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The whirlpool of misadventures: letters of Robert Paston, First Earl of Yarmouth, 1663–1679

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are developing or even have developed their own preservation and access strategies that transcend institutional arrangements. The astrophysics community, which depends on international initiatives such as the Hubble space telescope for data, is a good example.

More challenging is where projects engage the public directly. The Sloan Digital Sky Survey (SDSS) at John Hopkins University discovered that despite the fact that there are only 10,000 professional astronomers in the world, there are almost a million users for the 'cosmic genome project' at the university, such is the enthusiasm of the citizen scientist. In many projects (p. 117), including one that I am involved with about the professions in the Victorian period (see www.victorianprofessions.ox.ac.uk), the expectation is that the citizen will contribute directly. This is fashionably called crowd sourcing, but in fact represents a return to the origins of 'scientific' research in the mid-nineteenth century. Building such sites with a high level of citizen participation is both costly and time consuming. I bear the scars. Crowd sourcing addresses directly the impact agenda, just as much a feature of government policy as RDM, but it comes at a price and almost certainly with the expectation from the citizen that the data will enjoy the permanence of a book on a library shelf. Moreover, the citizen seems to expect such sites to be dynamic and continue to develop long after the research project has been completed. This represents an unintended consequence not explored here, and oddly there is no reference to crowd sourcing or the well-known Zooniverse project at Oxford.

To return to where I began in this review, the unknown assumption behind RDM is access and use. There are no recommendations for monitoring use. Although we are told that SDSS has almost a million registered users, there is no detail of how much or how often they interact with the site. Such data are vital both in testing the value of the whole RDM enterprise and in measuring impact.

The lesson for the archival world from this collection of essays is mix it or, as in so much else, run the risk of being marginalized in a space where there is much for the archival community to offer, particularly in terms of appraisal, sensitivity, IPR and managing the risks associated with both retention and access in terms of contingent liability. We need to learn to enter into a meaningful dialogue with the computing science community, particularly the information retrieval specialists who already use concepts that look remarkably like diplomatic, and with anthropologists and ethnographers who have a lively interest in the way appraisal shapes evidence and how the digital is changing long-established working practices. I am writing this review travelling through Slovakia where the evidence of failure in derelict factories is all too evident; it is essential that glasnost does not have similar consequences for the archival profession.

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The whirlpool of misadventures: letters of Robert Paston, First Earl of Yarmouth, 1663–1679, edited by Jean Agnew, Norwich, Norfolk Record Society, 2012 (Volume LXXVI), 415 pp., £18.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-9556357-5-5

In 1735, the Norfolk antiquary Francis Blomefield paid a fateful visit to the muniment room at Oxnead, the family seat of the Paston earls of Yarmouth. What he found there is

well known to all medievalists: 'innumerable letters of good consequence in history', sources of unparalleled value for the study of fifteenth-century gentry life and for medieval studies generally. Much scholarly labour has subsequently been bestowed upon those documents, which are now recognizable to all by the name of 'The Paston Letters'. But the papers of the fifteenth-century family, ancestors of the earls of Yarmouth of Blomefield's time, were not the only Paston Letters which the antiquary unearthed at Oxnead: substantial correspondence and papers of Robert Paston, first earl of Yarmouth (1631–1683), also survived there, and subsequently passed through various hands to Norfolk Record Office and the British Library. With the publication of this edition by Jean Agnew, comprising some 300 letters from the Norfolk Record Office collection, supplemented by a select few of the several hundred more from the British Library, these lesser-known documents should now achieve their due recognition.

The letters in this volume are billed as 'letters of Robert Paston', though in fact not all of them (only most) were written by or to him. While the diversity of voices represented in this collection is part of its fascination, Robert is the central figure. Robert's father, Sir William Paston, was the wealthiest royalist in Norfolk and suffered accordingly during the Civil War and Commonwealth. Robert, also a loyal supporter of the monarchy, sent money to King Charles II in exile. At his father's death in 1663 Robert inherited considerable debts and a declining estate, but after the Restoration he had good reason to look forward to a bright future in which his loyalty would be rewarded. An MP in the Cavalier Parliament, he proposed a bill in 1665 granting rights of lading and unlading to Southtown, part of his own estates, which he hoped would allow it to rival the port of Great Yarmouth. The bill passed with court backing, and Paston's letters to his wife Rebecca express his delight in the favour shown to him by the King, who also granted him potentially lucrative farms of customs on various commodities. Paston expected these measures, together with the alchemical research which he undertook with the assistance of Thomas Henshaw, to secure his fortunes – an expectation which did not bear fruit.

Despite royal favour, culminating in a peerage in 1673, and a network of wealthy friends, the Pastons' debt problems worsened. The lord lieutenancy of Norfolk, an expensive and gruelling task for a man in poor health, proved that rank and privilege could be something of a poisoned chalice. In retrospect, by the time of Robert's creation as earl of Yarmouth, the decline of the family's fortunes was already terminal. As his duty weighed ever more heavily on him while the goal of financial security seemed ever more distant, Paston complained to his wife of a 'whirlpool of misadventures'. The whirlpool proved inescapable, but it is not really the case that the Pastons were unfortunate; instead, their problem was that they were forever spending more money than they earned, in the anticipation of future rewards which never quite amounted to what they hoped for.

Letters are the most personal of historical documents. Preserving as they do the private affections and animosities, the quotidian news and gossip, which gave life its ordinary texture, they provide the most intimate insight into the real world of history. The correspondence of Robert Paston is wonderfully full of colour and interest, especially the letters from the alchemist Thomas Henshaw to his patron. In July 1670 he wrote from London that

there were lately severall bullets to the number of forty shot into the King's gallery and garden, the politicks judged there was treason intended . . . but at last it is found to bee an ordinary fellow that not farre keeps tame pidgeons which it seems his neighbours cats are very

lickorish of, he to bee revenged watches to kill all cats that come over the tiles with his stoneboy [a kind of catapult] and som of his shot have reached into Whitehall.

The volume as a whole is full of such gems: cats, ghosts and a grampus beached on the shore at Greenwich which families flocked to see, interspersed amongst serious news of county and state business.

There is a great deal of serious business in the volume; Paston's correspondence contains much that pertains to parliamentary affairs, elections, religious controversy and war, and seventeenth-century scholars will find this book an accessible and detailed view of such matters 'from the inside'. But Robert Paston the husband and father is just as prominent in the documents as Robert Paston the man of affairs. He emerges from this volume as a thoroughly engaging personality, both in his tender remembrances to his children and in the affection for his wife Rebecca, his 'dearest hart & sowle', which is constantly palpable throughout the letters he wrote her discussing cooks, gardeners, valentines for their eldest daughter and the company he was keeping in London ('the court ladies are verie indifferent as to beautie methinks', he told her). It is easy to see why his missives were so highly prized by his niece Alice Clayton, whose father wrote to Paston that she was 'exceedingly delighted at her letters... I assure you she takes herselfe to be somebody now & lockes up her letters in her cabinet with great care'. Those epistles are just some of the letters referred to in the correspondence which have not survived to be published, and their absence can only be regretted. It is a mark of this volume's success that the reader wishes it could have been several volumes.

Dr Agnew has dealt admirably with the challenges posed by documents which were in some cases written in cipher and include copious alchemical jargon amongst various other difficulties. The first of two appendices is a short explanation of the editor's practice regarding the ciphers. Where a cipher-key was not available, essentially Dr Agnew has relied on experiment by trial and error to come up with reasonably certain identifications of individuals referred to in code; but not infrequently this has been impossible, as she explains. A second appendix is a list of Robert Paston's family members: this, one feels, would work better as a diagrammatic family tree, the one thing this volume lacks. Otherwise, the clarity of the critical apparatus leaves nothing to be desired, and the book is comprehensively indexed. Dr Agnew's introduction establishes the context of the primary materials thoroughly and concisely, enabling readers to assess the fluctuations of the Paston family's fortunes from a historian's dispassionate perspective before experiencing them from the perspective of the protagonists.

Today, when 'antiquarianism' is a distinctly dirty word in academia and anything that savours of it is frowned upon, it is especially pleasing that a collection of personal papers of such wide and miscellaneous interest can receive so thorough and scrupulous an edition. This volume should be well received by all those interested in Norfolk history or the seventeenth century in general, specialists and non-specialists alike.

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