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Introduction

It is not surprising that many early copies of William Camden's *Britannia* (1586) contain handwritten annotations. After all, the text features hundreds of densely packed place names and antiquities. What is surprising is the uneven distribution of these notes. In one first edition copy, an anonymous early modern reader's marginal jottings are strictly confined to the Midlands section. In a volume published fourteen years later, a vigilant hand has written notes in the chapters on Leicestershire, Lincolnshire, and Rutlandshire to ensure that obliquely mentioned Nottinghamshire places are not wrongly ascribed to these other counties. A 1610 *Britannia* contains manuscript notes in several hands. One reader contributes copious marginalia, but only for the adjoining counties of Essex and Hertfordshire. The flowery brown calligraphy seems especially concerned with keeping up with the prominent gentry families of the neighborhood. Meanwhile, a scratchy black script appears for only a ten-page stretch in the section on the West Riding of Yorkshire. This reader turned writer provides a running list of the prominent place names mentioned in the text. A third hand, made orange by age, seems to have been particularly engaged by Camden's description of a minor river in Surrey: 'Not farre from hence the cleere riveret Wandle in Latin Vandalis, so full of the best trouts, issueth forth from his head . . . where by a tuft of trees upon an hil-top there are to be seene manifest signes of a pretty towne, and diverse wels built of flint stone' (299). In the adjacent margin, the reader has drawn a diminutive hand with index finger extended towards the passage, as if to quaintly underscore its importance. Then, on the fold-out map of Surrey, tucked neatly into the text five pages earlier, the same orange ink has been employed to write the label 'Wandle flu' next to the appropriate river, once at its source and then again a few inches away along the main channel. This gesture
is made all the more extraordinary because Camden has not labeled any of the rivers on the map – not even the Thames. Clearly, the River Wandle meant something to this reader. Maybe he was from the pretty town on the lush hilltop at the source of the Wandle, or maybe he had once enjoyed a memorable day of trout fishing in this same ‘cleere riveret.’ Whatever the cause, the surviving marginalia testifies to the importance of this local place for this anonymous person.

The late sixteenth century has been frequently described as a time of burgeoning nationhood. Fueled by expansive texts like Camden’s *Britannia*, English men and women were beginning to imagine and take pride in the nation. But even if such a lofty goal was Camden’s intention, it is hard to say what the *Britannia*’s actual effect was. The evidence above suggests that at least some people read Camden ‘locally.’ That is, they read the *Britannia* for what it had to say about their own particular region, county, or neighborhood rather than for the nationalistic picture that it provided. At times, they even augmented Camden’s text (and maps) by adding emphasis to the things that mattered to them most. These local responses are not incompatible with nationhood, but they do remind us of the continued importance of the local sphere in the early modern period.

It was the Victorians who first associated the Tudor age with the birth of the nation. They saw the formation of the Protestant church, the colonization of the New World, the defeat of the Spanish Armada, and the forceful personalities of monarchs like Henry VIII and Elizabeth I as catalysts for the formation of the English nation. In our own day, this perception has persisted. Richard Helgerson’s seminal *Forms of Nationhood: The Elizabethan Writing of England* (1992) argued that the generation of English writers working in the late sixteenth century ‘engendered . . . a national cultural formation.’ Subsequent literary critics have been eager to demonstrate how the new English nation was ‘imagined’ and constructed by writers like Sidney, Spenser, Drayton, Camden, Hakluyt, Coke, Shakespeare, and Jonson. Rather than focusing on particular writers, other scholars have sought to isolate and examine particular factors that promoted the emergence of nationhood, like maps, historiography, biblical rhetoric, language standardization, the Protestant calendar, and even the wool cloth industry. More recently, scholars have begun to further complicate constructions of nationhood by looking at how it was affected by the growth of empire and the question of Britishness.

While insightful, these studies have tended to overlook the importance of local identity in the period, suggesting that it was either swept away by or absorbed into the forces of nationhood. This book will explore
the vitality of early modern local consciousness. Even in an age of emerging nationhood, English men and women were still profoundly influenced by – and even drew their primary identity from – the parish, the town, and the county. This book examines how early modern writers invoke local places, traditions, and ways of thinking to respond to the larger political, religious, and cultural changes of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Far from functioning merely as a retreat from nationhood, local consciousness emerges as a dynamic site of negotiation where broader changes are interrogated, modified, and adapted to the needs of smaller communities. The first chapter will discuss the historical basis of local identity and describe the ways in which it was transformed in the second half of the sixteenth century. Each of the succeeding five chapters then focuses on a specific author and historical moment, and explores how local habits of thought are invoked to respond to a particular national initiative (political centralization, religious uniformity, court culture, civil war, and empire). Together, these chapters illustrate both the pervasiveness of local discourse and the range of possible responses to nationhood that it engendered.
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