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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 Bakerâs engaging book is somewhat coy in that the bookâs principal subject, William Blundell (1620-98), appears not by name but under cover of a generic canopy, the âmental world of a seventeenth-century Catholic gentleman.â The marketing instinct that may account for the displaced name is perhaps sound, however. Though Blundellâs voluminous writings are not unfamiliar to historians of early modern Catholic communities, the preponderance of scholarly attention has until now been given to Blundellâs 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 Bakerâs study) and Williamâs grandson Nicholas (1669-1737)–which is to say that the cumulative papers afford a rare longitudinal perspective on an established recusant familyâs 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 Williamâs 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 Blundellâs project of inventing and burnishing a legible sense of the familyâs cultural and confessional signature over time–as recusant and royalist, yet also politically disenfranchised. This is a story to which Bakerâs book adds warranted complications.

To this end, the main quarry of Bakerâs book includes Blundellâs abundant extant manuscript legacy outside of the Great Hodge Podge, and the wager is twofold. The bookâs first premise is that detailed inspection of the full range of Blundellâs writings beyond his contributions to the Great Hodge Podge will foster critical appreciation of Blundellâs 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 Blundellâs 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 bookâs stated ambitions are to treat the Blundell archive as a virtual case study peculiarly suited to test âgeneralisations about early modern religious identitiesâ (dogmatic tenets of Catholicity in particular) and to challenge âa historical determinism which removes Catholics from the mainstream of early modern societyâ (p. 2).

On the whole, Bakerâs study–the first book-length analysis of Blundellâs extant writings–delivers on its promise. It does so in part because its subject–the historical persona with virtuoso tendencies that emerges from Bakerâs 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 Blundellâs 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. Bakerâs 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 Blundellâs hand as more than neutral or passive reflections of the preexisting historical subject, and at key junctures Bakerâs 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 bookâs argument benefits from the authorâs 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 bookâs 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 Blundellâs 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 Blundellâs 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 âmiddle wayâ (p. 21) between habits of seeing the world (notably, regarding the place of women, ethnographic data, and natural phenomena) that comport 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 Blundellâs 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 Blundellâs writing career as a testament to something more than a cultivated posture of prudential or strategic responsiveness to external challenges (the world âout thereâ). It measures the manâs 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 Blundellâs 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 bookâs thesis, with the twin claims of Blundellâs at once idiosyncratic and representative status as a âunique window into early modern English Catholicismâ (p. 22).

Following a lucid overview of scholarship on Blundell and current critical assessments of the confessional landscape, chapter 1 underscores Blundellâs ingenuity in securing the family estate in Little Crosby, giving a nicely dovetailed account of the âwily, intelligent operatorâ 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 LâEstrange) who were in a position to provide material support and engage in shared confidences. These brushstrokes deftly secure the main terms of the bookâs overarching argument, that while persecution and disenfranchisement remained operative aspects of seventeenth-century Catholic experience in England, the record of Blundellâs activities shows both tactical manipulation of this mythos and sustained efforts to neutralize it. Chapter 2 enlarges the perspective by detailing Blundellâs 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 several interventions in political discourse, which presented updated versions of classic nonresistance arguments in favor of relaxing anti-Catholic legislation. Bakerâs interesting assessment of the latter materials reminds readers of the need for caution in judging prematurely the seemingly minor impact of Blundellâs interventions, given the fact that the arguments rehearsed in the limited printed material (e.g., Blundellâs âShort Discourse of the Paenall Lawes against the Roman Catholicks of Englandâ [1661]) were also disseminated in Blundellâs letters to friends and associates, thereby entering into networks of scribal and manuscript publication and âreciprocally supportive networks of Protestants and Catholicsâ 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 Bakerâs argument) offers a long overdue account of neglected parts of the Blundell archive, Blundellâs two commonplace books, the Historica and the Adversaria. Baker has important things to say about these documents. In some respects, Blundellâs procedure for composing the commonplace books conforms to a recognizable prescription (Hieremias Drexelâs 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 âbibliomaniaâ of the moment (p. 116). Tellingly, the Historia and Adversaria also disclose the proactive dimension of Blundellâs collating habit. For example, Baker pinpoints evidence of Blundellâs 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 commonplacing 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 Harveyâs reading practice, the instinct for such proactive literacy was already developed in earlier humanist cultures, but Bakerâs analysis significantly enlarges the scope and terms of this ethos, particularly insofar as it calls attention to the presiding spirit of Baconian method in Blundellâs developing style of reading experimentally.[1] The insight gains traction from the evidence gathered here of Blundellâs 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 Blundellâs epistolary activity, presents Baker with a provocative clue to one of the most significant functions of Blundellâs commonplacing practice. The commonplace format created a âproxy public lifeâ through which Blundell (denied access to public office because of his recusant status) âsought to change the mark of gentility from public office to a far broader, and therefore accessible, conception of public serviceâ (pp. 107, 173). Bakerâs careful demonstration of this point offers a salutary reminder of the hermeneutic blind spot that inheres in overhasty coupling of the imagined âpublicâ domain with printed or written materials. The point is in keeping with Bakerâs overarching critical scheme, which does not disallow received categories of analysis, identity, or genre (notably, âCatholicâ and âgentryâ as well as âpublicâ and âcommonplaceâ) 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 (âReading the Confessional Divideâ and âA Catholic Approach to the Worldâ) may be read as complementary outworkings of the core insights developed in chapter 3. As the chapter titles suggest, the lens applied to Blundellâs 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, Blundellâs 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 Blundellâs characterizations of the âloyalty and virtue of Catholics and the subversive nature of Protestantsâ [p. 149]). In essence, the concluding chapters present an absorbing image of Blundellâs shifting silhouette cast against the long post-Tridentine sunset of a certain type of seigneurial Catholic culture.

If Blundellâs 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. Bakerâs patient unfolding of the latter topics calls due attention to the unstable mix of conservatism and speculative openness in Blundellâs 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 Blundellâs rebranding of the commonplace format as a personal signature appears in Bakerâs symmetrical handling in chapter 4 of Blundellâs 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 Blundellâs biography may be conjured to account for what Baker calls the contradictory character of some of Blundellâs attachments, it is not clear (to this reader, at least) that identifying contradictions is a very helpful interpretive tool, which is to say that Bakerâs meticulous examination of the documents reveals more than it chooses to theorize. One of Bakerâs opening statements is instructive in this regard: the claim that the Blundell archive supplies âan insight into the way that one individual navigated the demands that were placed on him by different aspects of his belief systemâ (p. 22). What Bakerâs argument actually shows is that âbelief systemâ 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 Blundellâs case, these include the positions of landowner; *pater familias*; recusant; aspiring virtuoso; and, not least, the âwily, intelligent operatorâ 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 Blundellâs commonplacing habits corroborate Kevin Sharpeâs conjecture that the commonplace format provided ââa place where the early modern self emerged from contemplationââ (p. 197).[2] Yet the real merit and significance of Bakerâs 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 âthe early modern self.â As Baker also observes, the portrait of the self that emerges from Blundellâs writing is âneither distinctly Catholic, fully representative of broad gentry concerns, nor in complete accordance with the approach outlined by Bacon. Blundellâs approach to the world was idiosyncratic and incorporated strands that were apparently contradictoryâ (p. 197). In essence, Blundellâs archive, and Bakerâs analysis of it, invites us to think of âexperimentalâ as an illuminating synonym for the âapparently contradictoryâ traits of the persona. This single change in terminology helps us see better, I think, what Bakerâs 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 reviewerâs craft is to criticize a published work for not mounting the exact argument that the reviewer would have pursued, given âworld enough and time.â[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 Bakerâs insights into Blundellâs 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. Bakerâs careful presentation of Blundellâs commonplacing technique and the âdistinctly idiosyncratic middle wayâ (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 LÃ©vi-Straussian notion of âbricolage,â like Michel Serresâ and Bruno Latourâs inspections of the dynamic networks through which received notions of subject and object, as well as referential systems, are put in play and tested. Bakerâs book makes such a prospect not only tempting but also possible.

Notes

[1]. Anthony Grafton and Lisa Jardine, ââStudied for Actionâ: How Gabriel Harvey Read His Livy,â *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 Marvellâs poem âTo His Coy Mistress.â

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