

The London Chronicles of the Fifteenth Century. A revolution in English writing, with an annotated edition of Bradford, West Yorkshire Archives MS 32D86/42

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I find this an extremely difficult book to review fairly. McLaren has an enormous and infectious enthusiasm for her texts. And her work is important; she takes the discussion of a widespread form of historical writing well beyond the point at which it was left by a fine scholar, C. L. Kingsford. In this volume, McLaren provides a basic framework for the discussion of London chronicles, as well as a significant, hitherto unpublished new text. But whatever these contributions, the book is far from helpful on conceptualising or contextualising its subject, and it leaves a great deal of the work it could well have been doing for others to fill in.

McLaren's significant basic contribution appears in Chapter 3 (pp. 98-149), an analysis of the transmitted texts of the London chronicles and their relationships. This represents a largely unrevised reprinting of her 'The textual transmission of the London Chronicles', *English Manuscript Studies*, 3 (1992), 38-72. One would have hoped that, in a full volume, McLaren would provide the exact evidence underlying her earlier publication in some efficient form. (The summary at pp. 133-39 and Appendix III, pp. 241-60, are potentially very important but need more coherent, perhaps tabular, presentation.) It remains very difficult to understand how McLaren judges textual relationships (see pp. 110, 114: the presence/absence of entries? Verbal similarities?), and I find her sense of how texts were generally promulgated in the fifteenth century rather more hazy than it should have been (cf. p. 98 n. 2, McLaren's only brush with critical thinking about the quirks of textual transmission).

Both this discussion and the welcome presentation of the chronicle in the Bradford MS, are handicapped by McLaren's inexperience as a manuscript scholar. While her reasons for not expanding common abbreviations might be justifiable, the logic for this decision smacks of a naive belief that the form of writing allows direct contact with some medieval presence ('it is important that we read what a chronicler wrote and not what a more recent scholar thinks they wrote', p. 11). But the volume is littered with abundant evidence that McLaren cannot read her texts: for example, such an illustrative sample as page 157, s.a. 1232 'adintorin' for *adiutorium*; p. 161, s.a. 1308 'renemre' for *reuenire*; p. 163, s.a. 1324 [sic], 'ratifica int' (so spaced) for *ratificauit*. Nor is simple Middle English immune: for example, p. 182, s.a. 1403 'gr^{at}' for quarter; p. 191, s.a. 1415 'pression' for procession. In such a context, one suspects McLaren's passing comments about the scribe's senseless Latin may reflect her transcriptions as much as his abilities.

And most unfortunately, given her great love for these texts, someone else will need to consider what McLaren's data mean. There are general difficulties about contextualising the production of these books, and I don't find McLaren's general argument about their genesis especially persuasive. In the most expansive statement (pp. 52-94 *passim*), McLaren argues that the Chronicles provide the 'experiential' record of a society 'visual' or 'oral'. The text is thus liminal, a reflection of a mercantile sensibility taking on the power provided by writing from other, implicitly clerical (?) institutions. But surely sophisticated mercantile literacy and concomitant historical interests, although not necessarily in vernacular English, are a long-lived London phenomenon, going back at least to Arnold FitzThedmar in the reign of Henry III.

In some way, McLaren's argument can only be sustained because the book is too narrowly conceived. There needs to be here a stronger engagement with a range of medieval historical writing, most especially with the prose *Brut*. This text certainly pre-existed the Chronicles (in Anglo-Norman, a language generally 'London legible', by more than a century); indeed, the *Brut* may have provided a model for these texts, as a local supplement to vernacular national history. But in any event, London Chronicles are very far from 'the first historical accounts in the vernacular to be written by lay-people', as McLaren is prone to claim. And this implies that their creation always occurred within the realm of the literate and far from an oral/written divide.

As a way of suggesting what is at stake here that McLaren misses, I offer a few comments on the one of these manuscripts I know well, Oxford, St John's College, MS 57.⁽¹⁾ This will supplement McLaren's single paragraph discussion (p. 100) and indicate a variety of important historical issues germane to future studies:

(a) The date of the book (not entirely separable from certain issues below): The customary assumption that St John's 57 must be the earliest manuscript because its *Chronicle* ends in 1431-2 is certainly wrong. The book is on two paper stocks; although the scribal hand is continuous throughout, I think there is no likelihood that Stock A (fols 1-137) predates 1441, and stock B (fols 138-240, including the *Chronicle*) most resembles papers of later 1450s.

(b) The contents (an area in which McLaren is always skimpy): The two stocks distinguish separately produced portions of the book. A/part 1 contains the originally Yorkshire, but later ubiquitous, *Prick of Conscience*; B/part 2, the *Chronicle* plus Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls* plus Henry V's ordinances for the Agincourt campaign (Sir Nicholas Harris, ed., *History of the Battle of Agincourt* [Johnson and Co.; London, 1832; repr. Frederick Muller; London, 1970], Appendix, pp. 31-44). It is important to see the junction of variously sophisticated literary texts and historical ones: the Agincourt materials are of a piece with the *Chronicle* in their general interests, but equally, the account of Henry VI's coronation includes the verse 'scriptures' explaining the 'sotiltes' there enacted (*Index of Middle English Verse*, 1929). These have presumably been intruded from elsewhere, in part because of their literary content.

(c) The scribe: Professor Linne Mooney's 'list of scribes appearing in more than one manuscript' shows this writer to have been a prolific individual. He also copied, whole or part, another seven books, all customarily dated c. 1460 or so: Alnwick Castle, Duke of Northumberland, MS 455 (Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales* with the unique Chaucerian imitation, 'The Tale of Beryn', hence his cognomen, 'the Beryn scribe'); Cambridge University Library, MS Kk.i.3, part 10 (Lydgate, *Life of our Lady*); and five *Brut* chronicles, all of them the

same 'abbreviated version to 1419' (see Lister M. Matheson, *The Prose Brut: The Development of a Middle English Chronicle* [Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies; Tempe AZ, 1998], esp. pp. 215-28; and the summary listing, p. 73) – University of Michigan, MS 225; BL, MSS Harley 1337 and Harley 6251; Bodl., MSS Hatton 50 and Tanner 11 (another scribe in this volume may sign p. 212 as 'William Cardynall'). And Mooney thinks him perhaps also responsible for two other copies of this *Brut*-recension: BL, MS Stowe 71; and Bodl., MS Rawlinson B.190. Further, Matheson suggests adding to the count three further copies of the same recension: Glasgow UL, MS Hunterian 443 and National Library of Wales, MS Peniarth 396D; perhaps Oxford, Jesus College, MS 5 (p. 228).

(d) The scribe's language: The St John's manuscript itself has long been seen as representative of Essex English (see Robert E. Lewis and Angus McIntosh, *A Descriptive Guide to the Manuscripts of the Prick of Conscience*, Medium AEvum Monographs n.s. 12 [Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1982], pp. 117-8). Connecting the hand with the Northumberland *Canterbury Tales* would place it in a precisely analysed context; see Angus McIntosh, M. L. Samuels, et al., *A Linguistic Atlas of Late Mediaeval English* (4 vols; Aberdeen University Press; Aberdeen, 1986), LP 6040, from the Basildon area.

All these matters raise issues germane to London history generally and to McLaren's study in particular. First, the scribe's texts show him to have been an innovative, not passive, copyist who 'tailored' his works. He not only adds a series of alternative readings as an appendix to his *Prick*, but makes efforts to 'complete' his Chaucers (adding 'Beryn' to *The Canterbury Tales* and, as he did with his *London Chronicle*, an intercalated lyric to 'The Parliament'). In the *Brut*, he transmits a deliberately abbreviated version (see Matheson above for details). If he undertook this activity elsewhere, this raises the question of whether even his (surely professional) *Chronicle* has not undergone editorial treatment for a patron's use or at his/her instructions. Such a perception might throw McLaren's analysis of textual relations (which often presupposes that only homemade books are tailored) into some disarray. It raises the old spectre of Kingsford's 'master chronicle' – that all the London chronicles might have had a basic centre subjected to various *ad lib* reproduction on demand, regardless of the formality of their production.

The profusion of 'Beryn-scribe' MSS is striking, as is the fact that three of the certain examples (Michigan, Hatton, and Tanner) involve shared copying. It is at least possible (if not probable) that this is not A Scribe's Hand but a house style, shared by a group of related copyists. Matheson's identification of the work as perhaps the earliest example of 'primitive mass production' (p. 228) is well taken. And the MSS would then provide important early evidence (but no earlier than c. 1460) for the movement to 'workshop' or 'stationers' production in English book culture. The books are then central to a major shift in English publication history which McLaren raises fitfully. But serious difficulties remain in defining the term 'workshop' and in conceptualising the mechanisms at issue.[\(2\)](#)

Finally, the scribe raises issues concerned with a topic McLaren broaches, vernacularity itself, here the history of London English; for the scribe was certainly a London copyist, although his language remains apparently provincial. 'The Beryn scribe' (like several other individuals with similar language, most notoriously a scribe who wrote large tracts of the *Liber albus*, as well as three literary manuscripts) offers evidence for overturning longheld views of the development of London English (notably those of M. L. Samuels). These particularly concern the development of a local dialect distinct from the language of Essex, on the evidence of these manuscripts not yet at all a desideratum c. 1460 (versus Samuels's claim that this change had occurred c. 1380).

Thus, McLaren's study clears away a great deal of underbrush and allows scholars to see a variety of important issues she finds it difficult to take up in her volume.

Notes

1. *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Western Medieval Manuscripts of St John's College, Oxford* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2002), pp. 75-7. [Back to \(1\)](#)

2. See most recently Andrew Taylor, 'Manual to miscellany: stages in the copying of vernacular literature in England', *Yearbook of English Studies*, 33 (2003), 1-17, an article handicapped by a failure to recognise that copying and artistic decoration always, even after 1500, involved separate decisions, negotiations, and locales. [Back to \(2\)](#)

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