

A SELECTION OF SOURCES FOR TUDOR HISTORY

THE USE OF SOURCES

Sources are documents which were written during, or very close to, the period to which they relate.

They may be records, such as the proceedings of courts, councils or other formal meetings.

They may be letters which record the development of negotiations, or express the writer's opinions about what was going on.

They may be what is broadly called 'literature'.

In the latter category come not only poems and plays, which interpret contemporary events (or the human situation in general) in an imaginative way, but also chronicles and histories, and the theological and liturgical writings of the church.

Sources put the student directly in touch with his or her subject in a way which no secondary scholarship can do, but they also need to be used with caution.

Sixteenth century writers had their own agendas and these need (as far as possible) to be taken into account.

Sometimes we know what these were...

John Foxe wrote his *Actes and Monuments* (commonly known as *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* to destroy the credibility of the Catholic Church.

Thomas More wrote one of his works to discredit **Richard III**.

Eustace Chapuys (Charles V's ambassador in England), was bitterly hostile to Henry VIII, and did his best to undermine him – and so on.

But often we do not know what the motives of individual writers were, and therefore do not know what correctives to apply.

However information can to some extent be distinguished from opinion.

If an ambassador says that he has just attended a court ceremony, or spoken to a named person, he is probably writing the truth;

but if he is reporting the opinions of those he spoke to, then he may not be.

Ambassadors tell their employers what they think they want to hear, just as popular writers will write for their market.

So sources need to be used carefully.

They are expressing contemporary views, not necessarily recording facts.

Consequently it is always useful to cite more than one source if an event is being described.

In the same way, context is essential.

To quote a document out of context is to abuse it, and the fact that sixteenth century writers frequently did just that is not an excuse for the modern student to imitate them.

It is particularly important to bear this in mind now that the fashion in study is for 'bite sized' fragments to be used in isolation.

If you have to comment on an extract, always try to look at the whole document from which it has been taken.

The sentiment expressed in the extract may be quite untypical of the writer's overall view, and may even have been cited for confutation.

Foxe, for example, frequently uses plausible catholic arguments in order to give his heroes and heroines the chance to demolish them.

All the sources listed below are 'whole' documents; none are extracts or collections of extracts, the only partial exception being the calendars in the third section.

The first section consists of works which were printed at the time, and were consequently in the public domain from the start. Sometimes manuscript versions survive, and sometimes not.

The second section consists of 'modern' – that is not contemporary – editions.

Some of these documents may have been circulated at the time, but none was in the public domain in the same sense as a printed work. Often we do not know why they were compiled, and the writer's agenda is therefore unusually elusive.

Most of these editions have extensive notes and introductions, which should always be consulted when the document is being studied as a source.

The third section consists of collections put together by 'modern' scholars (some are as old as the eighteenth century).

It must be remembered that a calendar is not a collection of extracts.

Each document is either transcribed or fully summarised.

Those written in foreign languages (Latin, French, Italian and Spanish for the most part) are translated; and here another note of caution must be injected.

When quoting a translation, it must be remembered that the translator may have an agenda as well as the author.

Although for most practical purposes such collections as the Venetian and Spanish Calendars are accurate enough, it cannot be taken for granted that the editor/translator has not suppressed or distorted part of the text.

Generally speaking the more recent the translation, the less likely that is to have happened.

If these calendars are being used to reconstruct a sequence of events, then independent checks are more valuable than usual.

Different types of source are therefore useful for different purposes, and should not be treated as though they were all of equal authority.

Record sources are the most reliable, but also the most limited.

They only include what was useful and relevant to the body keeping the record.

So in the case of a royal court, we may get the indictment of the offender, the date of the trial, the names of the jurors, the plea and the verdict – but no clue as to the evidence offered.

In the case of a Chronicle we may get an arbitrary selection of events designed to serve the purposes of a patron or institution with which the writer was connected.

Letters and working memoranda are probably the most useful to the historian, specifically because they were not (usually) intended to be read by anyone other than the recipient.

Agendas are also frequently known, or can be readily reconstructed.

Sixteenth century men and women were no more honest and transparent in their dealings than people are today, and what they chose to put down on papers was only a fraction of what they said, or thought, or did.

Contemporary Printed works

1. HALL's CHRONICLE

The correct title of this work is *The union of the two noble and illustre families of York and Lancaster*.

Edward Hall was a member of parliament in the middle years of Henry VIII, and his objective was to write a panegyric of the House of Tudor, particularly of Henry VIII.

The title is an allusion to the reconciling of the rival factions of the Wars of the Roses through the marriage of Henry VII to Elizabeth of York.

The work is particularly useful in its descriptions of tournaments and court ceremonies such as masques and mayings, but as a political history it is patchy and unreliable.

Like most commentators, for example, the poet John Skelton, he was hostile to Wolsey, whom he regarded as a malign influence on the king.

The part covering the reign of Henry VII is practically a translation of Polydore Vergil (qv), and Hall's original text finished in

1532. There is alleged to have been an edition published in 1542, but no copy survives and it is probably fictitious.[1]

The first authentic edition was issued in 1548, the last fifteen years of Henry VIII's reign having been put together by the publisher, Richard Grafton, from Hall's notes.

The standard edition is by Henry Ellis (London 1809), following the antiquarian interests of that period.

There is a more recent version by Charles Whibley (London 1904) in two volumes, but that starts only with the accession of Henry VIII.

Hall was extensively used by later chroniclers such as Stow (qv) and Holinshed (qv).

The main part of his chronicle, covering the years 1509 – 1532 has the great merit of being a contemporary account by a well informed writer – but his agenda must be born in mind.

Notes

1. A.F. Pollard, 'The Bibliographical history of Hall's Chronicle', *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, x, 1932, 12-17.