

Michael Drayton's *Poly-Olbion*: Britain's First Antiquarian Epic

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A 'poet historical'

Michael Drayton (1561–1631) has never been the most fashionable of English poets. Modern literary accounts, if they discuss him at all, tend to represent him as a 'belated' writer: as a poet with an essentially Elizabethan worldview, who had the misfortune to live out more than half his adult life after Queen Elizabeth I had died in 1603, and as a writer whose work was defined by a powerful nostalgia for that earlier era. The American scholar Richard Hardin, for example, characterized him as a writer who was 'as conservative in poetry as he was in politics', and who 'continued writing the kinds of verse that had already been out of date in his youth'.¹

However, whilst Drayton was undoubtedly both a conservative and a nostalgic writer, such views seriously underestimate his significance as a 'poet historical' (a term invented by his contemporary Edmund Spenser [1552?–1599]), and his lifetime of experimenting with different forms and genres of history. Drayton, as the critic Bart Van Es has recently observed, sought to enact 'a newly explicit interaction between literary and historical texts'.² He was also one of the most thoughtful contributors to the classic literary critical debate about the relationship between poetry and history: a debate whose roots lay in Aristotle's *Poetics*, the foundational work for European aesthetics.

For Aristotle and his Renaissance imitators such as Sir Philip Sidney (1554–86), the essential difference between poetry and history was that whereas poetry 'ever setteth virtue so out in her best colours', history 'being captived to the truth of a foolish world, is many times a terror from well-doing and an encouragement to unbridled wickedness'.³ Drayton, however, took a different view: for him, the two disciplines were not so clearly distinguished, and were in fact at their most effective as teachers of virtue when they were mixed. As a result, he undertook a lifelong project to bring the two disciplines into productive dialogue.

Drayton's earliest attempts here were fairly conventional historical works in the genre known as 'complaint poetry': *Peirs Gaveston, Earle of Cornwall. His Life, Death, and Fortune* (1593), *Matilda. The Faire and Chaste Daughter of the Lord Robert Fitzwater* (1594), and *The Tragical Legend of Robert, Duke of Normandy, Surnamed Short-Thigh, Eldest Sonne to William Conqueror* (1596). Subsequent (and more successful) attempts included *Mortimeriados* (1596), a narrative poem focusing on the turbulent reign of Edward II, *The Barons Warres* (1603), an historical epic on the same subject, and *Englands Heroicall Epistles* (1597), a collection of fictional love letters in verse by figures from medieval and Tudor history, written in imitation of Ovid's *Heroides*.

These works were all, however, preliminary to Drayton's most significant experiment with historical genre and form: *Poly-Olbion* (1612 and 1622). Issued in two parts ten years apart, *Poly-Olbion* mixes learned antiquarian research into Britain's past with detailed topographical descriptions of the country's landscapes and literary conventions from classical epic. The work's scholarly credentials were burnished by the fact that it was also a collaboration with one of the leading antiquaries of the day: the lawyer, legal historian, and Hebraist John Selden (1584–1654). Selden provided an immensely learned prose commentary to the first part of *Poly-Olbion*, which was intended to explain historical uncertainties and illuminate obscure or otherwise difficult matters.

Chorography, antiquarianism, and epic

In the programmatic opening lines of *Poly-Olbion*, Drayton signalled not only the scope of his poem, but also its distinct mixture of genres, influences, disciplines, and traditions:

OF ALBIONS glorious Ile the Wonders whilst I write,
The sundry varying soyles, the pleasures infinite
(Where heate kills not the cold, nor cold expells the heat,
The calmes too mildly small, nor winds too roughly great,
Nor night doth hinder day, nor day the night doth wrong,
The summer not too short, the Winter not too long)
What helpe shall I invoke to ayde my Muse the while?⁴

As an invocation to the Muse, these lines, first of all, align *Poly-Olbion* with classical epic. They also, though, map out Drayton's own distinctive territory in the poem and his particular mixture of interests. They underscore the fact that this will be a poem about the history, geography, and ecology of Britain (or 'Albion', as he dubs it here).

What then follows in the rest of *Poly-Olbion* is a richly imagined, self-consciously literary survey of Britain's history and topography. As Drayton's narrator travels on his imaginary journeys up and down Britain, he encounters anthropomorphized rivers, forests, and mountains. These features of the landscape, depicted by Drayton as nymphs and spirits, sing to his narrator, and when they sing, they narrate Britain's history, map its geography, and describe its ecology—the 'Wonders' of 'ALBIONS glorious Ile', as the opening line puts it.

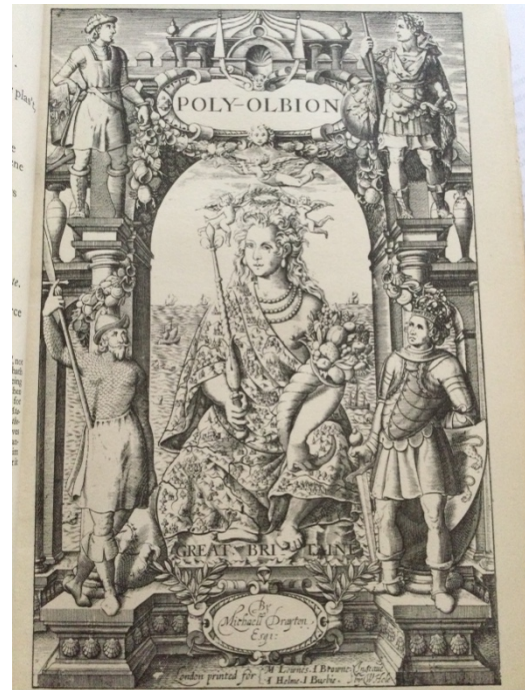
This combination of interests (history, geography, topography, ecology) was also the defining characteristic of the genre that was the single most important influence on *Poly-Olbion*: 'chorography'. The ancient Greek

mathematician and geographer Claudius Ptolemy defined ‘chorography’ as that discipline which ‘sets down the individual localities, each one independently and by itself, registering practically everything down to the least thing therein (for example, harbours, towns, districts, branches of principal rivers, and so on)’.⁵ The same understanding of the word applied in Drayton’s day. The mathematician Arthur Hopton (c. 1580–1614), for example, called chorography ‘the Arte, whereby wee be taught to describe any particular place [...] delivering all things of note contained therein, as ports, villages, rivers, not omitting the smallest’.⁶

This kind of comprehensive topographical description is exactly what Drayton set out to do in the poem. The work’s thirty Songs are characterized by lengthy catalogues, from genealogies of kings and queens to lists of rivers and forests. In applying this approach to both geographical *and* historical subject matter, Drayton was following in the footsteps of a number of recently published antiquarian surveys. Works such as William Lambarde’s *A Perambulation of Kent* (1576), William Harrison’s *The Description of England* (1577, 1587), and William Camden’s *Britannia* (first published in 1586) had pioneered this mixed historical and geographical approach.

Drayton signalled his own debt to the chorographic tradition most obviously through his work’s two title-pages. Both the letterpress title and the magnificent, engraved frontispiece present *Poly-Olbion* as an intervention in this genre. The former (the printed title-page) explicitly identifies *Poly-Olbion* as a work of chorography: ‘POLY-OLBION. | or | *A Chorographically Description of Tracts, Rivers, | Mountaines, Forests, and other Parts of this renowned Isle | of Great Britaine, | With intermixture of the most Remarkable Stories, Antiquities, Wonders, | Rarities, Pleasures, and Commodities of | the same: | Digested in a Poem*’. The latter, which was the work of the prolific engraver William Hole (d. 1624), suggested the same thing through its complex iconography and its series of figures and images.

Hole’s frontispiece similarly mixes geography and history. As such, it offers a visualization of Drayton’s chorographic poetics. The frontispiece is dominated by the large female figure, Albion, who sits underneath the grand arch at its centre. This figure is a representation of Britain itself. The shape of her dress is designed to resemble a map of the British Isles, whilst around her neck she wears a necklace of three strings of pearls as an allusion to the three kingdoms of England, Scotland, and Wales, and she is surrounded by the sea. In her right hand, she holds a sceptre, one of the symbols of monarchy. In her left hand, she carries a cornucopia, or horn of plenty: an emblematic representation of the copiousness of Drayton’s project. Surrounding her, and standing on the capitals and plinth, are four foundational figures from British history and myth (the Trojan Brutus, the Roman Julius Caesar, the Saxon Hengist, and the Norman William the Conqueror). These four figures represent four different genealogies (Trojan, Roman, Saxon, and Norman), four different national origins for Britain and the Britons, and four different traditions that histories of Britain from Drayton’s period commonly recounted. The frontispiece signals that *Poly-Olbion*, in keeping with its copious poetics, will do the same.



A commercial flop

Drayton’s literary ambitions for *Poly-Olbion* were, in the end, not matched by commercial success. For all his bold experimentation with history and geography, copies of the poem did not sell in anything like the numbers that either he or his publishers had hoped. Readers, it seems, were not quite ready for this ‘Topo-chrono-graphicall POEME’ (as the poet George Wither [1588–1667] called it in a commendatory poem that he wrote for the second part). Critics over the years have proposed all sorts of reasons for *Poly-Olbion*’s commercial failure, from its forbidding length (at over 15,000 lines long) to its often obscure antiquarian subject matter. However, its mixed nature may also have been a significant factor here. That is to say, the thing which made *Poly-Olbion* so innovative and significant a work—its mixtures of history and geography, of history and poetry, of traditions, genres, and forms—may well also have been what made it such a challenge to some contemporary readers at least.

¹ Richard F. Hardin, *Michael Drayton and the Passing of Elizabethan England* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1973), 9.

² Bart Van Es, “Michael Drayton, Literary History, and Historians in Verse,” *The Review of English Studies* 59, no. 239 (2008): 255.

³ Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry, or The Defence of Poesy*, ed. Geoffrey Shepherd (London: Nelson, 1965), 111.

⁴ Michael Drayton, *Poly-Olbion*, in *The Works of Michael Drayton*, eds J. William Hebel, Kathleen Tillotson, and Bernard H. Newdigate, 5 vols (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1961; first published 1931–41), 1. 1–7.

⁵ *Ptolemy’s Geography: An Annotated Translation of the Theoretical Chapters*, eds and trans J. L. Berggren and A. Jones (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000), 57.

⁶ Arthur Hopton, *Speculum Topographicum: or the Topographicall Glasse* (London: Nicholas Okes for Simon Waterson, 1611), B1r.