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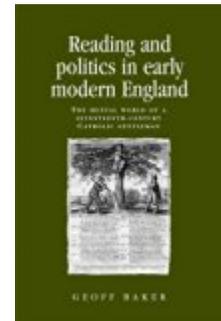
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Geoff Baker. *Reading and Politics in Early Modern England: The Mental World of a Seventeenth-Century Catholic Gentleman.* Politics, Culture, and Society in Early Modern Britain Series. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010. xiii + 236 pp. \$89.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7190-8024-1.

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The title of Geoff Baker's engaging book is somewhat coy in that the book's principal subject, William Blundell (1620-98), appears not by name but under cover of a generic canopy, the "mental world of a seventeenth-century Catholic gentleman." The marketing instinct that may account for the displaced name is perhaps sound, however. Though Blundell's voluminous writings are not unfamiliar to historians of early modern Catholic communities, the preponderance of scholarly attention has until now been given to Blundell's grandfather and namesake. The elder Blundell (1560-1638) figured prominently in the networks of Elizabethan Catholic recusancy and by happy coincidence also inaugurated the family commonplace book known as *The Great Hodge Podge*. This document has acquired a certain scholarly cachet for its intergenerational scope—family contributors included the later, Restoration-era William (the subject of Baker's study) and William's grandson Nicholas (1669-1737)—which is to say that the cumulative papers afford a rare longitudinal perspective on an established recusant family's self-identity and strategies of social accommodation, entrepreneurial property management, and political maneuvering over the course of a tumultuous century. As Baker points out, the later William's contributions to the *Great Hodge Podge* testify to the perceived function of the commonplace book not only as a repository of familial memory but also as a tool in Blundell's project of inventing and burnishing a legible sense of the family's cultural and confessional signature over time—as recusant and royalist, yet also politically disenfranchised. This is a story to which Baker's book adds warranted complications.

To this end, the main quarry of Baker's book includes Blundell's abundant extant manuscript legacy outside of the *Great Hodge Podge*, and the wager is twofold. The book's first premise is that detailed inspection of the full range of Blundell's writings beyond his contributions to the *Great Hodge Podge* will foster critical appreciation of Blundell's stature as a key witness to the rhythms of gentry Catholicism in the late seventeenth century after the Revolution of 1688, a period that has not received the same degree of attention in studies of early modern English Catholicism as the Elizabethan and pre-civil war eras. The second premise is that the evidence of Blundell's writing and reading habits will both corroborate and add further nuance to the narrative mantra that has been gaining ground in the historiography of early modern confessional communities since the pioneering work of scholars like John Bossy and Christopher Haigh. The mantra, which owes more to poststructuralist habits of critique than it typically cares to avow, replaces erstwhile attention to macro-patterns of binary opposition (e.g., documentary evidence of confessional antagonism amplified by an omnibus rhetoric of Catholic victimage and political marginalization) with a fine-grained focus on local zones of negotiatory interaction and accommodation as well as struggle. Thus the book's stated ambitions are to treat the Blundell archive as a virtual case study peculiarly suited to test "generalisations about early modern religious identities" (dogmatic tenets of Catholicity in particular) and to challenge "a historical determinism which removes Catholics from the mainstream of early modern society" (p. 2).

On the whole, Baker's study—the first book-length

analysis of Blundell's extant writings—delivers on its promise. It does so in part because its subject—the historical persona with virtuoso tendencies that emerges from Baker's careful inspection of the archive—proves as varied in aspect as the range of genres populating the archive itself. In addition to the entries in the Great Hodge Podge, there are an abundance of letters (the genre that brought Blundell to widespread attention to modern scholars, with Margaret Blundell's 1933 critical edition of the correspondence); two commonplace books; numerous transcribed texts; and a substantial collection of papers relating to the management of the Blundell estate, Crosby Hall in Lancashire. Baker's investment in the particular characterization of Blundell that emerges in this book would carry a sharper critical edge, I think, if it paid more systematic attention to the discursive tactics to be found in the writings through which competing faces to the Blundell portrait come into view. The sheer diversity of the extant material offers the tempting prospect of viewing the assembled traces of Blundell's hand as more than neutral or passive reflections of the preexisting historical subject, and at key junctures Baker's own interpretive gestures suggest an alternative picture of the writings as *actual participants* in the making of the historical subject—not just for us, belated readers, but for Blundell himself. I will return to this point.

As things stand, the book's argument benefits from the author's thorough grasp of what could be called the second wave of late modern historiographical scholarship on English Catholic communities, with its emphasis on the relatively porous boundaries between confessional identities and practices and the supple interplay of local and transnational concerns. This background gives both critical and methodological ballast to the book's organizational scheme. The sequence of chapters creates a gratifying sense of incremental complication and speculative intrigue. The first two chapters assess respectively the shape of Blundell's domestic and familial concerns and his concurrent efforts to ensure the survival of English Catholic communities on the continent as well as in the British Isles. The last three chapters inspect the varying admixtures of traditionalism and invention informing Blundell's reading practices across a range of genres: techniques of commonplacing; intuitive tactics for squaring literal with figurative components of Catholic belief as registered in devotional writing and religious histories; and tentative efforts to map hermeneutically a "middle way" (p. 21) between habits of seeing the world (notably, regarding the place of women, ethnographic data, and natural phenomena) that com-

port with Catholic doctrine and ones that show measured appreciation of the empirical-inductive investigative procedure associated with Baconian method. Cumulatively, this configuration of topics presents a nuanced picture of Blundell's richly varied, and sometimes contradictory, attachments and preoccupations. Though Baker does not put it in so many words, the resulting picture also suggestively imagines the arc of Blundell's writing career as a testament to something more than a cultivated posture of prudential or strategic responsiveness to external challenges (the world "out there"). It measures the man's taste for the serious game of making a world—in Thomist terms, of engaging the co-creative principle so as to put in motion an enveloping space habitable by all the varied facets of Blundell's heritage, together with the sustained commitment to be proactively familiar with philosophical and scientific as well as political developments in the contemporary scene. It is this kind of assemblage (though, again, the author does not elaborate the point) that makes sense of the apparent contradiction in the promissory note that launches the book's thesis, with the twin claims of Blundell's at once idiosyncratic and representative status as a "unique window into early modern English Catholicism" (p. 22).

Following a lucid overview of scholarship on Blundell and current critical assessments of the confessional landscape, chapter 1 underscores Blundell's ingenuity in securing the family estate in Little Crosby, giving a nicely dovetailed account of the "wily, intelligent operator" who built both immediate and long-term insurance stocks against anti-recusant penal laws through a variety of tactics (p. 34): the legal device of strict settlement in estate management; careful promotion of advantageous marriage alliances; investment in Catholic education on the continent; and, importantly, cultivation of valuable social relationships with Protestants (like John Chorley, mayor of Liverpool in the late 1670s, and, even more strikingly, the loyalist journalist and press censor Robert L'Estrange) who were in a position to provide material support and engage in shared confidences. These brushstrokes deftly secure the main terms of the book's overarching argument, that while persecution and disenfranchisement remained operative aspects of seventeenth-century Catholic experience in England, the record of Blundell's activities shows both tactical manipulation of this mythos and sustained efforts to neutralize it. Chapter 2 enlarges the perspective by detailing Blundell's activities in a wider theater: his patronage of religious orders and schools in continental Europe (notably, the Poor Clares and the Jesuit school at St. Omer), and his sev-

eral interventions in political discourse, which presented updated versions of classic nonresistance arguments in favor of relaxing anti-Catholic legislation. Baker's interesting assessment of the latter materials reminds readers of the need for caution in judging prematurely the seemingly minor impact of Blundell's interventions, given the fact that the arguments rehearsed in the limited printed material (e.g., Blundell's "Short Discourse of the Paenall Lawes against the Roman Catholicks of England" [1661]) were also disseminated in Blundell's letters to friends and associates, thereby entering into networks of scribal and manuscript publication and "reciprocally supportive networks of Protestants and Catholics" that do not map easily onto tellable stories of the lived (and, for us, virtual) cross-confessional communities of thought and debate (p. 62).

Appropriately, the second part of the book focuses on reading practices. Chapter 3 (the heart of Baker's argument) offers a long overdue account of neglected parts of the Blundell archive, Blundell's two commonplace books, the *Historica* and the *Adversaria*. Baker has important things to say about these documents. In some respects, Blundell's procedure for composing the commonplace books conforms to a recognizable prescription (Hieremias Drexel's method for partitioning excerpted material), and the attention Blundell seems to have given to certain formal features of source data (typography, binding paper, illustrations, and even printing errors) also indicates attraction to the "bibliomania" of the moment (p. 116). Tellingly, the *Historia* and *Adversaria* also disclose the proactive dimension of Blundell's collating habit. For example, Baker pinpoints evidence of Blundell's taste for dialogic assemblage (e.g., cross-cutting between Plutarch and Livy as means to produce a virtual disputational scene). Such an approach, Baker suggests, turns commonplace into a tool for teasing out possible solutions to historical or moral questions. As Anthony Grafton and Lisa Jardine have shown in their seminal study of Gabriel Harvey's reading practice, the instinct for such proactive literacy was already developed in earlier humanist cultures, but Baker's analysis significantly enlarges the scope and terms of this ethos, particularly insofar as it calls attention to the presiding spirit of Baconian method in Blundell's developing style of reading experimentally.^[1] The insight gains traction from the evidence gathered here of Blundell's habit of mixing literary and oral sources. The hybrid format of the commonplace book, together with its peripheral extensions into the replicated topics for disputation and conjecture that filled Blundell's epistolary activity, presents Baker with

a provocative clue to one of the most significant functions of Blundell's commonplace practice. The commonplace format created a "proxy public life" through which Blundell (denied access to public office because of his recusant status) "sought to change the mark of gentility from public office to a far broader, and therefore accessible, conception of public service" (pp. 107, 173). Baker's careful demonstration of this point offers a salutary reminder of the hermeneutic blind spot that inheres in overhasty coupling of the imagined "public" domain with printed or written materials. The point is in keeping with Baker's overarching critical scheme, which does not disallow received categories of analysis, identity, or genre (notably, "Catholic" and "gentry" as well as "public" and "commonplace") so much as ferret out signs of unpredictable remapping of what may be said to comprise such categories and their possible conjugations in lived experience.

Chapters 4 and 5 ("Reading the Confessional Divide" and "A Catholic Approach to the World") may be read as complementary outworkings of the core insights developed in chapter 3. As the chapter titles suggest, the lens applied to Blundell's writings (again, chiefly the commonplace books) focuses on the varied accents that Blundell placed on matters of confessional debate. In keeping with the established collating mind-set, Blundell's voice oscillates between mollifying views (where questions of essential religious difference between Protestant and Catholic churches or, in the Catholic enclave, between regular and secular clergy were concerned) and adversarial ones (for example, in Blundell's characterizations of the "loyalty and virtue of Catholics and the subversive nature of Protestants" [p. 149]). In essence, the concluding chapters present an absorbing image of Blundell's shifting silhouette cast against the long post-Tridentine sunset of a certain type of seigneurial Catholic culture. If Blundell's sense of catholicity sometimes served as nostalgic or utopian code for cultural homogeneity, that same sense also proved extraordinarily adaptive, marked as it was by an interest to test the solvency of Catholic teaching on a wide range of exegetical, moral, social, and political questions against the secularizing habits of curiosity toward the world, whether in the domain of gender relations, ethnographic studies of distant cultures, or natural phenomena. Baker's patient unfolding of the latter topics calls due attention to the unstable mix of conservatism and speculative openness in Blundell's curiosity, an alembic through which felt memories of a vanishing pre-Reformation Catholic world were regularly being reconstituted and reformed, so to speak, in the context of

contemporary exigencies and attachments.

An exemplary instance of what could be called Blundell's rebranding of the commonplace format as a personal signature appears in Baker's symmetrical handling in chapter 4 of Blundell's very different responses to two controversial voices of Catholic radicalism: avid sympathy for the skepticism of the Benedictine scholar Jean Mabillon, and hostility toward the political theories of the Catholic philosopher Thomas White. Though details of Blundell's biography may be conjured to account for what Baker calls the contradictory character of some of Blundell's attachments, it is not clear (to this reader, at least) that identifying contradictions is a very helpful interpretive tool, which is to say that Baker's meticulous examination of the documents reveals more than it chooses to theorize. One of Baker's opening statements is instructive in this regard: the claim that the Blundell archive supplies "an insight into the way that one individual navigated the demands that were placed on him by different aspects of his belief system" (p. 22). What Baker's argument actually shows is that "belief system" refers not simply to doctrinally adherent confessional identity but to a wide range of loci of belief, where the term stands for settled but not guaranteed ways of being implicated within a tissue of interwoven social identities. In Blundell's case, these include the positions of landowner; *pater familias*; recusant; aspiring virtuoso; and, not least, the "wily, intelligent operator" capable of accessing multiple *styles* of Catholicism—ways of performing or incarnating a form of life with a discernible (though not necessarily internally consistent or dogmatically adherent) claim to being called Catholic.

Baker claims, with some justice, that Blundell's commonplacing habits corroborate Kevin Sharpe's conjecture that the commonplace format provided "a place where the early modern self emerged from contemplation" (p. 197).^[2] Yet the real merit and significance of Baker's analysis lies elsewhere—not far field, but within a perspective that asks us, implicitly, to be a bit more agnostic about the solidity and tractability of notions like "the early modern self." As Baker also observes, the portrait of the self that emerges from Blundell's writing is "neither distinctly Catholic, fully representative of broad gentry concerns, nor in complete accord with the approach outlined by Bacon. Blundell's approach to the world was idiosyncratic and incorporated strands that

were apparently contradictory" (p. 197). In essence, Blundell's archive, and Baker's analysis of it, invites us to think of "experimental" as an illuminating synonym for the "apparently contradictory" traits of the persona. This single change in terminology helps us see better, I think, what Baker's argument is after: sharper understanding of how the Blundell archive conveys an engrossing sense of the poetics of the everyday, a lived art of bricolage in which the spirit of Baconian experimentalism had seeped into the lineaments of social and mental life and, tellingly, also into the crosscurrents of Catholic belief and practice.

The cardinal sin of the reviewer's craft is to criticize a published work for not mounting the exact argument that the reviewer would have pursued, given "world enough and time."^[3] So let me clear. My nod to the critical legacies of cultural anthropology is not meant to chastise Baker for not venturing into disciplinary territory outside the stated aims of the book. Rather, I wish to indicate the great interest that I think Baker's insights into Blundell's writing career will hold for scholars working in early modern cultural studies and literary history, outside of the specific historiographical concerns orienting most studies of early modern English Catholicism. Baker's careful presentation of Blundell's commonplacing technique and the "distinctly idiosyncratic middle way" (p. 21) it charts between Baconian science and Catholic religious beliefs makes it tempting to wonder how the Blundell archive would look in the light of posthumanist anthropologies that have drawn inspiration from the Lévi-Straussian notion of "bricolage," like Michel Serres' and Bruno Latour's inspections of the dynamic networks through which received notions of subject and object, as well as referential systems, are put in play and tested. Baker's book makes such a prospect not only tempting but also possible.

Notes

[1]. Anthony Grafton and Lisa Jardine, "'Studied for Action': How Gabriel Harvey Read His Livy," *Past and Present* 129, no. 1 (1990): 30-78.

[2]. Kevin Sharpe, *Reading Revolutions: The Politics of Reading in Early Modern England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 339.

[3]. Quotation from Andrew Marvell's poem "To His Coy Mistress."

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