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Popular Culture in England, c. 1500–1850

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TIM HARRIS

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For Peter Burke

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Preface

Over the past few decades there has been a great expansion of interest in studying history 'from below'. More and more scholars have begun to shift their focus from the learned and educated few at the top of society and started to pay greater attention to exploring the ideas, values, assumptions and aspirations of ordinary people. As a result, a whole new field of enquiry has opened up, namely the study of what has come to be labelled 'popular culture'. Scholars working in this field have laid down a powerful interpretative paradigm concerning what was happening to popular culture in early modern England. The period between c. 1500 and 1850, it has been argued, saw an increasing polarisation between the culture of the elite and that of ordinary people, with the result that by the middle of the nineteenth century a great cultural chasm existed between the upper and lower classes, the high and low, the respectable and the vulgar. Two broad forces have been identified as responsible for bringing about this transformation: first, the attack on popular culture from above, by moral and religious reformers; and second, the transforming effect of certain social and economic changes, such as the rise of literacy, the commercialisation of society, the enclosure movement, the rapid growth of cities, and the impact of the Scientific Revolution. In recent years, however, historians have become increasingly critical of this interpretative framework: some have questioned the appropriateness of the two-tier model of cultural conflict, which seems to obscure the important place occupied by the middling sort in English society; others have pointed to the diversities within popular culture itself (such as regional diversities), which seem to make it difficult to talk of 'a popular culture' in the singular; still others have raised questions about the alleged chronology of cultural transformation during the early modern period. There has also emerged a recognition that more attention needs to be paid to the cultural space occupied by women, for it is by no means clear that women experienced or participated in popular culture in the same way as did men from similar social backgrounds. As our revisionism proceeds, some historians have even begun to doubt whether the term 'popular culture' is a particularly meaningful analytical category.

The time was thought ripe, therefore, for a volume which would explore some of the major issues about 'popular culture' in early modern England in the light of recent critical trends. Given the broad nature of the field, it was thought wiser to put together a collection of essays on specific themes written by experts in particular areas of research, rather than for one author to attempt a broad work of synthesis; we felt that the end-result would offer more in-depth analyses and more penetrating insights into what are unquestionably very complex historical problems than could ever be achieved by an individual working on his or her own. It is true that as recently as 1985 Barry Reay published an excellent collection of essays exploring various aspects of popular culture in his *Popular Culture in Seventeenth-Century England* (London: Croom Helm, 1985), but his edition focused exclusively on the seventeenth century. Many of the interesting questions about popular culture that still need to be addressed centre on changes that happened over the longer time period, from (broadly speaking) the Reformation to the Industrial Revolution. This volume has been assembled, therefore, not as an alternative to Reay's, but rather as a complement to it, building on that book's important findings, but exploring issues which it was unable to address because of its more limited chronological time frame.

Contributions have been solicited from those who could draw on their own scholarly expertise to investigate certain key themes in early modern English popular culture which, we thought, had either been insufficiently explored or were in need of fresh examination. David Underdown, for example, looks at regional variations in popular culture. Two of the chapters – those by Susan Amussen and Patricia Seleski – focus on women. Three chapters look at what have been identified as some of the crucial agencies of change, and seek to reassess their impact: Jonathan Barry looks at literacy and popular literature and examines whether it is appropriate to talk of a growing divide between a literate, respectable culture and the oral world of popular tradition; Martin Ingram explores the enormous sea-changes effected in the religious culture of English society by the Reformation and its aftermath; Roy Porter investigates certain aspects of the impact on popular culture wrought by both the alleged rise of scientific rationalism and the commercialisation of society in Georgian England in his chapter on the hitherto largely neglected field of medicine. The last two chapters look at different

aspects of the culture of the lower orders towards the end of the early modern period, to shed light on the issues of how much had changed and how resilient to change that culture proved to be. John Rule takes an urban perspective, looking at custom and resistance in the workplace between 1700 and 1850, whilst Bob Bushaway takes us into the countryside with his examination of alternative belief in nineteenth-century rural England. My own introductory chapter seeks to raise critical questions about our conceptualisation of popular culture and the way we should approach its study, in the hope of providing an appropriate context for the essays which follow.

As editor of this volume I have accumulated numerous debts along the way. I am particularly grateful to Peter Burke, who initially suggested the idea of putting this volume together. Despite certain differences of opinion which will emerge in my own chapter, I trust our friendship will survive this book; my personal debts to him will ever remain immense. Martin Ingram provided much intellectual input and constructive advice; if in the end I was not as radical as he perhaps would have liked in my attack on the notion of 'popular culture', my own thinking about these issues has certainly been sharpened as a result of our discussions. I should also like to thank Keith Wrightson for many stimulating conversations over the years on the subject of early modern English social history more generally, in places as far afield as Cambridge (England), the other Cambridge (Massachusetts) and Claremont (California). In addition, Bob Scribner has been very influential in shaping the way I think about popular culture in early modern Europe; what I owe to him will be apparent from the pages of my chapter. I benefited enormously from the discussions I had with the students in my graduate seminar on a number of the topics explored in this volume; in particular I am indebted to Susannah Ottaway, who not only read a number of draft chapters, but even carried various materials back and forth across the Atlantic for me on one of her trips to England. Above all, I need to offer my deepest thanks to my contributors and the publishers for their patience and support whilst I was putting this collection together. As these things always seem to, the whole process took much longer than I thought; I apologise for the long delay and hope they feel that, in the end, it was worth it.