical rule.⁷ This paper addresses just this gap in our understanding, presenting one such medieval life geography as a way exploring the actions and motivations of one man whilst also going some way towards 'peopling' the medieval landscape: that is, understanding the landscape as being brought into being through the attitudes and actions of the individuals, groups and communities living within it, many of whom it is now difficult to recover from the archive. At the same time, in focussing on one late medieval individual and his connections to the lives and landscape around him, the paper explores important questions about how we can know the pre-modern world.

The phrase 'peopling the landscape' has recently acquired currency within the discipline of archaeology where it is used to describe archaeologists' efforts to interrogate individuals' and

communities' interactions with past landscapes, particularly in the context of the prehistoric landscape.⁸ This is not to suggest that historians and geographers have previously been unconcerned with the people living within past environments. Much mid-twentieth century historical geography and economic history sought to understand the impact lords and peasant communities had on the landscape around them. Initially conceptualized in terms of Anglo-Saxon and Norman lords' power to re-plan settlements and lay out field systems, the new 'history from below' of the 1970s recognized that the reactions and initiatives of ordinary villagers might also make important contributions to change whilst nevertheless maintaining the binary opposition between manorial authority and local custom.⁹ However, the early, probably pre-Conquest origins of both nucleated villages and open field systems mean that there is often little in the way of surviving evidence to answer such questions and both the lords and the other people involved in laying out both the planned settlements of the North and the classic Midland, open field villages remain 'very shadowy figures'.¹⁰

More recently, social history's interest in the negotiations, mediations and everyday politics taking place within – and constitutive of – local communities and environments has also refocused attention on the people living within past landscapes.¹¹ Andy Wood, Steve Hindle, Steve Hipkin and Nicola Whyte have all scrutinized the ways community politics, customary practices and local personalities might interact to shape episodes of landscape change, particularly in the context of enclosure and the extinguishing of common rights in the later sixteenth and seventeenth century.¹²

⁴ F. Driver, Henry Morton Stanley and his critics: geography, exploration and empire, *Past and Present* 133 (1991), 134–166; A. Blunt, *Travel, Gender and Imperialism: Mary Kingsley and West Africa*, New York, 1994; M. Bell, Citizenship not charity: Violet Markham on nature society and state in Britain and South Africa, in: M. Bell, R. Butlin and M. Heffernan (Eds.), *Geography and Imperialism 1820–1940*, Manchester, 1995, 189–220; C. McEwan, The mother of all the peoples: geographical knowledge and the empowering of Mary Slessor, in: Bell, Butlin and Heffernan, *Geography and Imperialism*, 125–150; Thomas, Lady Curzon (note 2); R. Johnston, Learning our history from our pioneers: UK academic geographers in the Oxford dictionary of national biography, *Progress in Human Geography* 29.5 (2005), 651–667; A. Maddrell, *Complex Locations: Women's Geographical Work in the UK 1850–1970*, Oxford, 2009. The 30 or so volumes of *Geographers: Biobibliographical Studies* and A. Buttimer, *The Practice of Geography*, London, 1983, also represent a significant contribution to geography's engagement with biography over the past 35 years. For critical reflections on the process of research and writing biography, see T. White, Theodore and Brina: an exploration of the myths and secrets of family life, 1851–1998, *Journal of Historical Geography* 30 (2004), 520–530; F.D. Mackenzie, The story(ing) of Jessie of Balranald: research encounters of a surprising kind, *Cultural Geographies* 14 (2007), 445–452.

⁵ See previous note 4. For eighteenth-century and early modern geo-biographies, see S. Daniels, *Humphry Repton and the Geography of Georgian England*, New Haven, 1999; R.J. Mayhew, Peter Heylyn (1599–1662), in: H. Lorimer, C.W. J. Withers (Eds.), *Geographers: Biobibliographical Studies* 28, London, 2009, 1–16; C.W.J. Withers, James Playfair (1738–1819), in: H. Lorimer, C.W.J. Withers (Eds.), *Geographers: Biobibliographical Studies* 24, London, 2005, 79–85.

⁶ K.D. Lilley, Geography's medieval history: a neglected enterprise?, *Dialogues in Human Geography* 1 (2011), 147–162; K.D. Lilley, Cities of God? Medieval urban forms and their Christian symbolism, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 29 (2004), 296–313; R.A. Jones, What time is human geography?, *Progress in Human Geography* 28 (2004), 287–304. See also R.J. Mayhew, Nostalgia, neglect and the necessity of a historicized geography, *Dialogues in Human Geography* 1 (2011), 169–173 who argues that the neglect of medieval geographies is neither so new or as absolute as Lilley suggests.

⁷ R. Jones, Medieval biographies and the geography of power: the Historia Gruffud vab Kenan, *Journal of Historical Geography* 30 (2004), 459–469; D.C. Harvey, Constructed landscapes and social memory: tales of St. Samson in early medieval Cornwall, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 20 (2002), 231–248.

⁸ A. Fleming and Y. Amilak, Peopling the landscape, *Antiquity* 71 (1997), 759–761. For further uses of the phrase, see J. Gardiner and M.J. Allen, Peopling the landscape, in: B.W. Cunliffe (Ed.), *England's Landscape: The West*, London, 2006, 35–58; C. Scarre, *Landscape of Neolithic Brittany*, Oxford, 2011; K. Jennbert, Peopling the landscape: the landscape-variable, invisible, and visible, in: D. Olausson, H. Vandkilde (Eds.), *Form, Function and Context: Material Culture Studies in Scandinavian Archaeology*, Stockholm, 2000, 51–57. Many of the same concerns are also evident in the work of other archaeologists. See, for example, H. Williams, *Death and Memory in Early Medieval Britain*, Cambridge, 2006; M. Pearson, *In Comes I: Performance, Memory and Landscape*, Exeter, 2007.

⁹ On settlement plans, see H. Thorpe, The village greens of county Durham, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 15 (1951 for 1949), 155–180; J. Shepherd, Medieval village planning in northern England: some evidence from Yorkshire, *Journal of Historical Geography* 2 (1976), 3–20; B.K. Roberts, *The Green Villages of County Durham: A Study in Historical Geography*, Durham, 1977; C. Dyer, Power and conflict in the medieval English village, in: D. Hooke (Ed.), *Medieval Villages: A Review of Current Work*, Oxford, 1985, 27–32. For a recent review of the literature on the origins of open field systems, see T. Williamson, *Shaping Medieval Landscapes: Settlement, Society and Environment*, Macclesfield, 2003, 1–27. Such a research agenda has, moreover, continued to have currency within landscape history in the past 25 years. See, for example, more recent work on church foundations by R.K. Morris, *Churches in the Landscape*, London, 1989; R. Daniels, The church, the manor and the settlement: the evidence from Cleveland, in: B. Vyner (Ed.), *Moorland Monuments: Studies in Archaeology of Yorkshire in Honour of Raymond Hayes and Don Spratt*, CBA Research Report 101, 1995, 102–114; P. Everson, and D. Stocker, The common steeple? Church and settlement in early medieval Lincolnshire, *Medieval Settlement Research Group Annual Report* 19 (2004), 5–6; and on deserted settlements by T. Rowley and J. Wood, *Deserted Villages*, Princes Risborough, 2000, 3rd Edition; C. Dyer, R. Jones (Eds.), *Deserted Villages Revisited*, Hatfield, 2010.

¹⁰ C. Dyer, The past, the present and the future in medieval rural history, *Rural History* 1 (1990), 37–49. See note 41 for the quote.

¹¹ Key texts in developing this new agenda within social history include K. Wrightson, The politics of the parish in early modern England, in: P. Griffiths, A. Fox, S. Hindle (Eds.), *The Experience of Authority in Early Modern England*, Basingstoke, 1996, 10–46; M.J. Braddick, J. Walter (Eds.), *Negotiating Power in Early Modern Society: Order, Hierarchy and Subordination in Britain and Ireland*, Cambridge, 2001; and A. Wood, *Riot, Rebellion and Popular Politics in Early Modern England*, Basingstoke, 2002.

¹² S. Hindle, Persuasion and protest in the Caddington Common enclosure dispute, 1635–1639, *Past and Present* 158 (1998), 37–78; H. Falvey, Crown policy and local economic context in the Berkhamsted Common enclosure dispute, 1618–1642, *Rural History* 12 (2001), 123–158; S. Hipkin, 'Sitting on his penny rent': conflict and right of common in Faversham Bleau, 1595–1610, *Rural History* 11 (2000), 1–35; A. Wood, Subordination, solidarity and the limits of popular agency in a Yorkshire valley c.1596–1615, *Past & Present* 193 (2006), 41–72; N. Whyte, *Inhabiting the Landscape: Place, Custom and Memory, 1500–1800*, Oxford, 2009. For allied contributions from geographers, see C. Griffin, Protest practice and (tree) cultures of conflict: understanding the spaces of 'tree maiming' in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century England, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 40 (2008), 91–108; C. Griffin, *The Rural War: Captain Swing and the Politics of Protest*, Manchester, 2012; B. McDonagh, Subverting the ground: private property and public protest in the sixteenth-century Yorkshire Wolds, *Agricultural History Review* 57 (2009), 191–206.

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