Earls Colne's Early Modern Landscapes

To scholars of early modern Europe, Earls Colne in Essex must be one of England’s best known parishes, thanks to the work undertaken in the 1960s and 1970s by the historian and anthropologist Alan Macfarlane, and following his work, the availability, firstly on microfiche and latterly online, of transcriptions of a large corpus of contemporary sources about the parish which has prompted significant subsequent research about Earls Colne. (1) The parish does indeed have several advantages for the early modern scholar, not least fairly complete manorial records and parish registers, and if that was not enough, the surviving diary of Ralph Josselin, the vicar of Earls Colne between 1640 and his death in 1683, all of which are freely available online.

Dolly MacKinnon is the latest scholar to undertake research on Earls Colne, and she is keen to outline the uniqueness of her approach relative to previous works about the parish. Her focus is on the landscape, and she wants to find out about the ways in which Earls Colne’s early modern inhabitants interacted with the place where they lived, in terms of what they saw, what they heard, and how they made their marks on the landscape, not least in acts of graffiti within the parish church. For MacKinnon, ‘The physical landscape is a dynamic space comprising topographical features and buildings that society and culture invest with meaning. It is a medium through which society negotiates ideas of gender, race, religion and social relations, as well as understandings of private, communal and public spaces’ (p. 14). All too often, these early modern understandings of the landscape are lost to historians. A person who had committed suicide might be buried outside of consecrated ground, and to contemporaries, that location would have held some meaning, but the historians of today are unlikely to be able to trace either that location or precisely what it meant to the
deceased’s family, friends and neighbours (ch. 14). Similarly, other sites within Earls Colne, such the ruined Colne Priory (partly converted since its dissolution into the residence of the manorial Harlakenden family), or rituals such as the collecting of the harvest, could provoke collective memories of an earlier, Catholic past (p. 63).

One of the main strengths of this book is MacKinnon’s use of perhaps unconventional sources to uncover new things about the past. In her reconstruction of the interior space of Earls Colne’s parish church, she combines the 19th-century records of the Incorporated Church Building Society held at the Lambeth Palace Library with various church court and visitation records to offer a reconstruction of the church interior plan between circa 1590 and 1835 (fig. 7.1). She also transcribes and analyses the surviving early modern monuments (i.e. pre-1750) in the church and churchyard as an addition to the existing Earls Colne corpus available to scholars (chs. 12-13). The most successful of these reconstructions uses the Ship Money return of 1637, where MacKinnon investigates why the third highest rated individual listed in the Earls Colne return, a widow named Grace Warford, does not feature within the manor court records. MacKinnon’s conclusion is that Grace and her late husband William (died 1634) had built-up their landholdings through sub-letting lands, and thus their landholdings were not formally recorded within the manorial records. MacKinnon thus points out that manorial records do not necessarily give a complete picture of the landscape of a manor, and that other sources, such as those produced by the church or by the state, can provide perspectives which flesh out the picture (ch. 8).

Whilst MacKinnon’s use of unconventional sources is very suggestive as to the potential of such evidence, some caution should be voiced, as she perhaps reads too much into these. In her analysis of the name ‘James Potter’ with the date ‘Septemr the 2 1694’ graffitied into the early 17th-century monument to two daughters of the Harlakenden family, MacKinnon assumes that it was Potter who had indeed carved his name into the monument, and interpreted it in terms of a ‘demand to be heard’, strikingly carved into a monument to the local manorial family (ch. 15). However, earlier in the book, MacKinnon had briefly raised the possibility that this piece of graffiti was an attempt at ‘an informal memorial’ to a deceased James Potter (p. 168), but this possibility is not even mentioned in the chapter about graffiti, with MacKinnon instead interpreting the graffiti as being symbolic of ‘two female children... usurped by young men’ (p. 227). There are also occasions where MacKinnon, in questioning the sources, does not necessarily follow the most revealing line of enquiry. In the chapter about memorial commemoration, MacKinnon discusses the monument to John Eldred (died 1717), a member of the family who had (via descent via the female line) succeeded the Harlakendens as the manorial family. This monument recalls various members of the Eldred family, and MacKinnon discusses their various traits of being a ‘mournful Relict’, or having ‘Extensive knowledge in the law’ (p. 174). However, I did wonder if something could have been said about the monument’s commemoration of John Eldred’s ‘Zealous Opposition to Popery and Arbitrary Government having a voice in the Convention Parliament’ (transcription, p. 175). Surely there was something to be said here about how the Eldred family (or perhaps even John Eldred himself) wanted to be remembered within the parish, as being one of the finite number of men who had played a role in defending protestant liberties by inviting William and Mary to assume the monarchy in 1689, or even the significance of the commemoration inside the parish church of Eldred’s ‘steady attachment to Religion and Virtue’ when he himself was a religious dissenter?(2)

In assessing this book as a whole, it is worth quoting what is effectively MacKinnon’s manifesto for the work:

(2)
This is not a book that continues in the tradition of land-family bond, individualism, or the discipline-specific studies of cartography, geography, social, economic, thematic, or comparative history. I have chosen to do something different, which moves the research trajectory into new and different areas for amateurs, undergraduates, postgraduates and academics who want to write about this or any other of the roughly 9,000 parishes in England in different ways (pp. 2-3).

The manifesto is certainly bold, but in pursuing something ‘new and different’, MacKinnon avoids consideration of the main concepts through which historians have come to know Earls Colne, such as ‘puritanism’ (as in the work of Robert von Friedeburg) or ‘individualism’ (as outlined by Macfarlane, and latterly re-investigated by Henry French and Richard Hoyle).(3) Surely though, such factors (in their early modern manifestations) would have impacted on how people perceived their local landscapes? A prime example is the mother of a child born outside of marriage, who presumably felt compelled by the puritan religious culture of this part of Essex to name her daughter ‘Repentance’ (the child’s burial in 1625 is noted on p. 201). Even the buying, selling, and sub-letting of land, for ‘individualist’ reasons or otherwise, would have meant that Earls Colne’s physical and human landscapes were always in some form of transition.

MacKinnon’s pursuit of her enquiries without reference to such factors (even if she was indeed to utilise them in ‘new’ ways or read them ‘against the grain’) does create an impression that a broader interpretive framework is missing, and I think that this slightly undermines MacKinnon’s attempt to uncover how Earls Colne’s early modern inhabitants would have perceived their locality.

Indeed, despite MacKinnon’s emphasis on the newness of her approach, my reaction is that in various ways, her approach sometimes reinforces the idealised early modern hierarchy which she seeks to get beneath. The ninth chapter considers the petition against the Book of Common Prayer submitted from Earls Colne to the House of Commons in January 1642. In exploring the religio-political background to this petition, MacKinnon does not once use the word ‘puritan’ or ‘puritanism’, and thus the petition is discussed without reference to its primary motivation. The subscriptions to the petition consists of four columns of signatures, headed by the manorial lord, Richard Harlakenden, the vicar, Ralph Josselin, followed by some of the leading (male) parishioners. MacKinnon speculates that the placing of the signatures correspond to the likely seating plan of the four columns of pews inside Earls Colne church’s nave and south aisle, noting that ‘While no seating plan survives for Earls Colne with which to compare this petition, other parishes for both petitions and early modern seating plans survive should be examined, to determine if the distribution for those parish seatings could be revealed’ (p. 131). MacKinnon, though, does not present any such comparisons with the pew plans of other churches. Such comparative work may have been useful; for example, Judith Maltby’s research on the Cheshire parish of Frodsham (for which survives two mass-subscription petitions dating from 1641, churchwardens’ accounts, and enough sources to allow for a reconstruction of the church’s pew plan in 1637) found that the ‘leading parishioners’ and churchwardens held pews distributed throughout the church building, and not solely at the east end of the nave as MacKinnon has suggested.(4) MacKinnon’s assertion that this was the case perhaps misinterprets some of the likely dynamics of worship within Earls Colne church, which had a very peculiar floor plan whereby the south aisle was situated towards the western half of the nave, with the pulpit situated at the intersection of the nave and the eastern end of the south aisle (see fig. 7.1). Whilst those sat at the east end of the nave may have had a good view of the proceedings when the communion was periodically consecrated in the chancel, on most Sundays, those sat in the midst of the nave would have had the best view of the usual focus for proceedings, the pulpit. In other words, being sat at the east end of the nave was not necessarily to be sat in the ‘best’ pews, and indeed, there were a variety of reasons not to be sat in pews at the east end of the nave even if one had risen to high status, not least emotional connections to a family’s historic pew or burial place. At Myddle in Shropshire in 1701, where the pulpit was situated more conventionally at the east end of the nave, before the chancel, Richard Gough’s leading parishioners were (as at Frodsham) seated throughout the nave.(5) Indeed, it is problematic to assume that there is an innate link between social status and the ‘best’ pews, for as Margaret Spufford demonstrated in Cambridgeshire, ‘the immediate members of a family could, and did, sprawl right across the economic divisions within a village’, and it is perhaps the case that
Earls Colne’s church’s pew layout was not as socially ordered as MacKinnon suggests.(6)

These examples raise questions about some of MacKinnon’s other assertions about the Earls Colne petition, such as that the ‘landless’ were ‘excluded’ from signing the petition (though not an exact comparison, Maltby found that nine of the 124 signatories of the December 1641 petition from Wilmslow were in receipt of poor relief), or that women were not allowed to subscribe to such petitions (though female signatures were indeed rare, examples are nonetheless observed within the Cheshire petitions of 1641).(7) In the introduction to this book, MacKinnon proclaims her intention to examine ‘the women, men and children’ that inhabited the Earls Colne landscape, but too often, MacKinnon does not (for me anyway) uncover what was really going on in the lives of the people who might be excluded from more conventional parish histories. After an account (recalled from Ralph Josselin’s diary) of two male youths causing a commotion in Earls Colne church in 1656 when they occupied what Josselin described as ‘the maids seate’, causing William Harlakenden to order that the youths be detained in ‘the cage’, MacKinnon ‘wonders... if the person creating the disturbance had been a householder rather than a youth, whether Harlakenden would have initiated a similar course of action’ (pp. 96-7). I suspect that there was more scope for investigation here, and rather than asking if they would have been treated different if they were householders, MacKinnon could have asked the more important question about why the two youths were rebelling in the first place?

Alexandra Walsham has highlighted the increased stress in English protestant culture upon the fifth commandment (‘Honour thy father and thy mother’), but interestingly, Robert von Friedeburg has drawn attention to the pattern that in the century before the outbreak of civil war in 1642, the majority of those accused of moral or sexual misdemeanours in Earls Colne were aged in their teens or early twenties.(8) One wonders if there was more lying behind the actions of the two male youths in 1656 (and indeed, Harlakenden’s reaction) than MacKinnon’s account reveals. Indeed, MacKinnon does have a tendency to put the Harlakenden family upon something of a pedestal at the head of the hierarchy of the village, owning and residing within Colne Priory (second only to the parish church in terms of its coverage by MacKinnon as a physical landmark within the parish), but given French and Hoyle’s depiction of the Harlakendens as being zealous pursuers of rents who ‘did not have the means to buy up copyhold lands for themselves except in a very small way’, one wonders if the Harlakendens’ position within the parish was maybe more precarious than MacKinnon gives credit, and would explain developments such as von Friedeburg’s Harlakenden-sponsored ‘reformation of manners’ within the parish, and also the Harlakendens’ desire (as is well explored by MacKinnon) to make their physical mark upon their parish church and the wider locality.(9) Given all of these factors, it would perhaps not be surprising if there were underlying tensions behind the misbehaviour of the two youths in 1656. All of this, though, reiterates my earlier point in that a deeper regard for the existing literature about the parish could have led MacKinnon towards some much more convincing conclusions than are sometimes presented within this book.

I would particularly like to place a brief focus upon the penultimate chapter of the book, entitled ‘The Quaker’s Landscape’. MacKinnon perceptively observes that the Quakers offered new interpretations of the Earls Colne landscape, not least by their refusal to participate in the worship of the parish church, and that their faith prompted the establishment of print and personal networks which stretched far beyond the parish’s boundaries (ch. 19). There are some problems, though, with MacKinnon’s chronology in this chapter.

MacKinnon sees Ralph Josselin’s alarm at some members of his congregation refusing to remove their hats during a service in June 1650 as evidence of ‘the growing activities of Quakers within the village’, and the future Quaker Robert Abbott’s refusal to pay his tithes to Richard Harlakenden (prosecuted in 1652) is similarly interpreted (pp. 280, 282). However, George Fox’s famous preaching tour of north-western England, which is seen as being crucial to the formation of early Quakerism, did not commence until the summer of 1652, and James Parnel is usually attributed as being the first person to bring the Quaker message to Essex in 1655.(10) As was the case at some places in Lancashire, what was probably observed at Earls Colne in the early 1650s was an existing disillusionment with parochial religion which early Quakerism was able to successfully capitalise upon.(11)

To conclude, MacKinnon’s book contains much of interest, and her case studies reveal some fascinating characters which provide a glimpse of society within early modern Earls Colne. I, though, would have liked
to have seen more of an over-arching framework to this book, as though her case studies are revealing, they flounder somewhat in the absence of such a framework. In the epilogue, MacKinnon claims that ‘Historians venture into the foreign place of the past often from the safety of pre-existing debates’ (p. 290), and whilst I appreciate her point, for this reader at least, this book goes too far in the opposite direction, so that her arguments can sometimes feel isolated from debates within which could have been made very useful and relevant observations. MacKinnon notes that ‘this will not be a book for every reader’ (p. 4), and that was perhaps the case for me. I did, though, value MacKinnon’s attempt to consciously do something ‘new and different’, and I hope that this and other works will encourage other scholars to visit the rich treasure trove of evidence, both archival and material, which can point towards the recovery of the fascinating world of early modern England’s rural landscapes.

Notes

7. Maltby, Prayer Book and People, pp. 204 (fn. 86), 211, appendix 3.10. Back to (7)

The author thanks James Mawdesley for his thoughtful review covering some aspects of the book, and does not wish to comment further.

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