Localités and Early Modern Britain

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Research and Review Series

Number 7 March 2000

Localités/Localities

a special issue inaugurating a web-based center for local history, with contributions by Newton E. Key, Terry A. Barnhart, Nora Pat Small, Debra Ann Reid, Daniel A. McMillan, Ben Fallaw, Christopher Waldrep, and Mark Voss-Hubbard

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AT CHARLESTON
Localités and Early Modern Britain

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Localism is a theory of mentalité.... It defines the mental horizons that supposedly bounded the social and political world of most inhabitants of Tudor and early Stuart England. According to ...the leading spokesman for the school, each town and county was a 'self-conscious and coherent community with a distinct life of its own ...in which politics played merely an intermittent part.'

In early modern England local identity often was more important than national identity, and "country" as often meant one's native shire as one's nation state. In 1710, a young German gentleman visited London and kept a diary in which he noted unique British customs. He wrote at length about a cockfight he witnessed. He learned that "cocks from the same neighbourhood or county do not willingly attack each other." English cocks had a county identity or mentalité. While the sociobiological truth of this animal behavior might be doubted, the English believed it to be true. Cockfights took place mainly between the prize cocks of country squires from neighboring shires. A 1685 advertisement gave advance notice of "a great Match of Cocking, between Leicestershire and Oxfordshire Gentlemen..., in Leicester." In 1710, Surrey and Hampshire gentlemen fought a cock match after May horse races, while, after a Peterborough horse race in July,


2The cock match was not exclusively a gentry affair, and, instead, mixed and confused the strict social hierarchy. At cock matches, the young German noted, "the people, gentle and simple..., sit with no distinction of place" and that "an hostler ...often wins several guineas from a Lord." London in 1710: From the Travels of Zacharias Conrad Von Uffenbach, ed. W.H. Quarrell and Margaret Mare (London, 1934?), 48-9. The famous Parson Woodforde disapproved of cockfights because they brought one into contact with "lowlife sort of people." Quoted in Amanda Vickery, The Gentleman's Daughter: Women's Lives in Georgian England (New Haven, 1998), 219.

there were to be several days of cock-fighting pitting "the Gentlemen of the Counties of Northampton and Lincolnshire against the Gentlemen of the County of Huntington, and Isle of Ely and Cambridge." Cocking and horse racing were part of a gentry "theatre of honour" and of provincial reciprocity and exchange networks. And cocking, at least, reinforced county not national identity.

In 1662, a Dutch visitor to England saw "the procession of the Oxfordshire countrymen in Cornhill," in London. After a service at St. Michæl's church, "they all marched two by two" to Grocer's Hall "to have their celebrations together." He added, "[t]his is in London usual with most...," before leaving a blank section in the diary. The Dutch visitor had witnessed part of a county or natives feast, of the type which became "usual" during the late 1650s, died out in the early 1660s, only to reappear in the late 1670s, proliferate in the 1680s and 1690s and, from available evidence, decline again in the early eighteenth century. A character in a play, The Huntington Divertissement, performed (or at least intended to be performed) at a county feast in London in 1676, describes the feasts this way:

they have set up a Monthly Club, which is kept the first Wednesday-night in every Month; when in a glasse of Sack or Claret they remember You here in the Country, and especially their great Patrons; And once a Year they

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4London Gazette, no. 4687, 4-6 May 1710 (for Whitsun Week); no. 4708, 22-24 June 1710 (for 11-13 July).
5These feasts have been studied at length in Newton E. Key, "The Localism of the County Feast in Late-Stuart Political Culture," Huntington Library Quarterly 58, 2 (1996): 211-37; and idem, "The Political Culture and Political Rhetoric of County Feasts and Feast Sermons, 1654-1714," Journal of British Studies 33, 3 (1994): 223-56.

have settled a Feast for the honour of our Country, where all the Lords, Knights, and Gentlemen are nobly entertained at a good dinner, and the Charitable Benevolence bestowed to put out poor Children of our own Country to be Apprentices.

And the natives feasts could be just as totemic as cocks fighting for their county. The Kentish feast deployed a Kentish strongman in their parade. "The Strong man who has made so much noise in Town, and who performed several things before the King with extraordinary strength, showed many feats on Saturday at Dorset Garden, but there is another Sampson come out of Darbyshire, who pretends to outdo the Kentish."

While the county community was not bounded as rigidly by gentry status or by geography, it was overwhelmingly self-conscious. Although earlier historians' narrative certainty of the polar division between parties during the late-Stuart and Hanoverian periods has dissolved under the scrutiny of revisionist historians, country ideology and county identity remain valid constructs. As one eighteenth-century feast preacher noted, "[n]or do I find, that even the Party Heat and Feuds, which have greatly tended to divide the Nation in general, have been able to disconcert...or to destroy that native Affection." "Country" was, of course, an ideology, a polemic. And, the localist myth, that the rural individual "moves in his proper sphere" and does not meddle with affairs of State (as opposed to the troubling town-dweller or Londoner—of indeterminate social status and who read the latest partisan newspaper at a coffeehouse), was itself a political polemic.11 In
the early seventeenth century, a country ideology developed that was anti-Court in polemic, though, in practice, it was used to cloak all manner of programs and interests. In the 1690s, “country” politicians opposed those in power with a rhetoric which drew upon a number of themes: “provincialism, patriotism, the defence of liberty, and resistance to the expansion of state power.” If country polemic was only in part a localism, qua provincialism, it was that, nevertheless. The study of local identities may be termed, localités. Localités signifies those mentalités or world-views that privilege the local or regional over the national or international.

Modern historical study of early modern localités began with the realization that, at least before 1700, most of the English lived out their lives within the confines of their county. Although, for those of yeoman status and below, the appropriate arena might better be the parish, throughout the social scale rural life was largely bounded by the shire: “Parliament met infrequently; the Court was socially exclusive; the focal point of gentry life remained the county community.” But, ultimately, county identity is as much a feature of urban self-perception or self-fashioning as it was a geographical or country fact. Oxford and Cambridge colleges as well as London victualing inns and alehouses had clear county associations from the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries. Cornish men could easily be found at Exeter College; Devonshire men congregated for news from their shire in inns on the Strand. Indeed, the link between county, college, and metropolis was the very life-cycle of the young gentleman. One preacher praised the Herefordshire natives’ “[p]laces of our Birth and Education..., viz. Hereford and Oxford.” Thus, when in July 1680, an advertisement in a London newspaper asked interested gentlemen to meet at the Fountain-Tavern, Newgate, every Wednesday to help plan a new Leicestershire feast, it sought, of course, London residents who had a Leicestershire identity, not rural gentlemen imbedded only in provincial networks.

The county community, as a localité, is a central component to the world view of the early modern English. It grew, paradoxically, in the metropolis, in London. London as the cultural, governmental, and economic center of the British Isles, of northern Europe, and of the Anglophone Atlantic basin is the “chief feature of the period 1500-1750.” As centralized political power grew, the sense of the importance of the county grew as well. As one local historian notes:

the eighteenth century especially stands out as the temporal apotheosis of the county—the period par excellence of the county town, of county regiments, of nascent county cricket involving different levels of society, and of county clubs or societies in the metropolis.

Of course, earlier periods have also been seen as periods of county awareness: the sixteenth century, the 1650s when the local gentry “held aloof from the central authority,” and 1660-

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15Thomas Watts, Social Friendship and Charity demonstrated as the most proper Remedies of Humane Evils. In a Sermon Before the Honourable Society of the Natives of the County of Hereford. At Their first Solemn Assembly upon their Annual Feast, December 4, 1723. in the Church of St. Michael in Cornhill, London ((Hereford), 1724), 21.

16London Gazette, no. 1525.


18Phythian-Adams, Re-thinking English Local History, 47.
Eighteenth-Century Provincial
Clark, quoted in Clive Holmes, 1983), Ancient Britons (Welsh) began in London under the century, did not recover its importance and centrality, neither to Protestants in London began meeting from 1689. The Society of local identity nor to the social calendar of London. Irish county London's cultural innovation, however, was a commitment to the London increasingly become and enhanced “the Urban forms, interacted and shaped national and supra-national developments. But the first criticism simply reaffirms that the county community was an idea, a localité, not a geographic entity. And, as for other forums, localités studies how loyalties from the parish to the pays interacted and shaped national and supra-national developments. Urban historians have noted how provincial towns drew upon “the London model” from 1700. During the Hanoverian period, London increasingly become “a cultural innovator and exemplar” and enhanced “local awareness of the outside world.” Part of London’s cultural innovation, however, was a commitment to the county localité.

The county feast, while it continued into the twentieth century, did not recover its importance and centrality, neither to local identity nor to the social calendar of London. Irish Protestants in London began meeting from 1689. The Society of Ancient Britons (Welsh) began in London under the Hanoverians; the Gwyneddigion Society of London (men of north Wales) began in 1751. As a new identity, the Briton, developed in the eighteenth century, Celtic links were likewise forged. A nineteenth-century list of the charities of London, lists only six county-based societies. Two of these societies were county schools, not apprentice, charity feasts, and only one, the Herefordshire society (established 1710), had been formed before the nineteenth century. Several natives feasts meeting in London struggled into the twentieth century. But the heyday of the natives feast and of county identity in the metropolis had passed. Whether the county was replaced by English, Welsh, Scottish, and Irish identities in the formation of a new British nationalism is a subject for future study.

Social and cultural historians have found the study of mentalités quite useful, and have drawn upon the anthropologist Clifford Geertz’s call for “thick description” study to reveal “local knowledge.” The problem of such “local frames of awareness,” which have found their equivalent in the microhistories of Robert Darnton and Carlo Ginzburg, is that they open the researcher to charges of triviality when viewed from the

19Heal and Holmes, The Gentry in England and Wales, 226; and Peter Clark, quoted in Clive Holmes, Seventeenth-century Lincolnshire (Lincoln, 1980), 254.
20Holmes, Seventeenth-century Lincolnshire, 262-3.
lofty prospect of world-system theory or other overarching holistic theory. Likewise, the local historian has often been charged with mere antiquarianism. And rightly so. The town on the nineteenth-century Illinois frontier (see the materials on Charleston in Coles County, below) created itself outside the patterns of world trade and national expansion no more than did the English workers of the mid-eighteenth century create themselves as a class outside English market and capital relations. But frontier settlers or the working class were present at their own creation and there is no useful history which ignores the actors. Likewise, provincial culture helped shape national culture. This point recently has been taken up by one historian who argues, "there was a profound cultural-political divide in British society in the eighteenth century, and in particular within its elites, between an emerging wide-ranging 'national society' and an alternative polymorphous communal-provincial culture." This struggle, between nativism and cosmopolitanism, is certainly important throughout the early modern period. And it has a history which is not the simplistic tale of an ever-widening cosmopolitanism and an ever-shrinking native culture. To help understand this struggle and its part in shaping a multi-cultural Britishness, the study of localités is in part dedicated.

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29Biersack, "Local Knowledge, Local History," 79, 82.