

Literacy and Libraries in Sixteenth Century England

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Originally Submitted to LI 839XJ History of Libraries

An Essay for *LHRT News and Notes*

## **Literacy and Libraries in Sixteenth Century England**

The library is an important part of the community. People visit the library for a variety of reasons – to check out materials like books and movies. Moms bring their tots to story time to partake of a book and activities that relate to the book. Teens come and hang out with their friends. It wasn't always like that. In sixteenth century England, libraries were not common and the literacy rate was low. In this paper, it is my intention to explore literacy and the libraries in sixteenth century England. For the purposes of this paper, “literacy” is defined as a person’s ability to read and write and “libraries” are generally defined as institutions, whether private or public, where literary resources like books, maps, scientific papers and historical records, are purposely collected and stored for protection and use. This paper will place the heaviest weight on studying literacy in sixteenth century England, and then spend some time describing the types of libraries that were prevalent in the sixteenth century.

## **Literacy in Sixteenth Century England**

Men of the nobility began their education at a very young age. Most were being groomed to take over the family interests when the patriarch chose to pass it on. Girls were given a “female education” geared toward running their own household, needlework, deportment, music and dancing. It was the parent’s hope that their daughters would make an advantageous match in the marriage market to bring prestige to the family. Lower class children were trained in their parent’s chosen profession whether it be sharecropping, glove making or making ladies’ hats. According to Miriam Balmuth (1988) in her article, *Female Education in 16<sup>th</sup> & 17<sup>th</sup> Century England*, “... at least some members of all classes of society were taught to read” (17).

There were three primary influences that shaped the literacy landscape in the sixteenth century. These events are Humanism, the Protestant Reformation and the “Elizabethan Phenomenon.”

### **The Rise of Humanism**

Who were these Humanists? There were several prominent Humanists of note. Balmuth writes that there were several prominent members such as Leonardo Bruni of Italy (c.1370-1444), and Juan Luis Vives of Spain (1492-1540) (p.18). I will talk about Vives’s importance later on. There were some important Humanists in England as well. Sir Thomas More (1478-1535), Desiderius Erasmus of Holland (1467-1536), Sir Thomas Elyot (1490-1546) and last of all Roger Ascham (1515-1568) (p.18). Three milestone events in the sixteenth century helped shape literacy and the lack of literacy.

The rise of humanism helped literacy and education for females. Humanists supported “liberalizing of thought and attitude,” according to Miriam Balmuth (1988) in her article, *Female Education in 16th and 17th Century England*. The humanists also stressed the importance of an education in the Greek and Latin classics (p. 18). The most important thing of all, was that the humanists strongly advocated that the Word of God be written in a language that ordinary people could understand, instead of exclusively in Latin (p. 18). The humanists also advised that it would be a good idea for females to be educated. Let’s look closer into humanism first.

Sir Thomas More did quite a bit to advance education for upper-class women in the sixteenth century. He can be held accountable for adding subjects such as “classical literature, philosophy, mathematics, astronomy, physics, logic and rhetoric” to the education of females (p.

18). More schooled his three daughters in this manner and was held up as a role model for others who likewise wanted to give their daughters a good education (p.18).

More, Vives and Ascham were an important part of the Humanist Movement, especially in advocating an education for females. As mentioned above, More saw to it that his three daughters were well educated, but he was not the only one to do so. Catherine of Aragon, was acquainted with Sir Thomas More and other noted humanists of the time. Catherine asked Juan Luis Vives to travel to the English court from the Spanish court of her parents, Isabella and Ferdinand. Catherine put him in charge of her daughter's (Mary Tudor) education. Vives wrote a narrative on education, *The Instruction of a Christian Woman* (1523), which he dedicated to Catherine (p. 18).

Roger Ascham was also a noted humanist and a Cambridge scholar, but he was also important because he was a part of Elizabeth Tudor's education. Alison Weir writes in her book, *The Life of Elizabeth I* (2008), that Henry Tudor may not have paid a whole lot of attention to his daughter, Elizabeth, but he did see to it that she had the education of a good Christian prince (p.13). Roger Ascham was one of Elizabeth's tutors. He was amazed by her impressive intelligence and her aptitude for learning languages saying that "he never had never known a woman with a quicker apprehension or a more retentive memory" (p. 14). Together Elizabeth and Ascham read works such as Cicero, Livy, Sophocles, and Isocrates in line with a humanist education (p.27). Elizabeth also read the Greek Testament, along with Cyprian and Melancthon asserts Christopher Hibbert in *The Virgin Queen: A Personal History of Elizabeth I* (2010, p. 27). The humanists had an effect on the monarchy of England. The Humanist movement was not the only thing to change literacy and education.

## The Protestant Reformation

The Protestant Reformation had its effect on literacy and education as well. The Protestant Reformation started in Germany with Martin Luther in 1517. He decided he had enough of Rome and the dominion of the Catholic Church (Balmuth, p. 18). In the *Norton Anthology of English Literature: The 16<sup>th</sup> Century: Topic 3: Overview* (2010-2015), it says, “In 1517, drawing upon long-standing currents of dissent, Martin Luther, an Augustinian monk and professor of Theology at the University of Wittenberg in Germany, challenged the authority of the Pope and attacked several key doctrines of the Catholic Church.” Luther’s outspokenness against the Catholic Church provided the inspiration for the foundation of the Protestant denomination (p. 18). Luther believed in using the everyday language of the people instead of using Latin (p. 18). John S. Pendergast (2006) asserts in his book, *Religion, Allegory, and Literacy in Early Modern England, 1560-1640* (2006), “Although there are no corresponding figures for the English Reformation ... the debates began by Luther were propagated via printed word in England. Further, Luther’s translation of the Bible into vernacular further emphasized the material/printed nature of spiritual truths” (p. 3). The use of the everyday language of the common man meant that if people could read, they would be able to read the Scriptures at home to supplement their church attendance (Cressy, 1980, p. 3). The intention was that the Scriptures be accessible to anyone that had the ability to read the common language and not just the clergy and elite intellectuals that could comprehend Latin (p. 18).

Luther was not adverse to female education, in fact he advocated for it. Not everyone agreed with Luther’s stance on female education. John Knox, the Scottish reformist did not think that females should be educated. Knox was the responsible for establishing the Scottish Presbyterian denomination (p. 18). He was quite outspoken on the subject of education for

women. In a treatise he wrote called *The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women*, he unequivocally railed against it (p. 18).

The Protestant Reformation moved outside of Germany and made it to England, where Henry VIII also decided he had enough of Rome and the Catholic Church, but broke from the church for an entirely different reason (p. 18). Henry had been trying to obtain a divorce from Catherine of Aragon so he could marry Anne Boleyn. Pope Clement VII, in fear of Catherine's powerful nephew, the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, would not grant Henry the divorce that he desired (Weir, 2008, p. 12). Henry broke from the Catholic Church and created the Church of England. Henry put himself as the head of the church (p. 12). In consequence, Clement VII had him excommunicated from the Catholic Church as punishment for putting Catherine aside without "a papal divorce," writes Balmuth (p 18). Henry in return, seized all the property of the Catholic Church and dissolved all of the monasteries and convents in England and dispersed their contents. That meant that all of the schools housed in the convents and monasteries were closed.

Francis Wormald and C. E. Wright write in their book, *The English Library before 1700, Studies in Its History*, the steps that Henry VIII took to dissolve all of the religious houses in England:

The royal commissioner appointed to visit the monasteries began their work in July of 1535. The legal instruments necessary to enable action to be taken followed quickly in 1536, first by the Act for the Court of Augmentation (27 Henry VIII, c. 27) whereby the machinery necessary for handling the monastic properties was established and, secondly by the Act of Dissolution of the Lesser Monasteries (27 Henry VIII, c. 28) (p.149).

This dissolution of the monasteries and the convents also effected the library collections, which I will address later on in this paper.

In replacement of the schools lost to Henry's dissolution of convents and monasteries, there sprang up a number of privately funded schools. The schools were mostly funded by the self-made merchant class says Balmuth, and staffed with male intellectual pedagogues instead of the less knowledgeable ecclesiastics (p.18). Education of children was not completely cut off with the dissolution of the religious houses.

### **The Elizabethan Phenomenon**

After the reigns of Henry VIII, Edward VI and Mary Tudor, Elizabeth Tudor was crowned and took over the leadership of the country. Her coronation was a boon for education, for two reasons, first, because Queen Elizabeth I was a very well educated woman, and, second, one of the most important educators of the time came to the forefront, Richard Mulcaster.

Richard Mulcaster was a reformer and one of the many scholarly school masters that taught school in the plethora of privately endowed schools that sprang up after Henry VIII dissolved all of the convent and monastery schools (p. 19). He had a profound effect on education in that he pushed the elementary curriculum for reading and spelling (p.19). "Mulcaster's concern was that English orthography was so irregular that it demanded the urgent attention of all who were engaged in teaching reading," interjects Cressy (1980, p. 22). He goes on to say that a lot of the elementary curriculum was put together with its usefulness in composition as well as reading (p. 22). Mulcaster thought that working on spelling while learning to read would be effective later on when acquiring the skill of writing because the child would already have learned to spell the words as well as understand them (p. 22). Drilling on

accurate enunciation of spelling the words out loud, permitted the student to learn how the word sounded in a sentence (p.22). This primed them for when the time came to learn composition (p.22). Even though learning to read was given a higher precedence, writing was not neglected because no course of study for primary education was achieved without learning to write.

Richard Mulcaster believed that education was important for people of all backgrounds, not just the wealthy. Balmuth admits that Mulcaster believed that women were quite able to learn but with the caveat that learning would not change their stations in life (p.19). If they were of the lower classes, getting an education would not help them to change their lower class status. However, the one thing that worked in favor of women was the fact that their sovereign queen had a shrewd and clever mind with an education that was equal to any man (Weir, 2008, p. 14).

### **Literacy and Religion**

Cressy observes in his book that, “The value of literacy was widely proclaimed by religious and secular authors in early modern England. From the reformation to the industrial revolution there was a constant clamor among men of God and men of letters to the effect that reading and writing brought enormous benefits to whomever possessed those skills” (1980, p. 1). The clergy felt that a person that could read and write was better prepared for absolution and to live a life that reflected godliness and duty than a person who was not literate (p. 1). It was also thought by the clergy that being able to read the Word of God enhanced one’s piety as well. “It was one thing to listen and be inspired, but an altogether more satisfactory activity to read and review, to go back over difficult passages, compare texts and glosses, and find one’s own way about the scriptures,” reasons Cressy (p.5). There were advantages to those of the Christian faith besides reading and attending services. People that were able to write could write down notes about the sermon during the service to ruminate on later (p. 5). According to Cressy, it also

permitted the clergy to write down and share their sermons with each other (p. 5). There were more benefits to being literate than enhancing their relationships with God. Christians were exhorted by the clergy to help those who didn't know how to read and write: "Since literacy was so vital, the Christian had a duty to help those around him to learn to read God's word. Parents were to teach children, masters should teach servants, those who could read and write were to assist their associates who could not, while philanthropists and governors should cooperate in the provision of public education" (Cressy, 1980, 4).

Literacy opened up a new world for those who could read and write. "Most pedagogues saw elementary reading and writing as but a stepping stones to classical literature and it was taken for granted that anyone wishing to be familiar with the finest thoughts of antiquity, or who merely wished to mix well with the educated clergy and gentry, would quickly master basic literacy and pass on to higher things," suggests Cressy (p. 7). The advent of the printing press made it easier to find texts on other things like animal husbandry, predictions, humor and wit, histories and advice about farming or household management, to name a few, from the stalls of booksellers (p. 7).

### **Measuring Literacy**

Can the levels literacy in sixteenth century England be accurately measured? According to David Cressy in his article *Levels of Illiteracy in England, 1530-1730* (1977, p. 2), literacy could only be measured by the ability or inability to write one's name. "People who formed signatures are counted as literate; those who made marks in default are counted as illiterate." In his study of the levels of illiteracy in this period, he cast about for sources to use to accurately gauge the levels of illiteracy and could not find anything. "Valuable information can be obtained from wills, marriage licenses, Protestations and Hearth Tax records, but no other series of

documents so clearly exposes the sexual, social and occupational dimensions of illiteracy over an extended period of time,” Cressy states (p. 3). He decided to use as his sample the deposition records from the Consistory Court of the diocese from Norwich to determine the parameters of illiteracy under the Tudor and Stuart Dynasties (p. 1). The records for the Norwich diocese, which incidentally also includes a large area of East Anglia has, as it turns out, the most intact documentation (p. 4). Cressy notes, “...it should be pointed out that illiteracy figures from the diocese of Norwich do not necessarily apply to the rest of England” (p.4). In actuality, it only covers a small amount of England.

The depositions gave Cressy the information that he wanted but with the caveat that not every diocese or archdiaconal register was meticulous about recording everything so the records varied from place to place (p. 3). The court was supposed to document, “the name, age, sex and marital status, occupation or social status, place of residence and length of time there, previous residences and place of birth of each witness, together with his relationship to the principle parties of the case,” points out Cressy (p. 3). In addition, each person that gave testimony was obligated to give his signature or mark so that it didn’t invalidate their deposition (p. 3). The depositions themselves covered an assortment of cases, age brackets, and rank of people.

The results of Cressy’s study shows that illiteracy fluctuated with educational logistics that as yet haven’t been studied. “The evidence of the depositions, whether examined by decades of observation or processed to show school generations, show the movement of illiteracy to have been far more volatile than was formerly suspected. Phases of improvement, stagnation and decline cannot always be explained by reference to indices of educational activity, but their discovery provokes more questions,” declares Cressy (p. 23). More study on the subject needs to be done to answer the new questions that have brought forward by this study.

## **Libraries in Sixteenth Century England**

University, monastic and private libraries seem to be the only ones in existence in the sixteenth century in England. I could not find evidence to support the existence of public libraries at this time. There might be a few monastic libraries but very few escaped Henry VIII's wrath as he purged England of convents and monasteries. What happened to the contents of the monastic libraries?

According to Wormald and Wright, sometimes even though it meant breaking the law and risking punishment, some of the belongings that were meant to stay in the monastery when its occupants left, was smuggled out (1958, p. 150). Books were part of the booty. Those that were left behind were destroyed in a number of ways – burnt, or cut up and used in flyleaves of other books. Wormald and Wright lament about the destruction: “At any rate, the presence of detached leaves or portions of leaves, in the bindings of manuscripts and early printed books is painfully frequent and the greater part of the destruction to which such leaves are a witness may certainly be attributed to the period of Henry VIII and his successor, Edward VI” (p.156). Not all of the books were destroyed however, some ended up in repositories like the Royal Library.

The establishment of the Royal Library can be credited to Edward VI. “The Royal Library was indeed one of the few repositories in existence at the time of the Dissolutions into which the scattered spoils of the monastic libraries could have been gathered,” contends Wormald and Wright (p.163). Proof of this, contends Wormald and Wright, is borne out by examining two different lists of inventory. The lists shows a significant increase in the amount of books and manuscripts housed at Westminster. “This sudden increase can only be explained by the incorporation of spoils from the monastic libraries...” (p.163). This statement gives proof that not all of the books and manuscripts were destroyed.

Fred Lerner writes in his book, *The History of Libraries from the Invention of Writing to the Computer Age* (2009, pg. 111) that university libraries mirrored the academic obscurity of their home institution. Jennifer Summit author of *Memory's Library Medieval Books in Early Modern England* (2008, p. 2) writes, "The English Middle Ages that we now study is the product of these Renaissance libraries, which became and remain the defining collections of the period today: they include the Parker Library in Cambridge (established in 1575), the Cotton Library in London (begun in 1588), and the Bodleian Library in Oxford (opened in 1602)." At their inception, these libraries were very small and limited in their collections. One might state that they were in their infant stages. There was little growth to their collections since the "age of the manuscript," and if there was growth it could be attributed to the differences of opinion brought on by the Protestant Reformation (p. 111). All of the classics like Copernicus and Galileo and the fictional works of Shakespeare and Cervantes were disregarded by the academia (p. 111).

Even though literature was written in the common language, the bulk of the university collections were written in Latin and a small amount in Greek (p.111). The learned men like Erasmus wanted their works to be available to other scholars. Generally, Erasmus had his works issued in Latin because he knew that other scholars would be able to read it, as Latin was the primary language of scholars.

Private libraries can be traced back to the Humanists and Sir Thomas More. More understood as few could, the aesthetic implications of the private library. Jennifer Summit (p. 53) quotes Sears Jayne from *Library Catalogues of the English Renaissance* (1956, p. 39), "As the first layman to become chancellor in England, More epitomized the laicization of literacy and its privileges that was an important precondition of English Humanism." He accumulated quite a library of his own as many scholarly men of his status did in the sixteenth century (p. 54).

Unfortunately, however, his collection did not survive the ravages of time. Summit notes, “More’s writings reflect his awareness of libraries’ centrality to humanistic culture” (p.54). Thomas More’s library was not in his house but a short distance from it in a separate building with a chapel, a gallery and a library, dubbed “New Building” (p.54). “Libraries defined the place of reading,” observes Summit, “and in the case of More’s library, that place is contiguous not with the household but with the chapel, and the meditative space of the gallery, which approximates the cloister. In bringing these spaces together, More’s New Building recalls no architectural and theoretical model so clearly as that of the monastery” (p.54-55). I can see a correlation to libraries of modern times.

### **Summary**

The cultural significance of literacy and libraries were certainly not at the top of society in the sixteenth century. For the most part, literacy was still not for every class or gender in society and libraries were mainly affiliated with the religious studies, a few private scholarly individuals, the aristocracy and a few universities. Still, there were sparks, beginning to stress the importance of literacy and the need for libraries. Scholars like Sir Thomas More and Richard Mulcaster saw a purpose in educating all classes of people to read and write. Humanists began to promote the importance of the common people to read the scriptures in their own vernacular. The education of Queen Elizabeth I provided a new model or an example to many other women to seek literacy and become educated beyond the home. The Protestant Reformation began to spread to England further fueling the rights of common people to read the Bible. King Henry VIII stood in defiance of the Pope and the Catholic Church; which was one event that broke the sequester of books and manuscripts held by the church monasteries. The Royal Library which formed during this period, and several universities like Cambridge and Oxford either established

libraries or increased the collection of texts and manuscripts that were made available to many scholars. One can conclude that the sixteenth century was an important time, an incubator for literacy in society and the beginning of planned repositories for information, books, and records, now called libraries.

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