

# REVIEW

## Holinshed and Company

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**Paulina Kewes, Ian W. Archer, and Felicity Heal, editors**

*The Oxford Handbook of Holinshed's "Chronicles"*

OXFORD: OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2013

XXXVII + 772 pages; ISBN: 9780199565757

☞ AT NEARLY EIGHT HUNDRED PAGES and with chapters from forty-three contributors, this volume in the excellent Oxford Handbooks of Literature series is a fittingly capacious companion to the massive multi-authored text called Holinshed's *Chronicles*. The name Holinshed is shorthand for the group of publishers, editors, writers, translators, and revisers responsible for the two distinct editions of this landmark work of Elizabethan historiography. Thanks to the initiative of the *Handbook's* editors, the *Chronicles* can now be considered texts worthy of close scrutiny in their own right, rather than as sources or intertexts for more "literary" works. Kewes, Archer, and Heal have done for the *Chronicles* what other scholars have recently done for the King James Bible, John Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*, and John Stow's *Survey of London* by bringing famous but under-studied early modern books to the forefront of scholarship. Like the Foxe and Stow projects, the Holinshed project has also produced an invaluable digital edition of the text(s): <http://www.cems.ox.ac.uk/holinshed>.

Part 1 of the *Handbook*, on "The Making of Holinshed," explores the origins of the *Chronicles*; the physical characteristics of the book, including its illustrations; the sources used in the two editions; and the vexed question of censorship. Felicity Heal and Henry Summerson chart the history of the project, nearly thirty years in the making, from its conception to the revised and expanded edition of 1587. They stress the centrality of Dutch-born stationer Reginald Wolfe, whose initial plan was for an ambitious "Universall Cosmographie." Wolfe died before a scaled-back work combining chorography and historical narrative was completed, leaving his assistant Raphael Holinshed to coordinate publication of the two-volume edition of 1577. When

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Holinshed died in 1581, Abraham Fleming took over his role and, with a new consortium of writers and publishers, produced an enlarged and revised second edition. Aaron Pratt and David Kastan in “Printers, Publishers, and the *Chronicles* as Artefact” situate the work in the marketplace of print, survey the competition, and explore the financial risks to publishers of such a large-scale project. They also examine the printing-house practices of Henry Bynneman and Henry Denham, the printers of the first and second editions respectively, and the use they made of a royal patent to print all English histories.

Complicating matters for printers and publishers was the government’s recall of copies of both editions shortly after they went on sale. Cyndia Clegg’s essay on censorship debunks the idea that the *Chronicles* fell victim to the draconian licensing practices of the Elizabethan state. The changes demanded in both editions, far from suggesting a paranoid government’s sensitivity to the least slight, targeted unflattering depictions of living people, or passages that might upset allies or threaten social order. Nor, as critics have claimed, were the publishers of the *Chronicles* scofflaws who tried to avoid the proper prepublication licensing of their book by the church authorities. This requirement, Clegg points out, was waived for books like the *Chronicles* that carried a royal privilege.

Several chapters in this part focus on the differences between the two editions. Perhaps the most striking of these is the second edition’s lack of illustrations, given that the first included nearly 1,300 images. For James Knapp, neither censorship nor cost-cutting can account for this absence; he argues that the printers no longer owned most of the woodblocks and that by 1587 woodcut illustrations would have made the book seem old-fashioned. Knapp laments this visual absence because, he claims, in their diversity and strategic placement the illustrations enriched the reader’s engagement with the written text.

The chapters in part 2, “Historiography,” challenge the view that by 1577 the *Chronicles* were an outmoded form of history writing because of their annalistic structure and overinclusiveness. Chapters by Alexandra Gillespie and Oliver Harris on the native chronicle tradition, and by Wyman Herendeen on the *Chronicles*’ influence on later historians, see the *Chronicles* instead as a hybrid work that incorporates an array of historiographical discourses. Other chapters in this section focus on how the *Chronicles* engaged with other scholarship about the nation’s past by John Leland, Edward Hall, and Foxe. Daniel Woolf, today’s leading scholar of the early modern historical imagination, surveys representations of the past at the time of the *Chronicles* in other parts of the world, including the Levant and east Asia. He discovers that, although very different in form, these accounts often share core political concerns with the *Chronicles*.

Part 3, “Form, Style, and Reception,” includes chapters on the genres, rhetoric, and narrative strategies of the *Chronicles*, as well as studies of “Holinshed and the Classics,” and “Shows and Pageants.” Like Herendeen in the previous part and Bart van Es later on, Felicity Heal argues in “Readership and Reception” for the lingering influence

of the *Chronicles* on early modern readers and writers despite mockery of the genre by members of a literary avant-garde. Heal's chapter is notable for its examination of marginalia in surviving copies of the *Chronicles*, where owners' jottings reveal how the text was used for various educational, antiquarian, and polemical purposes. The creative ways in which actual readers responded to the *Chronicles* suggest to Heal that the work offered a broad "cultural history of Britain" and engendered a "plurality" of views about the past (372).

Like many of the contributors, Heal draws on Annabel Patterson's landmark 1994 book, *Reading Holinshed's "Chronicles."* Patterson claims that the *Chronicles*, with their many authors, sources, and editions, spoke with conflicting voices and that Holinshed in particular refrained from adjudicating among them, preferring readers to construct meaning for themselves. Patterson's notion of the *Chronicles*' "multivocality" surfaces in part 4's exploration of their treatment of contemporary political topics like the nature of monarchy, the Tudor dynasty, social order, religion, and war. While the *Handbook's* contributors debate whether multivocality is just a function of the *Chronicles*' composition or a deliberate narrative strategy, they are all reluctant to endorse Patterson's further claim that the book promoted a proto-liberalism by encouraging free speech and a suspicion of authoritarianism (see 415, 442). John Watts's study of "Monarchy" in the *Chronicles* argues that they generally uphold the principle of hereditary succession, the naturalness of a single ruler, and the limited role of Parliament. Ian Archer argues in "Social Order and Disorder" that the *Chronicles* not only idealized the Tudor commonwealth—by depicting sovereign, aristocracy, middling sort, and commoners working together in harmony—but also laid bare its shortcomings, by exposing failures in the moral economy of charity and hospitality. He focuses especially on William Harrison's use of "a reformist rhetoric widespread and tolerated from the pulpits so long as it did not descend to . . . the naming and shaming of individuals" (399). Turning to "Religious Ideology," Peter Marshall probes the *Chronicles*' generally Protestant orientation to reveal "competition and contestation" among varieties of reformed and unreformed opinion (415). For Marshall, the multivocal quality of the work is indicative not of a tolerant pluralism but of "a profoundly unstable and fractured" text (416). The result for readers is a disconcerting dissonance as they try to make sense, for example, of the text's inconsistent handling of Foxe's influential narrative. Thomas Freeman and Susannah Monta make a similar argument in their chapter in part 2 on "Holinshed and Foxe." Marshall concludes that, despite the efforts of Abraham Fleming, the general editor of the second edition, to manipulate reader response through more assertive Protestant glosses, the revised *Chronicles* still failed to deliver a coherent reformed message. In "Providentialism," Alexandra Walsham locates the *Chronicles*' multivocality in their "juxtaposition . . . of rival mechanisms of historical causation," such as divine intervention and human agency. Walsham's chapter challenges the idea that a late sixteenth-century "historical revolution" inspired by Italian humanist thought swept away both the chronicle form and its underlying providentialism. She argues that the "vitality and resilience" of

providentialist thinking in the *Chronicles* is not some leftover from a medieval worldview but reflects contemporary Protestant views about God's control of human affairs (429).

Highlights of part 5, "Literary Appropriations," include Paulina Kewes's examination of "History Plays and the Royal Succession." Kewes finds in the *Chronicles* "several frameworks within which to ponder the succession," including the possibility of an elected monarchy (498). She shows how, in the 1580s and early 1590s, plays like *The Troublesome Reign of King John* and *The True Tragedie of Richard the Third* drew on these frameworks to stage a surprising range of solutions to the constitutional crisis facing England near the end of Elizabeth's reign. Other chapters in this section include Richard McCabe on "Spenser and Holinshed," Gilliam Wright on "Daniel and Holinshed," and Richard Dutton on "Shakespeare and British History." Dutton argues that when Shakespeare wrote about the nation's mythical past in *King Lear* and *Cymbeline*, he found in the *Chronicles* not just "narrative information" but also a way of writing history that encouraged the creative mixing of approaches (527). Shakespeare drew on the *Chronicles* in often puzzling ways—in *Lear* evoking Holinshed's account of Corineus and Gogmagog during Gloucester's "fall" at Dover, for example, or in *Cymbeline* using the names but not the characteristics of figures found in Holinshed. These disorienting textual moments, argues Dutton, weave historical fact and legend to disrupt audience expectations and direct its attention to topical anxieties like succession and national unity.

Part 6, on "Archipelagic Holinshed," begins with Philip Schwyzer's examination of "the cultural logic of the *Chronicles*' spatial coverage, with reference to contemporary and historical ways of imagining the Atlantic Archipelago (or 'British Isles') as a geographical entity" (593). Whereas earlier chronicles had been either universal in scope or limited to England, Holinshed's project broke with tradition by covering England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland. Schwyzer shows how the *Chronicles*' attention to the British Isles evoked an ancient Britain unified under a single ruler, as well as recent attempts by Reformation polemicists like Leland and Humphrey Llywd to construct a Protestant Britain that subsumed English, Welsh, and Scottish identities. For Schwyzer, the *Chronicles* waver between imagining these countries as forming an integrated unit and thinking of them as largely independent territories that shared little more than borders. The other chapters in this section support Schwyzer's sense that the *Chronicles* unsettle the belief that a unified Britain ever had or would exist. Roger Mason shows that, although the sections on Scotland are based on the writings of Scottish nationalists like Hector Boece and George Buchanan, the *Chronicles*' editors insist on England's historic suzerainty over Scotland. Like the Scottish section of the *Chronicles*, the section on Ireland, as Colm Lennon demonstrates, is the product of a "multi-layered scholarship" incorporating Anglo-Norman, English, Irish, Catholic, and Protestant perspectives. Lennon argues that even after John Hooker, a supporter of "English Protestant imperialism in Ireland," revised the Irish section in the book's second edition to reflect his own agenda, dissenting ideological views were still evident (664).

This comprehensive collection of essays marks a major step forward in reclaiming a largely overlooked, but profoundly influential and interesting, early modern book. The essays offer new insights into the *Chronicles*' intriguing textual and ideological complexity, laying the groundwork for further research. *The Oxford Handbook of Holinshed's "Chronicles"* is a major achievement and will be welcomed by early modern scholars of all stripes.

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