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HEATHER MACNEIL

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Tacit Narratives in the Manuscript Collections of Matthew Parker and Robert Cotton

HEATHER MACNEIL

ABSTRACT Over the past two decades, the history of early modern archives has been a topic of considerable interest among historians, and their research has drawn attention to the complex motives and commitments that inspired individuals, communities, and institutions to create, collect, preserve, and use archives in the early modern period. Their research also offers insights into what Eric Ketelaar has called the "tacit narratives of power and knowledge" woven into the formation, preservation, and use of archives and opens up new avenues for exploring the social history of archives. The English Protestant Reformation has provided the backdrop for some of this work, highlighting the ways in which post-Reformation libraries functioned as "polemical weapons" in political and religious struggles to control the historical narrative about the roots of the Reformation. The libraries built by the antiquarian collectors Matthew Parker and Robert Cotton in the 16th and 17th centuries furnish useful examples of the kinds of tacit narratives embedded in the selection, preservation, and use of post-Reformation manuscript collections. This article draws on the research undertaken by early modern historians into the collecting and compiling practices underpinning the formation and use of the Parker and Cotton manuscript collections to demonstrate how their work is helping to illuminate the tacit narratives embedded in early modern archives as well as broadening and deepening the social history of archives.

RÉSUMÉ Au cours des deux dernières décennies, l'étude des premières archives modernes représente un sujet d'intérêt important pour les historiennes et les historiens. Leurs recherches ont attiré l'attention sur les motivations complexes et les engagements ayant inspiré des individus, des communautés et des institutions à créer, à collecter, à conserver et à utiliser des archives du début de la période moderne. Leurs recherches offrent également un aperçu de ce qu'Eric Katelaar définit comme des « récits tacites de pouvoir et de connaissances, » tissés dans la formation, la conservation et l'utilisation des archives. Ces récits tacites offrent par le fait même de nouvelles opportunités d'exploration de l'histoire sociale des archives. La Réforme protestante anglaise fournit la toile de fond pour le développement de ce travail d'analyse qui se penche sur les façons dont les bibliothèques post-réformation évoluaient en tant que véhicules de polémiques dans les conflits politiques et religieux pour assumer le contrôle du récit historique sur les racines de la Réforme. Les bibliothèques érigées aux 16e et 17e siècles par les collectionneurs d'antiquités Matthew Parker et Robert Cotton offrent des exemples de types de récits tacites intégrés dans la sélection, la conservation et l'utilisation de collections de manuscrits de l'après-Réforme. Cet article s'appuie sur les recherches entreprises par les historiennes et les historiens du début de l'époque moderne sur les pratiques de collecte et de compilation d'information associées à la formation et à l'utilisation des collections de manuscrits de Parker et Cotton afin de démontrer comment l'exploration de leur travail contribue à faire émerger les récits tacites faisant partie des archives de l'époque prémoderne. Cette approche approfondit simultanément et élargit les horizons de l'histoire sociale des archives.

Introduction

Over the last two decades, historians have paid increasing attention to the formation and growth of archives and archival cultures in European society between 1500 and 1800. Their research has highlighted the personal, political, and religious commitments that prompted individuals, communities, and institutions to create, collect, preserve, and use documentation in the early modern period. It has also contributed new insights into what Eric Ketelaar has termed the "tacit narratives of power and knowledge"[1] embedded in archives and archiving practices and opened up new approaches to studying the social history of early modern archives – approaches that, in Markus Friedrich's words, treat archives as "historically specific infrastructures of knowledge that were made socially meaningful through complicated and contingent, highly localized processes and actors."[2]

One area of research has focused on the formation and growth of manuscript libraries in the early modern period. The English Protestant Reformation and the dissolution of monasteries that accompanied it have provided the backdrop for many of these studies, highlighting the active role played by post-Reformation libraries in political and religious struggles to control the historical narrative of the causes and consequences of the Reformation. The manuscript libraries built by the antiquarian collectors Matthew Parker and Robert Cotton in the 16th and 17th centuries feature in a number of these studies and offer valuable insights into the kinds of tacit narratives embedded in the selection and organization of post-Reformation manuscript collections. Their libraries were built, in part, around the manuscripts salvaged from the wrecks of monastic libraries in the decades following the dissolution of the monasteries under Henry VIII. Both Parker and Cotton harnessed their collecting efforts to Protestant nation building, seeking out manuscripts that contained evidence of the Anglo-Saxon origins of the English church and the roots of English national identity. Their subsequent efforts to annotate, augment, and rearrange this evidence into the shape of a historical narrative were driven by the same nation-building project. In the Parker library, that project took shape around collecting and preserving

1 Eric Ketelaar, "Tacit Narratives: The Meaning of Archives," *Archival Science* 1, no. 2 (2001): 131–41, 132.

2 Markus Friedrich, "The Rise of Archival Consciousness in Provincial France: French Feudal Records and Eighteenth-Century Seigneurial Society," *Past and Present* 230, supplement 11 (2016): 52.

historical sources that recuperated the ancient roots of England's Christianity while suppressing historical sources that undermined that narrative. In the Cotton library, Cotton assembled the sources he collected into a historical narrative that traced the long history of England and the English church through a post-Reformation lens.

In this article, I trace the connective thread between Ketelaar's notion of "tacit narratives" and social histories of early modern archives and then draw specifically on the research undertaken by early modern historians into the collecting and compiling practices underpinning the formation and use of the Parker and Cotton manuscript collections to illustrate how their work is helping to illuminate the tacit narratives embedded in early modern archives and, in the process, contributing to a social history of archives.

Connecting the Tacit Narratives of Archives with Social Histories of Early Modern Archives

In his 2001 article "Tacit Narratives: The Meaning of Archives," Ketelaar directed archival attention to the "tacit narratives of power and knowledge" woven into the formation, preservation, and use of archives. Such narratives, he maintained, are determined by "*archivalization* . . . meaning the conscious or unconscious choice (determined by social and cultural factors) to consider something worth archiving"; they are embedded in the archival processes and technologies through which records are ascribed value and made legible to a given community of users; and they are "reactivated" and reshaped with "every interaction, intervention, interrogation, and interpretation by creator, user, and archivist."[3] For Ketelaar, exposing the tacit narratives of archives meant unpacking the multifarious meanings woven into archivalization and archiving – that is, "the social, cultural, political, religious contexts of record creation, maintenance, and use."[4]

In subsequent writings, Ketelaar has expanded on the ideas introduced in that article and positioned them within broader technological, epistemological, and socio-cultural developments that have taken place within and without the archival world over the past few decades, including the proliferation of

3 Ketelaar, "Tacit Narratives," 133, 137.

4 Ibid., 141.

digital records and record systems, the emergence of continuum thinking, the reconceptualization of archival provenance, and the introduction of archival-turn scholarship into archival discourse. These developments have had a transformative effect on the archival understanding of the nature of records, inviting archivists to see records as the documentary traces of individual, social, and organizational activity that are "always in a state of becoming": they are assembled and reassembled as they are connected to, and moved across, a multiplicity of contexts, and their meaning is continually reshaped by the various agents – among them, creators, custodians, and users – that interact with them over time.[5] The archival turn in the humanities and social sciences – which prompted a methodological shift from "archive-as-source to archive-as-subject"[6] – has troubled the conventional belief in archives as neutral repositories for the preservation of historical sources and archivists as trusted custodians of those sources. As archival-turn scholarship has filtered into archival discourse, archivists have come to recognize that "archives . . . are not passive storehouses of old stuff, but active sites where social power is negotiated, contested, confirmed."[7] That recognition has led archivists to advocate, in alignment with Ketelaar, for more critically oriented histories of archives that place more emphasis on uncovering and describing the interconnected systems of knowledge and power that have shaped the making and keeping of records within given societies in specific historical periods and the part played by archivists over the centuries, "as performers in the drama of memory-making."[8] These developments, Ketelaar

5 Sue McKemmish, "Traces: Document, Record, Archive, Archives," in *Archives: Recordkeeping in Society*, ed. Sue McKemmish, Michael Piggott, Barbara Reed, and Frank Upward (Wagga Wagga, NSW: Charles Sturt University Centre for Information Studies, 2005), 3, 20; see also Helen Heslop, Simon Davis, and Andrew Wilson, *An Approach to the Preservation of Digital Records* (Canberra: National Archives of Australia, 2002), https://www.naa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-01/An-Approach-to-the-Preservation-of-Digital-Records.pdf; Tom Nesmith, "Seeing Archives: Postmodernism and the Changing Intellectual Place of Archives," *American Archivist* 65, no. 1 (2002): 24–41.

6 Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 44.

7 Joan M. Schwartz and Terry Cook, "Archives, Records, and Power: The Making of Modern Memory," *Archival Science* 2, no. 1–2 (2002): 1.

8 Terry Cook and Joan M. Schwartz, "Archives, Records and Power: From (Postmodern) Theory to (Archival) Performance," *Archival Science* 2, no. 3–4 (2002): 172. See also Terry Cook and Joan M. Schwartz, eds., "Archives, Records and Power," two-part special issue, *Archival Science* 2, no. 3–4 (2002): 1–351; Francis X. Blouin Jr. and William G. Rosenberg, eds., *Archives, Documentation and Institutions of Social Memory: Essays from the Sawyer Seminar* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2006); Francis X. Blouin Jr. and William G. Rosenberg, *Processing the Past: Contesting Authority in History and the Archives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

has contended, helped to lay a foundation for a social history of archives – one grounded in an understanding of archivalization and archiving as "socially and culturally situated archival practices" and directed toward illuminating the multiple layers of meaning embedded in those practices.[9]

Over the past few decades, historians of Europe's early modern period have begun to lay another part of that foundation. Fuelled by the recognition that archives are "sites in which a variety of contemporary and later actors have exercised and negotiated agency, identity and power"[10] and, thus, have complex histories worth unpicking, historians have turned their attention to researching the formation and growth of archival cultures in European society between 1500 and 1800 within and across a range of jurisdictions, institutions, and communities.[11] Their research has drawn attention to the manifold ways in which "archival consciousness" – understood as both an awareness of the social value of documentation and "an impulse to preserve in perpetuity"[12] – manifested itself in the early modern period and to the personal, political, and religious commitments that prompted individuals, communities, and institutions to create, collect, use, and preserve documents. The question that underpins much of this research,

9 Eric Ketelaar, "Prolegomena to a Social History of Dutch Archives," in *A Usable Collection*: *Essays in Honour of Jaap Kloosterman on Collecting Social History*, ed. Aad Blok, Jan Lucassen, and Huub Sanders (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014), 40–55; Eric Ketelaar, "Foreword," in *Archives & Information in the Early Modern World*, ed. Liesbeth Corens, Kate Peters, and Alexandra Walsham (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), xv–xviii.

10 Alexandra Walsham, "The Social History of the Archive: Record-Keeping in Early Modern Europe," in "The Social History of the Archive: Record-Keeping in Early Modern Europe," ed. Liesbeth Corens, Kate Peters, and Alexandra Walsham, *Past and Present* 230, supplement 11 (2016): 11.

11 See, for example, Corens, Peters, and Walsham, eds., *Archives & Information in the Early Modern World*; Filippo de Vivo, Andrea Guidi, and Alessandro Silvestri, eds., "Archival Transformations in Early Modern European History," *European History Quarterly* 46, no. 3 (2016): 421–589; Markus Friedrich, *The Birth of the Archive*: *A History of Knowledge*, trans. John Noël Dillon (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2018); Randolph Head, ed., "Archival Knowledge Cultures in Europe, 1400–1900," *Archival Science* 10, no. 3 (2010): 191–343; Randolph Head, *Making Archives in Early Modern Europe*: *Proof, Information, and Political Record-Keeping, 1400–1700* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Jennifer Summit, *Memory's Library*: *Medieval Books in Early Modern England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); Alexandra Walsham, "History, Memory, and the English Reformation," *Historical Journal* 55, no. 4 (2012): 899–938; Corens, Peters, and Walsham, eds., "The Social History of the Archive: Record-Keeping in Early Modern Europe," *Past and Present* 230, supplement 11 (2016): 9–349; Elizabeth Yale, "'The Manuscripts Flew About Like Butterflies': Self-Archiving and the Pressures of History," in *Sociable Knowledge*: *Natural History and the Nation in Early Modern Britain* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 205–48.

12 Friedrich, "The Rise of Archival Consciousness in Provincial France," 49–70; Brien Brothman, "Perfect Present, Perfect Gift: Finding a Place for Archival Consciousness in Social Theory," *Archival Science* 10, no. 2 (2010): 155.

Ketelaar suggests, "is not 'what is an archive' but how a particular individual or group at a particular time and place perceives and understands an archive."[13] Put another way, "over the course of history, what kinds of purposes have animated individuals and societies to keep and preserve documentation in its many forms, and what kinds of social consequences have induced them to continue to do so, to stop doing so, or to change how they do so?"[14]

Not surprisingly, archival-turn scholarship has provided an important touchstone for this research; Ann Stoler's work on the ethnography of the colonial archive, for example, has been influential in laying out new terms of scholarly engagement with the archive. As she explains,

> Ethnography in and of the colonial archives attends to processes of production, relations of power in which archives are created, sequestered, and rearranged. . . . I treat archives not as repositories of state power but as unquiet movements in a field of force, as restless realignments and readjustments of people and the beliefs to which they were tethered, as spaces in which the senses and the affective course through the seeming abstractions of political rationalities. . . . The case need no longer be made that "sources" are not "springs" of colonial truths. Distinguishing fiction from fact has given way to efforts to track the production and consumption of facticities as the contingent coordinates of particular times and temperaments, places and purposes.[15]

Stoler's call for scholars to critically query the effects of archival production – that is, "to identify the conditions of possibility that shaped what warranted repetition, what competencies were rewarded in archival writing, what stories could not be told, and what could not be said"[16] – has been a source of inspiration for a number of social histories of early modern archives. Ketelaar's advocacy for research that focuses on deciphering the narratives of knowledge and power

13 Ketelaar, "Foreword," xvii.

14 Brothman, "Perfect Present," 143.

15 Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain*, 32–33.

16 Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain*, 34.

embedded in archives and archival processes resonates with Stoler's call and has been cited as another source of inspiration by some of these scholars.[17]

Early Modern Manuscript Libraries in the Wake of the English Reformation

Markus Friedrich maintains that one of the salient characteristics of a social history of early modern archives is that it takes into account but also moves beyond what he calls "the 'usual suspects' of the history of archives" – the institutions and bureaucratic practices of church and state – to encompass "a much broader and much more colourful landscape of archives and archival practices that also contributed significantly to turning European societies and cultures archival."[18] The manuscript libraries built by early modern antiquarian collectors in the wake of the English Protestant Reformation form part of that broader and more colourful landscape. As Alexandra Walsham observes, "historians have begun to illuminate how the Reformation and associated processes such as the dissolution of the monasteries in Henrician England both transformed and initiated new archival regimes."[19] Elizabeth Yale, for example, has shown how the dispersal of monastic libraries that accompanied the dissolution "sharpened" the "preservationist instincts" of early modern antiquaries and naturalists, whose scholarly pursuits depended on the survival and accessibility of the documentary remains of the ancient and medieval past.[20] Social histories of post-Reformation libraries specifically highlight the ways in which these libraries functioned as "polemical weapons" and "sites of active epistemological construction" that, as Walsham puts it, "bear the distinctive imprint of the theological priorities and

17 Walsham, "The Social History of the Archive," 45; Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain*, 46.

18 Friedrich, "The Rise of Archival Consciousness," 51.

19 Walsham, "The Social History of the Archive," 23.

20 Yale, "The Manuscripts Flew About Like Butterflies," 207. Historians have also examined the impact of the dissolution on the preservationist instincts of the English state during the 16th and 17th centuries. See Vanessa Harding, "Monastic Records and the Dissolution: A Tudor Revolution in the Archives?" *European History Quarterly* 46, no. 3 (2016): 480–97; and Nicholas Popper, "From Abbey to Archive: Managing Texts and Records in Early Modern England," *Archival Science* 10, no. 3 (2010): 249–66.

prejudices of those who compiled them."[21] In *Memory's Library: Medieval Books in Early Modern England*, Jennifer Summit brings together library history and literary history to explore how post-Reformation libraries in England constructed a particular version of the English medieval past through the collecting and compiling practices of their owners. According to Summit, "these new libraries were not meant simply to contain and preserve the past; rather, the books and written materials that they contained were deliberately selected and in some cases literally remade in order to strengthen the king's supremacy and to support the cause of religious reform."[22]

The post-Reformation libraries built by Matthew Parker and Robert Cotton in the 16th and 17th centuries, which have survived into the 21st century, have provided a focal point for a number of these studies. Matthew Parker (1504–1575) was an antiquarian collector and scholar, as well as the archbishop of Canterbury (1559–1575) during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. Parker's collecting activities were driven by "his desire to justify the doctrines of the Church of England through appeal to historical precedents."[23] Parker believed that early Christian missionaries who had been dispatched to England by Pope Gregory in 596 had intended to establish "an entirely independent English Church, unfettered by Rome," and he looked back on the Anglo-Saxon period as "a golden age of English national identity and independence."[24] The bulk of Parker's personal library was bequeathed to Corpus Christi College, University of Cambridge, upon his death in 1575. The Parker Library (as it is now known) is described on the college's

21 Walsham, "The Social History of the Archive," 31.

22 Summit, *Memory's Library*, 3–4. The attention paid to the ideologies embedded in collecting and compiling practices in studies of post-Reformation libraries links them thematically with material histories of print and manuscript cultures in the early modern period, which are similarly focused on examining collecting as a complex cultural practice and exploring the ways in which the processes of archival selection and reorganization have shaped our understanding of textual and literary history. See, for example, Jeffrey Todd Knight, *Bound to Read*: *Compilations*, *Collections*, *and the Making of Renaissance Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014); Marjorie Swann, *Curiosities and Texts*: *The Culture of Collecting in Early Modern England* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001); Elisabeth Leedham-Green and Teresa Webber, eds., *The Cambridge History of Libraries in Britain and Ireland*: *Vol. 1*, *to 1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) and J.P. Carley and C.G.C. Tite, eds., *Books and Collectors*, *1200–1700*: *Essays Presented to Andrew Watson* (London: British Library, 1997).

23 James P. Carley, "Monastic Collections and Their Dispersal," in *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain*, *vol. IV*, *1557–1695*, ed. John Barnard and D.F. McKenzie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 343.

24 Christopher De Hamel, *Meetings with Remarkable Manuscripts: Twelve Journeys into the Medieval World* (New York: Penguin Press, 2016), 12–13.

website as "the College's greatest national heritage treasure" and "one of the most significant surviving renaissance libraries in Europe," holding nearly a quarter of all extant Anglo-Saxon manuscripts in the world.[25]

Elizabeth Yale observes that, "while those in Parker's generation were fierce partisans to the cause of the English church, later collectors, such as Robert Cotton . . . were more 'ecumenical' in their tastes (though still steeped in and motivated by religious controversy)."[26] Robert Cotton (1571–1631) was a politician, an antiquary, and a co-founder, with the historian William Camden, of the first Elizabethan Society of Antiquaries in 1586. Cotton's collecting activities were directed primarily toward acquiring sources for the history of the British Isles (including the history of the English church) from the Anglo-Saxon period to the 17th century. The library he built around his collections represented "a new kind of manuscript library, not for the piety of monks or the domestic delight of princes, but for the preservation of history and the service of state at a time when English nationhood was being reshaped and defined."[27] Upon his death, Cotton's library was passed to his son Thomas; Thomas, in turn, passed it to his son John, who bequeathed it to the British nation upon his death in 1702. It survived partial cremation in 1731 to become one of the founding collections of the British Museum, and today its home is in the British Library.[28] The Cotton Manuscripts, as they are known today, are said to be "the most important collection of manuscripts ever assembled in Britain by a private individual."[29]

25 Corpus Christi College, University of Cambridge, Parker Library (website), accessed January 6, 2023, https://www.corpus.cam.ac.uk/parker-library.

26 Yale, "The Manuscripts Flew About Like Butterflies," 219.

27 Christopher de Hamel, *The Posthumous Papers of the Manuscripts Club* (London: Allen Lane, 2022), 172.

28 The Cotton library passed into the custody of the British government in 1702. In October 1731, a fire broke out in Ashburnham House, where the Cotton library was stored, destroying or damaging parts of the manuscript collection. The fire succeeded in focusing government attention on the need to ensure the safety and future of its national collections, and by 1757, the Cotton library had been moved into its new home in the British Museum. For a detailed account of the fire and subsequent restoration efforts, see Andrew Prescott, "'Their Present Miserable State of Cremation': The Restoration of the Cotton Library," in *Sir Robert Cotton as Collector*: *Essays on an Early Stuart Courtier and His Legacy*, ed. C.J. Wright (London: British Library, 1997), 391–454.

29 British Library, "Collection Guides: Cotton Manuscripts," British Library, accessed January 6, 2023, https://www.bl.uk/collection-guides/cotton-manuscripts. In 2018, the Cotton collection was added to the UK UNESCO Memory of the World Register.

The holdings of the Parker and Cotton libraries are indicative of the diversity of documentation encompassed by early modern manuscript collections.[30] Among the Parker Library's holdings are the Gospels of St. Augustine, which dates from the sixth century; the oldest version of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle; the best surviving manuscript of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*; a collection of Middle English, French, and Latin texts on subjects ranging from alchemy to astrology to music and medicine; and numerous documents relating to the European reformers of the 16th century, including letters from Bucer, Melanchthon, and Erasmus, together with many of Parker's personal papers and letters.[31] The Cotton Manuscripts contain the largest collection of Anglo-Saxon manuscripts in the world, including the Lindisfarne Gospels and the Beowulf manuscript; state papers from the 16th and 17th centuries, including the diary of Edward VI, the will of Mary, Queen of Scots, and autograph letters of Henry VIII and Elizabeth I; papers from the collections of antiquarian scholar John Leland, mathematician and astronomer John Dee; and statesman William Cecil, Baron Burghley; Anglo-Saxon and medieval British charters, including two of the four surviving contemporary exemplifications of Magna Carta 1215; medieval cartularies from England and Ireland, including the oldest surviving Anglo-Saxon cartulary; and medieval chronicles from the British Isles and western Europe.[32]

The collecting practices of Parker and Cotton attest to the porous boundaries between libraries and archives in the early modern period. As Walsham points out,

30 Parker and Cotton collected printed books as well as manuscripts, and both used the term *library* when referring to the sites of their collecting activities, as did their contemporaries. The term continues to be used by Parker and Cotton scholars, and the meaning they attach to it reflects the hybrid nature of libraries in the early modern period; my use of the term in this article corresponds with that usage. My use of the term *manuscript collection* when referring to the holdings of the Parker and Cotton libraries reflects its conventional usage as an umbrella term to describe a collection of documents of various kinds accumulated and organized by an individual; this usage is consistent with the varieties of documentation represented in the Parker and Cotton libraries. In the 16th century, the term *manuscript* could refer simply to a handwritten, as opposed to printed, text or more specifically, to an ancient or medieval handwritten text written on parchment or vellum. The collections of Parker and Cotton contain manuscripts that correspond to the more specialized use of the term, but they also contain documents that would have been more commonly referred to as *papers* and *records*. See Yale, "The Manuscripts Flew About Like Butterflies," 210–215; Walsham, "The Social History of the Archive," 13–17; Geoffrey Yeo, "'Let Us See What Is Meant by the Word Recorde': Concepts of Record from the Middle Ages to the Early 20th Century," *Archivaria* 93 (Spring 2022): 29–31.

31 Corpus Christi, Parker Library (website), accessed January 6, 2023, https://www.corpus.cam.ac.uk/parker-library.

32 British Library, "Collection Guides: Cotton Manuscripts," British Library, accessed January 6, 2023, https://www.bl.uk/collection-guides/cotton-manuscripts.

> The sharp distinction between an archive and a library – between places for keeping items relevant to government and those relevant to scholarship and heritage – does not capture the organic and dynamic character of record-keeping between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. In early modern Europe, some 'archives' (especially those of elite families) contained material that was not principally administrative or executive in quality and which was collected in the interests of posterity. In turn 'libraries' frequently housed transcriptions of legal instruments alongside private papers selected and obtained for the purpose of preserving the past for analysis and study by contemporaries and subsequent generations.[33]

Walsham's point resonates with Summit's observation that "the Cotton Library observed and enforced no real distinctions between documents and literary or religious texts. . . . Cotton collected medieval literary and religious texts for the same reason he collected cartularies – because he saw their potential utility in addressing the most contentious matters of his day."[34] Anthony Grafton takes a similar view in relation to the Parker library, asserting that "when Parker discussed his collection with collaborators and visitors, they looked at official documents as well as manuscripts, and treated his collection, in our terms, as an archive as well as a library."[35]

The Parker and Cotton libraries were built, to a considerable extent, around the medieval manuscripts "rescued" from destruction in the aftermath of the sacking and dispersal of monastic libraries that followed Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries. Both Parker and Cotton harnessed their collecting efforts to the project of Protestant nation building and used their collections to construct a Reformation narrative revolving around the shared historical roots of English Protestantism and English national identity. Their collections provide particularly fertile ground for unearthing that narrative because, unlike

33 Walsham, "The Social History of the Archive," 14–15; see also Michael Riordan, "'The King's Library of Manuscripts': The State Paper Office as Archive and Library," *Information & Culture* 48, no. 2 (2013): 181–92.

34 Summit, *Memory's Library*, 141.

35 Anthony Grafton, "Matthew Parker: The Book as Archive," *History of Humanities* 2, no. 1 (2017): 18. The qualification *in our terms* is an important one given that the word *archive* was not in common use in England during Parker's time. For the emergence and usage of the term in England's early modern period see Yeo, "Let Us See What Is Meant by the Word Recorde," 31–33.

many manuscript collections of that period, those of Parker and Cotton were not dispersed after their deaths and have remained relatively intact over the centuries, making it possible for scholars to glean valuable insights into their collecting and compiling practices.[36] Timothy Graham observes that Parker and his assistants left "such ample traces of their work that the modern scholar can reconstruct with precision both the methods by which they proceeded and the purposes that guided them." His own examination of the Parker Library leads him to conclude that "Parker's treatment of his manuscripts provides a remarkable insight into the extent to which early modern collectors were prepared to restore and reshape their books."[37] Colin Tite finds, in the surviving records of the Cotton library as well as the Cotton collection itself, significant clues to the motivations underpinning its formation and the various agents – including Cotton, his heirs, various Cotton librarians, and anonymous assistants – who were involved in shaping it prior to its transfer to the custody of the British government.[38] In the following sections, I will trace the contours of the Reformation narrative embedded in the Parker and Cotton manuscript collections, drawing on the insights of historians who have studied those collections. In so doing, I hope to demonstrate some of the ways in which historians are drawing needed attention to the multiple layers of meaning embedded in early modern archives and contributing to a social history of archives rooted in an understanding of archivalization and archiving as complex socio-cultural practices.

36 The qualification *relatively* is important in light of the losses and damages the Cotton collection suffered as a result of the 1731 fire (see footnote 28 above). For a detailed account of those losses, see Prescott, "Their Present Miserable State of Cremation."

37 Timothy Graham, "Matthew Parker's Manuscripts: An Elizabethan Library and its Uses," in Leedham-Green and Webber, *The Cambridge History of Libraries in Britain and Ireland*, 322, 328. See also Timothy Graham, "Changing the Context of Medieval Manuscript Art: The Case of Matthew Parker," in *Medieval Art*: *Recent Perspectives*, ed. Gale R. Owen-Crocker and Timothy Graham (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 183–205; Timothy Graham, "The Beginnings of Old English Studies: Evidence from the Manuscripts of Matthew Parker," in *Back to the Manuscripts: Papers from the Symposium 'The Integrated Approach to Manuscript Studies: A New Horizon,' held at the Eighth General Meeting of the Japan Society for Medieval English Studies*, *Tokyo*, *December 1992*, ed. Shuji Sato (Tokyo: Center for Medieval English Studies, 1997), 29–50.

38 See Colin G.C. Tite, *The Early Records of Sir Robert Cotton's Library*: *Formation*, *Cataloguing*, *Use* (London: British Library, 2003). See also Colin G.C. Tite, *The Manuscript Library of Sir Robert Cotton*: *The Panizzi Lectures 1993* (London: British Library, 1994); Colin G.C. Tite, "The Early Catalogues of the Cottonian Library," *British Library Journal* 6, no. 2 (1980): 144–57.

Parker's Library

One of the effects of the English Protestant Reformation was the erasure of significant parts of England's medieval past. As Walsham explains, "successive sets of injunctions and statutes called for the systematic destruction of statues, images, and relics in parish churches and private homes, so that 'no memory of the same' remained to perpetuate the besotted in the misguided ways of their forefathers."[39] The sacking, dispersal, and disappearance of medieval manuscripts that accompanied the dissolution of English monasteries in the 1530s and continued until Elizabeth I ascended to the throne in 1558 was perhaps the most profound act of destruction.[40] In the words of the 17th-century historian John Speed, during the dissolution, monasteries were, "laid open to the generall deluge of Time, whose stream bore down the walles of all those foundations, carrying away the shrines of the dead, and defacing the Libraries of their ancient records."[41] Not all of these "ancient records" were obliterated, however, and in the decades following the dissolution, thousands of surviving monastic manuscripts found their way into university libraries and private manuscript collections.

The survival of monastic manuscripts was due in no small part to the efforts of antiquaries. In early modern England, antiquaries devoted themselves to the revival of the classical and medieval past through the recovery and reassembly of its textual and material remnants.[42] The dissolution of the monasteries, and the profound sense of historical, literary, and cultural loss it engendered, lent a particular urgency to the antiquaries' collecting efforts. According to Margaret Aston, "the very process of casting off the past generated nostalgia for its loss. And with nostalgia came invigorated historical activity."[43] Reformation concern about national identity and religious ancestry provided a further impetus, and what antiquaries chose to preserve reflected these "ideological

39 Walsham, "History, Memory, and the English Reformation," 907–8.

40 Yale, "The Manuscripts Flew About Like Butterflies," 214.

41 John Speed, *History of Great Britaine* (London: 1611), quoted in Summit, *Memory's Library*, 2–3.

42 Angus Vine, *In Defiance of Time: Antiquarian Writing in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 1.

43 Margaret Aston, "English Ruins and English History: The Dissolution and the Sense of the Past," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 36, no. 1 (1973): 255.

preoccupations."[44] Elizabeth Yale describes the monastic manuscripts "selectively salvaged" by antiquaries in the decades following the dissolution as "instruments of the Reformation, pry bars for widening the fissures between Protestant and Catholic Britain." The new libraries that took shape around those manuscripts were driven by the same theological and political aims and designed "to demonstrate and inculcate particular kinds of literacy" about the causes and consequences of the Reformation.[45]

The library built by Matthew Parker in the late 16th century was emblematic of this new kind of library. Assembled from the wrecks of monastic libraries, Parker's library was inspired, at least in part, "by the need to establish a historical record that would legitimize the Church of England's separation from Rome" and dedicated to promoting a version of nation building that wove tightly together Protestantism, history, and English identity.[46] Parker's collecting activities were supported by Queen Elizabeth's Privy Council, which, in July 1568, issued, at Parker's request, letters granting him "a speciall care and ouersight" over "auncient recordes and monumentes."[47] The letters acknowledged the role formerly played by monasteries as official custodians of historically significant secular as well as religious records:

> Whereas the Queenes maiestie, hauyng lyke care and zeale as diuers of her progenitours haue had before tymes for the conseruation of such auncient recordes and monumentes, written of the state and affaires of these her realmes of Englande and Irelande, which heretofore were preserued and recorded by speciall appoyntment of certaine her auncetours, in diuers Abbeyes, to be as treasure houses, to kepe and leaue in memorie such occurrentes as fell in their tymes. And for that most of the same wrytynges and recordes be mentioned such historicall matters and monumentes of antiquitie, both for the state ecclesiasticall and civile gouernement.[48]

44 Vine, *In Defiance of Time*, 8; Yale, "The Manuscripts Flew About Like Butterflies," 207; Walsham, "History, Memory, and the English Reformation," 908.

45 Yale, "The Manuscripts Flew About Like Butterflies," 215, 216.

46 Ibid., 217.

47 Graham, "Matthew Parker's Manuscripts," 326.

48 Quoted in Benedict Scott Robinson, "'Darke Speech': Matthew Parker and the Reforming of History," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 29, no. 4 (1998): 1069.

With the dissolution of the monasteries, these writings and records had fallen into "the possession of sundry priuate persons," and thus "remayne obscure and vnknowne." To remedy that situation, the Privy Council letters ordered anyone who possessed such materials to make them available for inspection to Parker and his agents.[49]

As he collected medieval texts for his library, Parker took pains to distinguish between the "monuments of antiquity" that would confirm the supposed existence, in Anglo-Saxon times, of an English church independent of Rome and the "monuments of superstition" that perpetuated Catholic falsehoods and undermined the true Protestant religion. The latter, according to Parker, "by public orders and laws of this realme ought to be abolished as derogatory to the state of religion publicly received."[50] The distinction between "monuments of antiquity" and "monuments of superstition" is significant on a number of levels. First, it makes clear that Parker's collecting activities involved the suppression as well as the preservation of medieval historical sources. Second, it speaks to one of the ways in which post-Reformation libraries such as Parker's were positioned as sites for the preservation of *legitimate* historical knowledge. According to Summit, "classifying [medieval texts] as 'monuments of antiquity' sanitized them for Protestant readers by removing them from the formerly idolatrous setting of the monastic library to a new site of historical value."[51] The distinction also underscores the intimate link between the construction of a Protestant history and the formation of English Protestantism's still "uncertain and fragile" social identity in the 16th century. As Thomas Betteridge explains, "From its inception Protestantism demanded the production of texts that claimed authority in terms of setting down or fixing what was and was not truthful religious teaching. . . . Within this schema Protestantism is the creation of an idealized social identity dependent on an understanding of papistry as its other."[52] Labelling texts that expressed articles of Catholic doctrine and belief as "monuments of superstition" was a means of reinforcing that understanding.

In his pursuit of texts that would "illuminate papal tyranny" or provide evidence of the prior independence of the English church from Rome, Parker

49 Graham, "Matthew Parker's Manuscripts," 326.

50 Summit, *Memory's Library*, 108.

51 Ibid., 106–7.

52 Thomas Betteridge, *Tudor Histories of the English Reformations*, *1530–83* (London: Routledge, 1999), 18, 19.

collected historical, theological, and liturgical manuscripts, charters, and other administrative documents, as well as printed books.[53] According to his secretary, John Joscelyn, Parker

> was verie carefull and not without some charges to seeke out the monume[n]tes off foremer tymes to knowe the religion off thancient fatheres and those especiallye which were off the Englishe churche. Therefore in seekinge upp the cronicles off the Brittones and Inglishe Saxo[n]s which laye hidden euery wheare contemned and buried in forgetfullnes and throwgh the ignoraunce off the Languages not wel vnderstanded his owen especially and his mens dilige[n]ce wanted not. And to the ende that these antiquities might last longe and be carefullye kept he caused them beinge broughte into one place to be well bounde and trymly couered.[54]

Parker was particularly keen to acquire Anglo-Saxon manuscripts, which he believed provided evidence of the Anglo-Saxon roots of English Protestantism, as well as Anglo-Norman chronicles which, Grafton suggests, Parker came to view as "an archive in their own right." Grafton cites in support of this suggestion Parker's 1570–71 edition of the 13th-century Benedictine chronicler Matthew Paris, in which Parker (echoing the Privy Council letter of 1568) "argued that the monasteries of Anglo-Norman England had been the official repositories of memory, which they had preserved in official chronicles. . . . Learned historians, Parker claimed, had recorded and then archived contemporary history."[55] In the 16th century, the trustworthiness of medieval chronicles as historical sources rested on their purported status as authorless texts: the chronicle was understood to be "a simple mimetic record of the passing of time" and the chronicler, "a mere cipher who simply record[ed] significant events within a basic chronological framework."[56] The trustworthiness Parker ascribed to chronicles was not entirely warranted given that the genre conventions of chronicles were sometimes deployed by chroniclers "to represent as truthful [their] own partial

53 Popper, "From Abbey to Archive," 254; Grafton, "Matthew Parker," 18.

54 Quoted in Robinson, "Darke Speech," 1065–66.

55 Grafton, "Matthew Parker," 39–40.

56 Betteridge, *Tudor Histories of the English Reformations*, 10, 9.

view of the past."[57] Moreover, chronicles blurred the boundary Parker was intent on enforcing between monuments of antiquity and monuments of superstition. As Summit observes, "the saint's legend, a genre Parker designates among the 'monuments of superstition' to be purged, could be easily copied within or alongside the work of chronicle history which . . . Parker deemed eminently worthy of preservation."[58]

The purposes that inspired Parker's collecting activities may have been public, but the library he maintained was decidedly private, and access to it was restricted to Parker and his associates, who treated its contents as a working collection. "Viewing the manuscripts as his private possessions," Timothy Graham observes, "Parker allowed himself significant liberties in the ways he handled them. Almost every manuscript that passed into his hands has undergone some transformation as a result of his ownership."[59] In Parker's library, collecting did not simply mean the accumulation and storage of manuscripts; it also meant their "active comparison and analysis."[60] Evidence of Parker's textual interventions is scattered throughout the library's manuscript holdings, manifesting itself in the "constant underlinings, cross-references, inserted text, tables of contents, and indices, and . . . innumerable marginalia . . . [including] notes and exclamations, references to alternate accounts, and observations of variance between accounts."[61] Titles, pagination, and headnotes were added to aid navigation, and other annotations, in the form of "counterfeit[ed] ancient writings" and transcriptions of missing text, were inserted into damaged or illegible or partial manuscripts in an effort to restore "a semblance of completeness."[62] The most heavily annotated passages of the manuscripts were those that concerned issues central to the reformed English church's stance against Rome, including papal abuses, church doctrine relating to clerical marriage, and church teaching concerning the eucharistic bread and wine.[63]

57 Ibid., 10.

58 Summit, *Memory's Library*, 111.

59 Graham, "Matthew Parker's Manuscripts," 328.

60 Grafton, "Matthew Parker," 20.

61 Robinson, "Darke Speech," 1075.

62 Grafton, "Matthew Parker," 20; Robinson, "Darke Speech," 1075–76.

63 Graham, "Matthew Parker's Manuscripts," 334.

Such treatment, Benedict Scott Robinson suggests, makes it clear that, for Parker and his associates, the manuscripts were, essentially, "copy-text" to be translated, edited, and published: "even those manuscripts that were not ultimately sent to press seem clearly to be annotated with an eye toward possible publication."[64] The printed editions produced by Parker and his circle (which were drawn from manuscripts in Parker's library as well as manuscripts borrowed from other collectors) included a series of histories of the English church and editions of Anglo-Saxon and other medieval chronicles.[65] Like the manuscripts in his library, Parker's editions contain traces of the liberties he took with them. Although he insisted that his editions neither added to nor subtracted from the original authors' words, there are numerous places where Parker did precisely that, filling in textual gaps "with material pirated from other texts and even other chroniclers."[66] While modern editors have castigated Parker for such practices, Robinson takes a different view, arguing that Parker's editions need to be understood as "part of a broader effort to produce a unified national history, an effort which naturally placed less value on the integrity of ancient texts than on their place in a restored and reconstructed history."[67]

This broader effort provides the connective thread tying together Parker's collecting and editing activities. Both were directed toward "the reconstruction of a unified corpus of English history, whether in the manuscript volumes brought together on the shelves of Parker's library, or in the texts collated and 'corrected' on the pages of Parker's editions."[68] Grafton finds a metaphorical encapsulation of this connection in Parker's 1572 edition of *De antiquitate Britannicae ecclesiae*. The *De antiquitate*, he explains, "was a history of the English church, in the form of a collective biography of the archbishops of Canterbury. But it was also the harvest of Parker's collecting: a huge collage or mosaic . . . of passages from primary sources assembled to tell a particular story."[69] He speculates that Parker may have seen the *De antiquitate*, along with his other

64 Robinson, "Darke Speech," 1077.

65 Graham, "Matthew Parker's Manuscripts," 335.

66 Robinson, "Darke Speech," 1079.

67 Ibid.

68 Ibid., 1066.

69 Grafton, "Matthew Parker," 19; see also Graham, "Matthew Parker's Manuscripts," 336.

printed editions, as serving, "in their own way, as an official, irrefutable archive of English history – especially ecclesiastical history."[70]

When Parker died in 1575, the bulk of his library, comprising some 433 manuscripts and over 800 printed books, was donated to Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, with strict instructions as to how it was to be cared for and used.[71] The tacit narrative told through the formation and use of Parker's personal library, prior to its relocation to Corpus Christi and subsequent transformation into "a national heritage treasure,"[72] might be described, from the perspective of Parker and his circle, as a story of loss and reclamation, with dedicated Protestant scholars working diligently to recover, from the corrupted and incomplete fragments of England's textual past, traces of the ancient origins of English Protestantism and a distinct Protestant identity.[73] Viewed through the lens of 21st-century historical scholarship, the formation and use of Parker's personal library is also a narrative about the sanitization and suppression of those parts of England's textual past that did not conform to Parker's Protestant version of a "unified" English history.

Cotton's Library

Robert Cotton's manuscript collection began to take shape around 1588, and at the time of his death in 1631, it comprised more than 900 volumes. Between 1631 and 1702, the collection continued to grow as its ownership shifted first to his son Thomas and then to his grandson John.[74] In his 1696 synopsis of the contents of the Cotton library, Thomas Smith, librarian to John Cotton, identified six broad manuscript categories within Cotton's collection: "manuscripts written in the Anglo-Saxon tongue"; "cartularies of monasteries"; "lives and passions of the

70 Grafton, "Matthew Parker," 35.

71 Graham, "Matthew Parker's Manuscripts," 338–40.

72 Popper, "From Abbey to Archive," 254.

73 Robinson, "Darke Speech," 1082.

74 Richard Ovenden, "The Libraries of the Antiquaries (c. 1580–1640) and the Idea of a National Collection," in Leedham-Green and Webber, *The Cambridge History of Libraries in Britain and Ireland*, 554. See also Kevin Sharpe, *Sir Robert Cotton, 1586–1631: History and Politics in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 48–83.

saints and martyrs"; "genealogical tables"; "histories, annals, and chronicles"; and "original records of the kingdom."[75] Apart from his manuscript collection, Cotton also owned a large collection of printed books – about which, Richard Ovendon observes, "we know tantalisingly little"[76] – as well as a cabinet of curiosities, which housed material remains of British history including Roman and British coins, Roman inscriptions, royal seals, medals, and, possibly, a fragment of the skull of St. Thomas à Becket.[77]

Cotton made his library accessible to a wide community of scholars, including William Camden, John Donne, Ben Jonson, and Francis Bacon, and even extended borrowing privileges to some of them. Graham Parry speculates that Cotton's "open-handed generosity in making his books and manuscripts available probably did more to advance the cause of scholarship than the combined patronage of Oxford and Cambridge."[78] Cotton's policy of granting scholars access to his collection may have been tied to his unsuccessful attempt to garner royal support for a national library.[79] In 1602 or thereabouts, Cotton and two fellow antiquaries petitioned Queen Elizabeth I to establish "an Academy for the Study of Antiquity and History." The academy would house a library dedicated to British history that would be "well furnished with divers ancient bookes and rare monuments of antiquity, which otherwise may perish."[80] Cotton "offered to pool his and the other antiquaries' books with those of the queen" to create that library. When the petition failed, Cotton's library "provide[d] a substitute for the

75 Thomas Smith, "A History and Synopsis of the Cotton Library," trans. Godfrey E. Turton, in *Catalogue of the Manuscripts in the Cottonian Library*, *1696*, ed. C.G.C. Tite (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1984), 47–59. These categories remain more or less unchanged in contemporary finding aids of the Cotton collection, although there have been a few wording adjustments, e.g., *Anglo-Saxon* has been replaced with *Old English*; *original records of the kingdom* has been replaced with *English State Papers*. See British Library, *Cotton Manuscripts* (*5th Century–19th Century*) ([London]: British Library, n.d.), 1, accessed January 6, 2023, http://hviewer.bl.uk/IamsHViewer/Default.aspx?mdark=ark:/81055/vdc_100000000035.0x0000b4&_ga=2.18556345.146392782.1649513099-361013811.1644957955. See also Tite, *The Manuscript Library of Sir Robert Cotton*, 24.

76 Ovenden, "The Libraries of the Antiquaries," 557.

77 Sharpe, *Sir Robert Cotton*, 66–68; C.J. Wright, ed., *Sir Robert Cotton as Collector: Essays on an Early Stuart Courtier and his Legacy* (London: British Library, 1997), 6–7; Summit, *Memory's Library*, 167.

78 Graham Parry, *The Trophies of Time: English Antiquarians of the Seventeenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 70.

79 Tite, *The Manuscript Library of Sir Robert Cotton*, 20.

80 Quoted in Carley, "Monastic Collections and Their Dispersal," 334.

national library that the antiquaries had sought."[81]

Cotton's antiquarian endeavours were fuelled in large part by Reformation historiography, and like Parker, Cotton harnessed his collecting efforts to the ideological project of Protestant nation building.[82] Unlike Parker, he considered lives of saints and martyrs worthy of preservation in support of that project and collected a wide range of English hagiographies. Thomas Smith defended Cotton's inclusion of these "monuments of superstition" in his 1696 synopsis of the Cotton collection. Smith acknowledged that, in their biographies of saints' lives, monks had frequently "corrupted the truth with a mixture of stories . . . feeding the credulity of the superstitious in a vicious and ignorant age with inventions tacked on by dull minds and designed less to teach than to mislead." Nevertheless, he maintained, "even the strictest critics will agree . . . that it is wrong to pass harsh judgement on all the biographers alike and that among the confused mass of rubbish and dross, veins of purer metal lie hidden for good sense and hard work to sort out, many of which throw light on the civil and ecclesiastical state and history of those times."[83] Smith's defence supports Summit's assertion that Cotton's rationale for preserving hagiographic texts was "forensic" in nature – that is, "once preserved, they [could] be judiciously examined and thereby stripped of their seditious and superstitious power." Saints' lives could then be "reclassified as artifacts of historical knowledge rather than religious belief."[84]

The energies of Parker and other 16th-century collectors, who acquired their manuscripts from, or at one remove from, the monasteries that held them until the dissolution, were mainly preoccupied with the challenges of selection – that is, of determining which manuscripts were worthy of preservation and which were not. Seventeenth-century collectors like Cotton, on the other hand, who acquired their manuscripts from other collectors rather than from dissolved monastic libraries, were also concerned with "the challenge of organization," as they consolidated and rearranged entire collections or parts of collections.[85] Cotton devoted considerable time and energy to the task of organizing his manu-

81 Sharpe, *Sir Robert Cotton*, 27, 50.

82 Summit, *Memory's Library*, 138.

83 Smith, "A History and Synopsis of the Cotton Library," 54.

84 Summit, *Memory's Library*, 159, 165.

85 Summit, *Memory's Library*, 136–37.

script collection. In the late 1620s, Colin Tite explains, Cotton began to devise his "emperor" shelf-marking system, according to which manuscript volumes were shelved in a series of presses "designated by the names of the Roman emperors whose busts surmounted them. In completed form . . . there were presses named after the twelve emperors from Julius Caesar to Domitian and the two imperial ladies, Cleopatra and Faustina."[86] Individual shelves within each press were assigned letters, and individual volumes were numbered in shelf order from left to right. Tite points out that, while the emperor system of arrangement was not fully in place until after Cotton's death, "the first catalogue to reflect [its] completion . . . was well underway by 1638."[87]

Cotton also committed considerable time and energy to rearranging the individual volumes within his collection, frequently disassembling existing volumes and reorganizing and rebinding manuscripts into new volumes. Cotton's compilation techniques were comparable to Parker's, and James Carley notes that, "in some ways [Cotton] was even more violent in the treatment of his books than Parker had been."[88] His comment aligns with Tite's wry observation that, "the dissolution of the monasteries hugely disrupted the libraries of medieval England but so did Sir Robert Cotton: my present best estimate is that barely half of his books are in the order and arrangement that they exhibited before they came into his hands."[89]

The new volumes compiled by Cotton brought together texts of different provenances and genres, which were grouped roughly by subject and ordered chronologically.[90] While their organizing principles are not always obvious, it is clear that the new volumes were carefully compiled with deliberation and a strong sense of purpose. Summit makes the point that, although "researchers today commonly consult the Cotton volumes in search of individual sources and thus encounter them as repositories of discrete manuscripts; . . . contemporary evidence suggests that Cotton intended them rather as compilations whose

86 Tite, *The Manuscript Library of Sir Robert Cotton*, 85–86.

87 Ibid., 29. The catalogue to which Tite refers is BL Add.MS 36682. The physical arrangement of the Cotton library and the evolution of the emperor system is described in more detail in Tite, *The Manuscript Library of Sir Robert Cotton*, 83–99 and Tite, "The Early Catalogues," 148–50.

88 Carley, "Monastic Collections and Their Dispersal," 346.

89 Tite, *The Manuscript Library of Sir Robert Cotton*, 45.

90 Summit, *Memory's Library*, 146; see also Sharpe, *Sir Robert Cotton*, 68–73.

contents were closely interconnected, and even sequentially arranged, rather than standing alone."[91] Cotton's intentions are evident in the engraved title pages and contents-titles, which were added to many of the volumes by Cotton, his librarian, or close associates to aid the reader's navigation through a volume, and in Cotton's instructions to binders, which are found inside the front cover or on the first leaf of a volume.[92] These instructions include Cotton's "organizational notes," which, Tite explains, "draw attention to marks or notes employed by Cotton to set up the arrangement of a volume," such as his guidance to binders on the ordering of documents within the new volumes.[93] Evidence of Cotton's intentions may also be found in his "trimming" instructions to binders. According to Tite, Cotton did not feel any obligation to preserve the marginalia left on manuscripts by their more recent owners or users and instructed the binder working on the *catalogus benefactorum* of St. Albans Abbey (in Nero D VII) and the cartulary of St. Nicholas Priory, Exeter (in Vitellius D IX), "to trim the leaves of these manuscripts – 'cut it smooth' – he adds, 'I car not for the new notts.'" As Tite confirms, the binders followed through on these instructions because, "in both volumes, the sixteenth-century marginalia have been cut through."[94]

In Cotton's compilation of some 200 volumes of original state papers relating to English domestic and foreign affairs in the 16th century, Tite finds a particularly persuasive demonstration of how Cotton imprinted his intentions on his collection. The manuscripts included in the state paper volumes were "assembled from many different sources" and "arranged and ordered in sequences which he himself decided upon."[95] Tite argues that Cotton's motivations went beyond simply analyzing, sorting, and ordering the manuscripts: he finds "evidence for a grander objective" in several of the volumes, where, he says, "it is common to find transcripts and copies interspersed among the original documents. In other words, the volumes are rather more than collection: I believe they are an attempt to present a full chronology or account, supplying the gaps where originals were unavailable with copies intentionally acquired – and even bought

91 Summit, *Memory's Library*, 146.

92 Tite, *The Early Records of Sir Robert Cotton's Library*, 259.

93 Ibid., 9; see also Tite, *The Manuscript Library of Sir Robert Cotton*, 46.

94 Tite, *The Manuscript Library of Sir Robert Cotton*, 48.

95 Ibid., 51.

– for the purpose."[96] The conclusion Tite draws is that Cotton, perhaps drawing inspiration from the medieval chronicles and annals in his collection, "was . . . endeavouring to provide something of an equivalent for his own time, thereby establishing an archive – as complete as he could make it – which he and others . . . might explore, in much the way that they quarried in the chronicles for the history of earlier times."[97]

Summit detects a similar intentionality in the Cleopatra E volumes[98] of Cotton's manuscript collection, which are organized into three broad groupings: documents relating to English ecclesiastical history from the 12th to the 16th century (E I–III); documents relating to the dissolution of the monasteries from 1536 to the 1540s (E IV); and documents relating to the Reformation from the 1530s to 1540s (E V–VI). Like Tite, Summit finds in the organization and framing of these volumes evidence that Cotton intended them to be "a multipart chronicle of English Reformation history, told through original sources."[99] The Cleopatra E volumes bring together a broad array of documents – including papal bulls and briefs, royal and ecclesiastical letters, registers of religious houses, proclamations, and religious tracts and treatises – that track the long history of Christianity in England and the political and legal conflicts between the popes and the English kings "from the first plantation of religion"[100] on English soil to Henry VIII's divorce and the royal supremacy over church and state. That history continues in the volumes that succeed and precede Cleopatra E. The Cleopatra F I–III volumes carry the Reformation narrative forward into the Elizabethan period; while the Cleopatra D I–IX volumes trace the pre-history of the Reformation by way of a history of the early English church told through chronicles, saints' lives, and other sources.[101]

Like the medieval chronicles they appear to emulate, Summit argues, the chronological ordering of the manuscript volumes "implied arguments about

96 Ibid., 52.

97 Ibid., 55–57.

98 For a detailed listing of the contents of the Cleopatra E volumes, see British Library, *Cotton Manuscripts*, 2578–92.

99 Summit, *Memory's Library*, 149.

100 British Library, *Cotton Manuscripts*, 2572.

101 Summit, *Memory's Library*, 151–52. For a detailed listing of the contents of the Cleopatra D and F volumes, see British Library, *Cotton Manuscripts*, 2553–71 and 2593–2605.

imminence, causality and precedent, topics that became critical to Reformation historiography," and thus "produce or suggest narratives that reflect the political and religio-historical concerns of their maker."[102] She cites as an example the assemblage of Anglo-Saxon sources at the beginning of the Cleopatra E volumes, which reflect the post-Reformation belief that English national identity was forged in the Anglo-Saxon period. She finds further evidence of Cotton's narrative framing and organizing practices in the sequential titles borne by the Cleopatra E I–III volumes; the essays about the history of the English church written by Cotton and fellow antiquaries, which preface the first volume; and the organizational notes written by him, which are found throughout.[103]

The Reformation narrative Cotton constructed through his collecting and compilation practices was carried forward into the works of 17th-century prose nonfiction writers such as William Camden, John Speed, and John Selden, all of whom were regular users of the Cotton library. Summit suggests that, for these users, the Cotton library was more than "a repository of documentary sources"; it also offered "an example of how to compile those sources to tell particular stories about the past."[104] Subsequent generations of scholars have drawn on Cotton's manuscript collection to tell their own particular stories about the English medieval past, and the various custodial and curatorial agents who have been responsible for preserving the collection over the past four centuries have added new layers to Cotton's original narrative by way of numerous restorations and transfers of custody.[105]

102 Summit, *Memory's Library*, 148–49.

103 Ibid., 151–52.

104 Ibid., 195–96.

105 See, for example, Prescott, "Their Present Miserable State of Cremation," 391–454; and de Hamel, *Posthumous Papers of the Manuscripts Club*, 171–213.

Reflecting on the Tacit Narratives in the Parker and Cotton Collections

The Reformation narrative woven into the manuscript collections of Parker and Cotton was determined by the deep sense of cultural and historical loss evoked by the dispersal of monastic libraries, antiquarian desire to recover and reconstruct the lost English Middle Ages through their surviving textual remains, and Reformation anxiety about national identity and religious ancestry. In the Parker library, a selective history of loss and reclamation took shape around collecting and preserving "monuments of antiquity" – historical sources that recalled and recuperated the ancient roots of England's Christianity – while suppressing and nullifying "monuments of superstition" – historical sources that perpetuated false Catholic doctrine and belief and undermined the true Protestant religion. In the Cotton library, a Reformation narrative was constructed through the artful compilation of original sources into a multipart chronicle that traced, through a decidedly Protestant post-Reformation lens, the long history of the English church and its relations with the papacy from Anglo-Saxon times to Henry VIII's royal supremacy. These narratives were supported and reinforced through framing devices, such as the addition of headings and marginal commentary, and through augmentation, including the incorporation of transcriptions into original manuscripts to fill gaps in the historical narrative.

Reflecting on the impact of Protestantism on Tudor historiography, David Womersley writes, "Protestantism required the complete rewriting of English history . . . a thorough remodeling of the English past in the light of Reformation. The recovery of true religion demanded nothing less than a root-and-branch rewriting of the English past."[106] The libraries built by Matthew Parker and Robert Cotton in the 16th and 17th centuries were critical sites for that root-and-branch rewriting. They functioned as sites for the preservation of legitimate historical knowledge and the rehabilitation of "ancient records and monuments" salvaged from monastic libraries; placing these records in the Parker and Cotton libraries removed the taint of their monastic provenance. Summit believes that the archive of the English Reformation Parker and Cotton constructed through their collecting and organizing practices "reflected a concerted program of demystification, which was directed at neutralizing monastic books' appeals to sacred and

106 David Womersley, "Against the Teleology of Technique," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 68, no. 1–2 (2005): 103.

miraculous authority."[107] Parker sought to neutralize monastic books' appeals to sacred authority by banishing hagiographic texts from his library. Cotton allowed these texts entry into his collection but then neutralized them through context, binding them together with other original sources and making them part of the history of the Reformation. The result was that texts "that had hitherto been the subject of reverence were transformed into historical artefacts, into testimonies to the delusion of previous generations."[108] These efforts to neutralize through erasure and recontextualization align with Ketelaar's characterization of the archive as "an infinite activation of the record." As he elaborates, "every interaction, intervention, interrogation, and interpretation . . . is an activation of the record. . . . Each activation leaves fingerprints which are attributes to the archive's infinite meaning. . . . Every activation also changes the significance of earlier activations."[109] The documents and collections that were incorporated into the manuscript collections of Parker and Cotton entered those collections carrying with them a long history of activations by previous creators, collectors, and custodians, including activations initiated by the monasteries themselves.[110] Their reactivation by Parker and Cotton reshaped those meanings and overlaid them with new ones.

The efforts of Parker and Cotton to shore up a post-Reformation vision of the English Reformation through the selective rescue and reshaping of pre-Reformation documents have been described by scholars as reformations in their own right. Robinson likens the work undertaken by Parker and his associates to collect, "correct," and publish sources of medieval history to a "textual reformation," because that work was directed toward the production of "a usable past for Protestant England. English history would be reformed by reforming its texts."[111] Summit regards Cotton's collecting practices as the enactment of "a kind of bibliographic Reformation" because it entailed "redirecting [pre-Reformation]

107 Summit, *Memory's Library*, 8.

108 Walsham, "History, Memory, and the English Reformation," 908–9.

109 Ketelaar, "Tacit Narratives," 137–38.

110 James Carley observes that "most lamentations over the dissolution of the monasteries seem implicitly to suggest that monastic collections remained in a static state throughout the Middle Ages like insects trapped in amber. In fact, the monasteries themselves had weeded out and recycled over the centuries: many medieval manuscripts have flyleaves or covers taken from much more ancient texts." Carley, "Monastic Collections and Their Dispersal," 347.

111 Robinson, "Darke Speech," 1064.

manuscript materials from monks to antiquarians. . . . The Cotton Library became a laboratory for a particular form of scholarly alchemy, in which the straw of medieval belief could be spun into the gold of early modern knowledge."[112]

Rethinking Traditional Archival Assumptions about Manuscript Collections in Light of the Early History of the Parker and Cotton Collections

The histories of the Parker and Cotton manuscript collections that I have drawn upon in this article reflect the reorientation of social histories of archives toward "archiving-as-process rather than archives-as-things"[113] because they focus attention on the production processes and power relations underpinning the formation, preservation, and use of those collections. In so doing, they respond to the need for archival research that devotes more time and energy to elucidating the value of archives as "repositories of meanings" and perhaps less time to asserting "the traditional values [of] authenticity, originality, and uniqueness."[114]

In the context of the Parker and Cotton collections, such a reorientation invites us to see differently an archival genre long excluded from traditional definitions of archives. Late 19th- and early-20th-century archival writers found the heterogenous and multi-provenancial nature of manuscript collections impossible to reconcile with their understanding of the nature of archives. As Terry Eastwood observes, they "often contrast[ed] the naturalness of archives with the artificiality of collections of archival documents or copies of them brought together from various sources as a result of the interest of the collector, according to some determined theme or for some overt historical purpose."[115] In their *Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives*, Muller, Feith, and Fruin drew a clear distinction between the formation of archives and that of historical manuscript collections:

112 Summit, *Memory's Library*, 138.

113 Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain*, 32, 20.

114 Ketelaar, "Tacit Narratives," 139.

115 Terry Eastwood, "A Contested Realm: The Nature of Archives and the Orientation of Archival Science," in *Currents of Archival Thinking*, 2nd ed., ed. Heather MacNeil and Terry Eastwood (Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited, 2017), 6.

> An archival collection comes into being as the result of the activities of an administrative body or of an official and . . . it is always the reflection of the functions of that body or of that official. An archival collection therefore is not arbitrarily created in the way that historical manuscripts are accumulated. . . . On the contrary, an archival collection is an organic whole, a living organism, which grows, takes shape and undergoes changes in accordance with fixed rules.[116]

In the English translation of the *Manual* from which the quotation above is taken, the term *archival collection* is synonymous with the Dutch word *archief* and is intended "to render the idea of an organic archival whole."[117]

Jenkinson drew a similar distinction between archives and "collections" and insisted that

> Archives are not collected: I wish the word "Collection" could be banished from the Archivist's vocabulary, if only to establish that important fact. They are not there, or they should not be, because someone brought them together with the idea that they would be useful to Students of the future, or prove a point or illustrate a theory. They came together, and reached their final arrangement, by a natural process. . . . They have consequently a structure, an articulation and a natural relationship between parts which are essential to their significance. . . . Archive quality only survives unimpaired so long as this natural form and relationship are maintained.[118]

For Jenkinson, another essential characteristic of archival documents was their authenticity, which depended on "the possibility of proving an unblemished line of responsible custodians."[119] Here, too, historical manuscript collections fell

116 S. Muller, J.A. Feith, and R. Fruin, *Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives*, 2nd ed., trans. Arthur H. Leavitt, with new introductions by Peter Horsman, Eric Ketelaar, Theo Thomasson, and Marjorie Rabe Barritt (1940; repr., Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2003), 19.

117 Ibid., 13, fn. 1.

118 Hilary Jenkinson, "The English Archivist: A New Profession," in *Selected Writings of Sir Hilary Jenkinson*, ed. Roger H. Ellis and Peter Walne (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2003), 238–39.

119 Hilary Jenkinson, *A Manual of Archive Administration* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1922), 11.

short. The documents brought together in such collections arrived at their final destinations through varied and circuitous routes; their authenticity, therefore, could not be presumed and had to be proven by means other than continuous custody. Jenkinson concluded that since manuscript collections failed to meet the criteria of naturalness and authenticity they lacked "archive quality" and therefore did not belong in an archives:

> The British Museum, for example, has a collection of Administrative documents which is formed out of the wreck of hundreds of earlier sets of muniments: an interesting, valuable, and beautiful accumulation which is, of course, admirably selected and most carefully conserved. No Archivist could wish (it is almost superfluous to say) for better guardianship or custody than these documents receive. At the same time no Archivist, . . . could possibly allow full Archive value to documents which have been violently torn from the connexion in which they were originally preserved, a connexion which in nine cases out of ten is important, if not vital, for the full understanding of their significance.[120]

In Jenkinson's view, the proper place for manuscript collections was in a library or, as in the example above, in the Department of Manuscripts of the British Museum, which eventually became part of the British Library.

The ambivalence of early archival writers toward manuscript collections is a far cry from the moral panic engendered by "monuments of superstition" among Parker and his circle. Nevertheless, a rhetoric of purity/innocence versus contamination/corruption can be read into the distinction they made between archival documents and documents in manuscript collections. Jenkinson, for example, described administrative documents found in manuscript collections as documents that had once possessed but had now lost their archive quality, implying a fall from grace. In contemporary archival literature, the distinction between fonds and collections continues to be made, but the ambivalence has been replaced by more nuanced examinations of their complementary natures. The dichotomy posited between "organic" fonds and "artificial" collections has proven unsustainable when considered in light of archival-turn scholarship,

120 Jenkinson, *A Manual of Archive Administration*, 42.

which has demonstrated the highly constructed nature of fonds and the ways in which they too are shaped by particular interests and ideological commitments. The studies of the Parker and Cotton collections lend historical depth to these discussions. They also complement the aims of initiatives within the archival field, such as the biannual International Conference on the History of Records and Archives (ICHORA) and the Archival Discourses research network, that seek to broaden and deepen the study of archival history and to foster critical histories of archival traditions, theories, and practices.[121]

Conclusion

Alexandra Walsham maintains that research into the social history of early modern archives drives home the point that "archival cultures are historically specific and contingent" and thus act as "a corrective and a prophylactic: to highlight the dangers of projecting back onto that past anachronistic models of the archive that are artefacts of the preoccupations of the era in which it was institutionalized in its modern form."[122] The early history of the Parker and Cotton manuscript collections offers a useful corrective to Robert-Henri Bautier's characterization of the early modern period as the age of archives as "arsenals of authority," a conventional trope in archival history.[123] As Walsham observes, "records and archives [in the early modern period] functioned not merely as muniments, but also as monuments and memorials that bore witness

121 The first ICHORA conference was held in Toronto in October 2003. Its aims are described in Barbara L. Craig, Philip B. Eppard, and Heather MacNeil, "Exploring Perspectives and Themes for Histories of Records and Archives (I-CHORA): The First International Conference on the History of Records and Archives (I-CHORA I)," *Archivaria* 60 (Fall 2005): 1–10. Papers from ICHORA conferences have been published in numerous archival journals; a case in point is this article, which is a revised and expanded version of a paper originally delivered at the 10th ICHORA, which was held online from July 25–29, 2022, and hosted virtually by the National Archives (UK) and the Forum for Archives and Records Management Education and Research (FARMER). The Archival Discourses network was formed in 2018; its founder and convenor is James Lowry, associate professor in the School of Library and Information Studies at Queen's College, CUNY. The network's objectives and initiatives may be found on the network's website at https://archivaldiscourses.org/about/. An example of a publication that has emerged from the network is James Lowry and Heather MacNeil, eds., "Archival Thinking: Genealogies and Archaeologies," special issue, *Archival Science* 21, no. 1 (2021): 1–116.

122 Walsham, "The Social History of the Archive," 12.

123 Robert-Henri Bautier, "La phase cruciale de l'histoire des archives: La constitution des dépôts d'archives et la naissance de l'archivistique (XVIe – début du XIXe siècle)," *Archivum* 18 (1968): 140.

to the presence of historical consciousness and of an impulse to preserve the past for the future."[124]

The studies of the Parker and Cotton collections illustrate some of the ways in which historians are contributing to a social history of archives that is grounded in an understanding of archivalization and archiving as "socially and culturally situated practices" and directed toward uncovering the multiple layers of meaning – tacit narratives – embedded in those practices. As the monographs and special thematic issues of journals cited early in this article attest, these studies are part of a growing body of research exploring the complex commitments that shaped the formation, preservation, and use of early modern archives; the richness and diversity of the documentation collected and preserved; and the manifold ways in which that documentation was classified, framed, and deployed to legitimize a particular vision of the past. This research has succeeded in deepening, extending, and troubling the foundations of archival history and, in so doing, may be seen as enacting a kind of reformation in itself.

124 Walsham, "The Social History of the Archive," 15.

BIOGRAPHY Heather MacNeil is a professor in the Faculty of Information at the University of Toronto. Her research and writing revolve around archival history and theory, archival representational practices, and histories of knowledge organization within and across archives, museums, and libraries.