17th Century Books & Reading

There was a general improvement in popular literacy over the course of the seventeenth century, but the ability to read and write was closely tied to social status. John Aubrey, looking back to the early Restoration period, had a ready explanation for this apparent increase in literacy:

Since printing came in fashion, till a little before the Civil-wars, the ordinary sort of people were not taught to read. Nowadays, books are common and most of the poor people understand letters.

The common criterion for literacy is the ability to sign or write ones own name, proficiency in writing being assumed to indicate at least an elementary ability to recognise the written word. Estimates of the literacy of sample populations are frequently derived from analyses of lists of signatories to protestation oaths and covenants, which usually provide a cross-section of inhabitants. Unfortunately the names of those who subscribed to the oath were transcribed, rather than entered directly into the Austrey register, so this technique cannot be used. An alternative analysis of the signatures and marks of those acting as witnesses or overseers to wills encounters difficulties because witnesses did not always represent the broad cross-section of inhabitants. Allowance has to be made for the fact that some 'literate' testators may have been too old or incapacitated to sign their own names. Another problem is that witnesses were selected rather than chosen at random. This means that in the case of the wealthier inhabitants witnesses were more frequently chosen from two social extremes: the educated elite who acted as overseers and executors, and ordinary household servants who were closest to hand at the drawing up of the will.

Nevertheless, the surviving Austrey wills suggest that about a third of the inhabitants were literate, which conforms fairly closely to the Cambridge Group's estimate of around 70 per cent illiteracy among signatories to the Protestation Oath in 1642. All of those identified as gentry or clergy in the wills and title deeds throughout the period of this survey were able to sign their names as witnesses. In the earlier period, from 1600 to 1640, approximately half of the yeomen and a third of the husbandmen and labourers, could sign their names. Although only a handful of the witnesses were craftsmen they were generally more literate than husbandmen or labourers.

The Parson's Library

The seventeenth-century vicars of Austrey had books but, unlike their clerical neighbours in Appleby, their libraries do not provide much evidence as to clerical leanings and affiliations, much less evidence of radical Protestant inclinations. (The Appleby parson's puritan sympathies are revealed, in contrast, by the several volumes of Calvin's Commentaries among the books Thomas Mould passed on to his successor in 1642). By 1660 the Austrey vicarage had a study where the parson probably retired to write his sermons. In 1664, the incumbent, John Prior, left his brother James 'writing paper and books in the study', later appraised at £10. In 1680 his successor, John Shakespeare, left books in the same study worth £40, reflecting the growing enthusiasm for books throughout the country. The parson's study probably contained some recent acquisitions including three 'popular' works which were later discovered in the parish chest and which may well have found their way into the vicar's library about this time. Their general tone is conservative or Anglican rather than puritan. The presence of John Foxe's popular Actes and Monumentes, required to be kept in every church under the Order of Convocation attached to the Elizabethan settlement, needs little further

explanation. John Jewel's Apology for the Church of England, published around 1562 and reprinted in numerous editions over the course of the century, was a standard defence of orthodox doctrine. The third book, John Pearson's Exposition on the Creed, published in 1669 also defended the established church, perhaps even more vigorously, since Pearson served for a time as chaplain to Charles I in 1645 and, later, as bishop of Chester. Its possible that John Shakespeare purchased his copy of Pearson's Exposition from Richard Davies the bookseller in Oxford who had the book in stock while John was in residence as a servitor at St. Mary's Hall.

The Books of the Austrey Gentry

The gentry's literary interests are less in evidence. Although it can be safely assumed that most advanced beyond grammar school, the Austrey wills and inventories throw only a glimmer of light on their reading habits. It has already been suggested that the Warwickshire gentry may have had access to almanacs and newsheets from London and it seems likely that they maintained contact through local apprentices, especially to booksellers and the Stationers' company. Even so, there is little evidence of book ownership or scholarly interests in Austrey before the Civil War. The inventory of Henry Kendall, the most prominent of Austrey's late Elizabethan gentry, fails to list a single book or to provide any other indication of literacy, although it is apparent from wills and other documents that Henry was quite capable of signing his own name. After 1660, however, wills and inventories begin to provide evidence of a new enthusiasm for religious and secular reading. The younger Henry Kendall, Henry's grandson, had a study equipped with two desks and a 'press' (or shelf) of books valued at £6.5.8. His prized Geneva Bible and the Commentaries which Henry mentions in the will, is prominently recorded, giving clear indication of his Calvinist sympathies. Another gentleman, Robert Lilley, the Austrey attorney, had a substantial collection of 'law books' which be bequeathed to his children in 1685. The small number of books in Austrey inventories should not be interpreted to mean that the gentry did not have scholarly interests or connections. They may well have kept company with the scholarly antiquarians who lived around Polesworth, men like Aston Cockayne of Pooley Hall, an 'ingenious gentleman', poet and antiquary, and Walter Chetwin of Grendon, the antiquarian attorney.

The occasional printed book listed in the inventories of those below the gentry provides further evidence of the link between literacy and religious piety. Although books are more frequently encountered after 1660 they were still a comparative rarity in inventories, despite an impressive array of evidence of an expanding market for religious tracts, little books, ballads and almanacs after the Interregnum. The Bible continues to be the most frequently listed book in the parish and most of the books recorded are religious works John Lakin, the retired yeoman (1630) had only a Bible and a Statute Book in his possession. A mention of 'one little and other books' valued at 2s in John Mould's inventory (1672) provides one of the few tangible indications that chapbooks were available. The bulk of the works mentioned were devotional works with a comparatively wide circulation. It is hardly surprising to find, for example, that one of the husbandmen, Thomas Robinson, had two Bibles and a copy of Lewis Bayly's Practice of Piety (1602) in his possession in 1672. Nicholas Sharpe, variously styled as husbandman or yeoman, had eight books worth 2s 8d out of goods appraised at £22.7.8 in 1682. Finally, John Rainalls (1684), the Austrey village blacksmith, had a collection of what appear to have been chapbooks, judging from their small value (3s). These books undoubtedly represent only a fragment of the printed material kept in the parish during this period. The absence of any further

record of such items is explained by the fact that the cheaper printed emphemera were more readily disposed of during the testator's lifetime, or more easily overlooked by the appraisers after his death.

Literacy was highly regarded by gentry and non-gentry alike, but it remained an almost exclusively male preserve (even some gentry widows were illiterate) and it took a long time to reach the labouring poor.