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## **A scholarly edition of a seventeenth-century anonymous commonplace book in the British Library [introduction]**

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PUBLISHER

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VERSION

SMUR (Submitted Manuscript Under Review)

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## **Introduction**

The study of commonplace books offers an important means for scholars to gather evidence on the history of reading practices in early modern England. A cross between a diary and a notebook, a commonplace book is usually a collection of handwritten notes in which a reader recorded items of particular interest from printed books, manuscripts or from conversations or sermons. Some commonplace books are interspersed with notes, messages, shopping lists, even illustrations, while others are extremely orderly reflections of serious scholarship, some being divided up thematically with indexes. A formal Renaissance commonplace book acted as a repository of pithy sayings that could be used to enhance one's own conversation and writing. However, it is important not to adopt too narrow a definition of a commonplace book because it has much in common with other engagements with print culture such as scrapbooking. Classical and biblical references commonly appear, reflecting the education and typical reading habits of the time. Commonplacing is sometimes considered a substitute for writing notes in the margins of a book's printed text, which might indicate that the commonplace author had only limited access to the volume i.e. that he did not own it. We can thus use commonplace books to learn something about book ownership and the circumstances in which the books were read because commonplacing was also a reflection of the particular market for books in the early modern period. Books (especially large multi-volume works) were very expensive and even a wealthy member of the elite might not possess a large library. Books were often borrowed from acquaintances or used at their homes. Many town libraries

were founded during this period and a few lucky readers living nearby had access to their books. To gather information, a reader may have had only a few hours to copy as much as possible before then returning the book to its owner or passing it on to another borrower.

Determining reading practices during this period is notoriously challenging because of the absence of reflective accounts by readers. By examining commonplace books we see readers working with two books simultaneously, making editorial choices while excerpting and changing the way certain sections are written. However, in this case, what is most striking is how closely the commonplace author has stuck to the texts he is copying. The production of this commonplace book is a concerted act of concentration, reproducing the contents of detailed, lengthy printed works with very little amendment. Reading practices varied during the early modern period just as they do today. Commonplace books were sometimes the result of a drive for self-improvement. The eighteenth-century idea of the 'self' had not yet been fully formed, but in the seventeenth century reading was thought to be a good way of exercising the mind, and transcribing notes was a way of enhancing that process. However, the commonplace book is very different from a journal, in which authors strove for improvement through self-reflection, and from the notebook in which day to day thoughts and notes might be inserted. Unlike the journal, the commonplace book contains little reference to the passing of time. It is often impossible to say how many sittings the notes took to write or the time interval between sessions. The role of the commonplace author is also different in that he does not usually push himself forward in

the text, rather, allowing the authors' voices whose work he is reading to dominate. Despite the lack of direct clues, some conclusions can be drawn about the commonplacers themselves through an analysis of their reading.

The manuscript commonplace book reproduced here is held at the British Library, part of number 6494 in Harleian Manuscript collections. It contains 33 folio pages, with 61 numbered paragraphs all written in the same hand. Robert Harley assembled his library in 1704 when he purchased over six hundred manuscripts from the collection of Sir Simonds D'Ewes (died 1650). However, 6494 was not part of this original core of manuscripts because it was produced over 20 years after the death of D'Ewes (see below for dating evidence). The rest of the collection, assembled in the 1710s and 1720s by Harley and his son, Edward, consisted of items obtained from auctions held in England and in continental Europe. 6494 is a miscellaneous collection of documents, including notes on the law, lists of church benefices, Francis Mason's notes on astronomy from the 1590s, a translation of Aesop's fables, an *Elogium* of Thomas Aquinas, the relation of a journey into the west of England, by an anonymous author, a tract on usury, a letter from a Roman Catholic to his Protestant friend, a treatise on the art of courtship and another on the soul. None of the other items in 6494 are in the same hand as the commonplace book. The commonplace book appears in the catalogue to the Harleian Manuscripts as item 14:

‘collections relating the West Indies, the Affairs of Europe & several historical occurrences in England’.<sup>1</sup>

The handwriting is mostly legible and the document undamaged but it contains many contractions, which encouraged me to produce a modern version of the commonplace book. It reveals the topics that were important to a seventeenth-century reader and the editorial choices he made in taking notes, but until now these notes have not been placed in their proper context. A modern edition is timely because the Early English Books Online database, and the full text searches that it permits, allows the marrying of the extracts with the books from which these notes originally came.

The books used by the commonplace author were mostly easy to identify using the search engines on Early English Books Online, although it proved more challenging to pinpoint particular editions. Dating evidence was used as a guide. In paragraph 19 (footnote 136), the commonplace author wrote that the Reformation took place 140 years previously. This was not something derived from the original text, but was inserted by the compiler, and must have referred to the period when he was writing. Therefore, the time of writing was around either 1647 or 1676, depending on whether the date of Reformation was estimated from Luther’s *Ninety-Five Theses* or Henry VIII’s break with the Church of Rome as fixed by the Act of Appeals. The latter date is confirmed as one section of the text was copied from a book published in 1679 with no

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<sup>1</sup> A *Catalogue of the Harleian Collection of Manuscripts*, Volume 2, p. 7076.

earlier editions. The evidence suggests 1679-80 as the date of the commonplace book.

The identity of the commonplace author remains as yet unknown. There are no definitive clues within the text as to gender, although the weight of probability is that it is a man. In light of this, for ease, I will refer to the commonplace author as 'he'. The choice of books from which notes were taken suggest certain areas of interest, some of which are typical of an educated man of the seventeenth century, while others are more unusual. The text is continuous and there is no attempt to categorise the diverse information into themes by using headings or an index. Throughout the commonplace book the choice of extracts reflects an interest in the unusual, even the bizarre. Religion is also a focus but the classical authors were ignored, in contrast to many commonplace books of the time; moreover the compiler omitted to copy a number of classical references found in the original books that he was working from. He was interested in stories of fabulous creatures in the Americas, descriptions of Luther's graphic cartoons satirising the Pope and accounts of the iconoclasm committed on the 'Eleanor Cross' at Cheapside in London.

The reader's interests initially took him across the Atlantic. Much of this section was taken from Samuel Purchas's monumental five-volume work *Purchas, His Pilgrims* first published in London in 1625. Purchas was a Church of England clergyman and a member of the Virginia Company. He took over the mantle of Richard Hakluyt in gathering together travel narratives documenting the forays of English merchants and sailors around the world. Purchas spent about twenty years gathering manuscript, printed and

oral accounts and tying them together with anti-Catholic editorial polemic. The interests reflected in the notes derived from Purchas are of curious stories, such as reports of mermaids. There is no unifying theme of chronology, geography or individual traveller. The commonplace author indicated that he believed that individual sailors' and nations' stories are universal by removing their specific names and thoughts from his version of their stories. He ignored a comment by Purchas that credited wondrous creatures to God's creation, which may suggest that the interest of the author lay in the scientific rather than providential approach to the natural world. Determining the origin of this early section of the commonplace book (paragraphs 1-14) proved particularly challenging because Purchas's work is derived from a number of previously published works and many later authors used Purchas's work as a basis for their own. When undertaking searches on Early English Books Online, multiple possibilities presented themselves and all of these have been noted in the accompanying notes and bibliography. The commonplace author was most likely working from an edition of Purchas because his book is the unifying source that covers the entire section.

Another interest is the history of the continental Reformation, with some reference also to the return of Catholicism to England under Mary. There is a fascination with ceremony, and information about Catholic rituals and beliefs was copied without any additional comment. All the books from which notes on the Reformation were taken are texts written by Protestants and so consequently make their own judgements about Catholicism. The commonplacer

does not contradict or comment on any of these opinions. John Sleidan (or Johannes Sleidanus), one important source, was an early historian of the Reformation from Luxembourg and his work is the source of the notes in paragraphs 15 to 35. While undertaking diplomatic work, which included periods in England and at the Council of Trent, Sleiden collected materials for his history. Although he finished writing his history just before his death, Sleiden was unable to afford to print it and died in poverty in 1556. Denouncing corruption within the Catholic Church, Sleiden's polemic was violently partisan with accounts of the suppression of particular ideas, as well as the sinfulness of Popes featuring strongly. By undertaking a textual comparison, it becomes clear that the commonplace text is closest to the earliest English translation, the 1560 edition produced by John Day. Day was committed to the evangelical cause and used his role as printer and bookseller to promote this during the 1540s. Later, Day used his connections with members of the continental printing and bookselling trades to attract lucrative works to England such as that by Sleiden. In 1563 the success of such ventures allowed Day to produce his most famous work: Foxe's *Acts and Monuments*, better known as the *Book of Martyrs*. For an author as concerned with Catholicism and martyrdom in England as the commonplace author obviously is, the omission of notes from Foxe, the perhaps second most widely read text during this period after the Bible, seems striking. Perhaps he already owned a copy of Foxe or was so familiar with its contents that he felt it unnecessary to take notes from it.

Sleiden's book shares a common theme with the next book used by the commonplace author: they are both



concerned with the ritual and performance of authority. The next sequence of notes is taken from Richard Baker's 1643 volume, *A Chronicle of the Kings of England* (paragraphs 36-47). Baker was a defender of the Caroline court, engaging in polemical debate with William Prynne whose savage treatise, *Histriomastix*, characterised the court as popish and slandered Henrietta Maria, Charles II's wife. Baker's *magnum opus*, his history of the kings of England, dedicated to the young Prince Charles (the future Charles II), was written while in the Fleet prison for debt, where he spent the last ten years of his life. The book went through five reprints in England alone between 1665 and 1680 and was also translated into Dutch. Although now considered defective as historical scholarship, during the late seventeenth century its influence was unchallenged. Its popularity was due to the appealing nature of its narrative - a key attraction for the commonplace author. He copied extraordinary stories designed to provoke both shock and laughter, such as that of the horrific burial of William the Conqueror whose corpse exploded when the coffin lid was closed. But notes taken from both Baker's and Sleiden's works reflect an interest in formal ceremonial, in the orders of aristocratic hierarchy and in the source of royal and religious authority.

But the compiler was also interested in the vicissitudes of worldly power and the downfall of eminent men and women. One vivid story taken from Baker recounted the execution of Mary Queen of Scots. It contrasted the calmness and dignity with which she went to her death with the wrangling over Elizabeth I's culpability in agreeing to her execution. One of the smallest extracts from

a single book is taken from James I's account of the execution of Henry Garnet, Superior of the Jesuits in England (paragraph 49). James's account of the Gunpowder Plot was first published in 1605, but the commonplace author definitely used the later version because Garnet died in 1606 and so the extract about his death only appeared in the 1679 edition. During the period when the commonplace author was writing there was a heightened fear of Catholics following the Popish plot and the Exclusion crisis of the late 1670s. These events formed the backdrop for the commonplace author's interest in the threat that Catholicism might pose.

The legality and rituals of kingship are noted from Nathaniel Bacon's *A Continuation of a Historical Discourse* of 1651 (paragraphs 50-53 and 58). There is also a 1689 version, but the notes are significantly closer to that of 1651. The commonplace author writing at the end of the 1670s was only a generation removed from the turmoil of the Civil War. As fear of Catholicism again threatened the stability of the realm, readers turned to books written during the Civil War period for answers to questions about their future. Bacon was a supporter of the Long Parliament and his cynical views on monarchy come through strongly in his writing. During his lifetime the book was highly regarded and his contemporary, Richard Baxter, called it one of the most significant works of the Civil War era. Drawing heavily on the notes of John Selden (indeed some consider Bacon the editor rather than the author), the work showed the shaky grounds on which many English kings had claimed the throne, and explained the political and legal contortions that the nation had gone through in order to

acknowledge their rights. His overall thesis is that Parliament was justified in its attack on Charles I. The book went through a secret reprinting in 1672, and again in 1682 during the Exclusion crisis. Charles II was very worried by its popularity and its printer, John Starkey, was prosecuted twice for distributing it. Hundreds of copies were publicly burnt.<sup>2</sup>

Moving away from royalty and religion, the compiler took notes from John Stow's very popular *Survey of London* (paragraph 54). Stow was an avid collector of manuscripts and his role as an historian is significant, but it was his authorship of the *Survey of London* that has defined him; the work has remained constantly in print since the first edition in 1598. Stow's personal knowledge of London and his interest in pageantry pervade the book, but it was not a section on pageantry and display that was chosen by the commonplacer, but one discussing Roman archaeological discoveries in Spitalfields in 1576. Perhaps the author lived close by. Continuing with the theme of London, the commonplace author moved on to James Howell's *Londinopolis* of 1657, to take notes about the mayor, William Walworth, and his capture of the rebel Wat Tyler (paragraphs 55-57). After this, at paragraph 58, the notes revert to a previous book, that of Bacon. This is an intriguing example of his reading practices where, after notes were taken from one book, the commonplacer then swapped to another book and then back to the first. The topics do not obviously overlap, although the Wat Tyler

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<sup>2</sup> *CSP Domestic*, 1682, 263, 608; *CSP Domestic*, 1677-8, 406, 409; *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004), Nathaniel Bacon.

extract might be seen as continuing the theme of challenges to monarchical authority.

James Howell is the only author to whose books the commonplacer refers twice. In paragraph 59, in another dramatic change of subject, he takes notes from Howell's *Epistolae Holianae* of 1650 about the spa waters at Bath. The section copied is a scientific treatise on the natural heat of the waters rather than a discussion of their medicinal value. Coincidentally, like Richard Baker, James Howell was imprisoned in the Fleet for debt at the time of writing his work, and like Nathaniel Bacon, he was in contact with the great lawyer and patron, John Selden. Howell's writing was an attempt to find a moderate way through the religious and political turmoil of his time, but although he leant more towards the Royalist side, he was not rewarded with preferment at the Restoration and instead made his living from literary publications.

Paragraph 60 is the only mystery in the commonplace book, an extract for which no source has been identified among printed works published in England. Possibly this section comes from a manuscript treatise, or a translation of a Latin or other foreign language work. The final paragraph of the book represents another radical departure in topic, covering the history and geography of Palestine that was taken from Gerard Mercator's book *Historia Mundi* (the 1635 English edition)

These works are all copied very closely but they also reveal both calculated and accidental changes made by the commonplace author. There are editorial choices throughout that might tell us something about his identity. He changed

accounts written in the first person (especially in the section from Purchas) into the third person. He rendered these accounts in the passive voice. He seemed reluctant to copy someone else's story directly, but rather tried to make it his own or, at the very least, to make it universal. From the sections taken from Bacon's book, the commonplace author consistently ignored the classical and legal references included by Bacon.

There are also accidental omissions, especially when the author is copying long lists of information. One example is in footnote 374 where a list of Eleanor crosses comes from Howell's *Londinopolis*. The place name 'Waltham' is omitted completely from the list, surely an oversight. However, in the same list, 'West Cheap' in the original is changed to 'Cheapside' in the commonplace text. This seems to be a deliberate amendment reflecting an updated usage.

Not every change is an omission; in many places the author added information. This is often to clarify a passage in which the original is not clear about dates, places or names. This suggests that the commonplace author expected to make use of his notes at a later date and wanted their meaning to be absolutely clear. Other examples in footnotes 290 and 299 refer to blanks left in the manuscript. The commonplace author clearly intended to identify the name of the missing county and add it later. Either he forgot to do so, or could not find the information.

One change of spelling appears throughout the manuscript. In the original, where the word 'been' or 'beene' appears, the commonplace author always rendered it

‘bin’. The author was not copying letter for letter the words in the text that he had read. He might read a sentence, process it, think it through, and then write it down. In his own accent, in his own head, the word ‘been’ sounds more like ‘bin’. Or perhaps he was taught that the correct spelling was ‘bin’. Inconsistency of spelling is ubiquitous during this period, and the authors of the original works are certainly not consistent, so I would argue that the consistent use of ‘bin’ reflects the normal usage by the commonplacer.

To assign authorship to the commonplace book is to enter the realms of speculation. But the reading practices revealed here offer a possible suggestion. The largest single extract copied (paragraphs 15 to 35) is taken from the John Day edition of John Sleidan’s work on the history of the Reformation and is obviously of key interest to our author. Even though these passages comprise a small part of Sleidan’s magisterial work and the commonplacer was interested in other authors, it raises the possibility that he might be George Bohun, the translator of the next edition of Sleidan in 1689.<sup>3</sup> Bohun’s personal history certainly chimes with the interests revealed here. The son of a Church of England minister from New House, Keresley, Coventry, Bohun decided not to follow in his father’s footsteps and instead moved to London to pursue a mercantile career. George was overshadowed by Ralph, his more successful elder brother. Ralph did enter the church, went to Oxford and became tutor to John Evelyn’s children. Evelyn became his patron throughout his life. George, also an Anglican, fell

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<sup>3</sup> R.G. Thorne, ed., *History of Parliament: Commons 1790-1820* (London, 1986); *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004), George Bohun.

foul of Coventry's Presbyterians by presenting St. Michael's church (later the cathedral) with two great candlesticks. He had trading interests in overseas companies such as the African Company, which might explain a concern with Purchas's accounts of the Azores and America. Ralph too, had an interest in travel and science; while at Oxford in 1671 he published a treatise on hurricanes. When he married in 1681, George was living in Cheapside, chiming with the commonplacer's interest in accounts of the city by Stow and Howell, and his notes on Cheapside. Later in 1690, when his younger brother died, George inherited family property in Spitalfields. Family connections in the area might have encouraged an interest in the Roman archaeological remains found there a century earlier. Bohun subsequently became the Tory MP for Coventry and a lieutenant of the city. He was buried in a family vault in St. Michael's. If he is indeed the author of the commonplace book, then he compiled it in his late thirties and at the peak of his mercantile career, and when he was preparing to establish himself with Tory grandees and to manoeuvre into political power. This identification remains highly speculative, however. The anti-monarchical flavour of his extracts from Bacon do not fit easily with the sentiments of a Tory.

#### **Editorial Note:**

In this modern edition I have expanded the numerous contractions and modernised spelling and punctuation except in the case of personal and place names. I have also tried to retain the spirit of the original and have not

modernised idioms or sentence structure. My task was to tidy the manuscript rather than rewrite it. This means that the voices of both the author of the published work *and* of the commonplace author come through in this version.



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## **List of Paragraphs<sup>4</sup>**

| <u>Paragraph number:</u> | <u>Topic:</u>                   |
|--------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1                        | Tortoises                       |
| 2                        | Brazil                          |
| 3                        | Panama                          |
| 4                        | Azores                          |
| 5                        | Bermudas                        |
| 6                        | Newfoundland                    |
| 7                        | Newfoundland                    |
| 8                        | Moose, Possum and other animals |
| 9                        | Brazilian Parrots               |
| 10                       | Mermaid                         |
| 11                       | Dolphins                        |
| 12                       | Swordfish                       |
| 13                       | Solomon Islands                 |
| 14                       | Penguin                         |
| 15                       | Father Landre of Paris          |
| 16                       | Francis I                       |
| 17                       | Francis I                       |
| 18                       | Calvin's Works                  |

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<sup>4</sup> This list will help the reader navigate through the modern edition. There is no contents page or index in the commonplace book itself.

|    |                                  |
|----|----------------------------------|
| 19 | Mary's reign                     |
| 20 | –                                |
| 21 | –                                |
| 22 | –                                |
| 23 | –                                |
| 24 | Council of Trent                 |
| 25 | Francis I                        |
| 26 | Henry II                         |
| 27 | Peter Aloise                     |
| 28 | Paul III                         |
| 29 | Council of Trent                 |
| 30 | Maximilian                       |
| 31 | Charles the Wise                 |
| 32 | Reformation                      |
| 33 | Religious debates, Cardinal Pole |
| 34 | Council of Trent                 |
| 35 | Cardinal Pole                    |
| 36 | Edward the Confessor             |
| 37 | Richard I                        |
| 38 | Henry VII                        |
| 39 | William the Conqueror            |
| 40 | Mary Queen of Scots              |
| 41 | Mary Queen of Scots              |

|    |                                 |
|----|---------------------------------|
| 42 | Duke of Norfolk                 |
| 43 | Mary Queen of Scots             |
| 44 | Penance, 1417                   |
| 45 | Thomas Arundel                  |
| 46 | Henry VIII's wives              |
| 47 | Edward III                      |
| 48 | Peter of Savoy                  |
| 49 | Henry Garnet                    |
| 50 | Henry VII                       |
| 51 | Mary I                          |
| 52 | Reigning monarchs without title |
| 53 | Female monarchs                 |
| 54 | Archaeology at Spitalfields     |
| 55 | Jack Straw                      |
| 56 | Eleanor crosses                 |
| 57 | Use of <i>Custos Regni</i>      |
| 58 | Privy Council                   |
| 59 | Medicinal Waters at Bath        |
| 60 | Marriage of clergy              |
| 61 | Canaan                          |