

**Deborah Youngs**, *Humphrey Newton (1466-1536): An Early Tudor Gentleman* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2008), xii + 257pp., ISBN: 9781843833956, £50.00.

*Humphrey Newton (1466-1536): An Early Tudor Gentleman* is a masterfully written biography of a country gentleman who lived in Pownall, Cheshire in the late middle ages. As the author herself explains, ‘this book is not about a person of whom many will hitherto have heard’ (p. 2) and therein lies the fascination. For social historians, Deborah Youngs’ work resonates precisely because it examines the private life of a member of the lesser gentry when in other studies of this period, the personal is so often overlooked in favour of the more ‘public’ and political exploits of early modern gentlemen. While this book is centered first and foremost on the life and livelihood and personal and professional interests of a single man – Humphrey Newton – it is of broader interest to a variety of readers nonetheless as it addresses several larger themes and connects many disciplines, ranging from gentry studies to literary history and legal history.

Youngs’ first two chapters provide her readers with an introduction to Humphrey Newton and the Newton family, and it is here that the author does an exceptional job of making use of the limited sources at her disposal by giving her audience a wonderful glimpse into Newton’s private sphere. She does so by relying upon Newton’s cartulary and commonplace book as the primary sources for her account of his life, the manuscript of which is held at the Bodleian Library in Oxford. A commonplace book was a type of scrapbook containing miscellaneous pieces of information that were of interest to its compiler and Newton put his together between the 1490s and the 1520s. As the only known book of its kind from early Tudor Cheshire, or anywhere else for that matter, it is a truly exceptional work. From a legal history perspective, this book and its subject provide invaluable insight into the personalised legal education and training of a practising provincial ‘scrivener’, or legal scribe.

In particular, Youngs’ third and fourth chapters rely on the commonplace book to evaluate Newton’s business practising law at the lower end of the legal profession in the Cheshire countryside. Like many, if not most, provincial scriveners, Newton never attended an Inn of Court or Chancery. As a result, his knowledge of the law and legal procedure and the documentation upon which these first two depended came from a fundamentally practical legal education. In Newton’s case, it appears as though he learned his law through artful imitation with his commonplace book including transcriptions of the letters sent to him by two prominent local justices that contained advice on matters such as the rights of inheritance and how to set

land to holders of fiefs, also called feoffees (p. 43). Acquiring advice like this from other practitioners and then learning by the example they set is one way in which the provincial gentry was able to make inroads into the law, on a local level at least.

In the third chapter, Youngs demonstrates how men like Newton were able to accrue such knowledge in a practical way without having had the benefit of a formal legal education, while in the fourth chapter Youngs is able to connect Newton's business in the law to his acquisition of land and title, thus demonstrating how Newton was a member of a burgeoning class of landed gentry with links to the law. Learning law through example, via legal literature and by seeking out the invaluable advice of more senior and successful locals on matters of interpretation and formula, was a typical method of gaining informal legal education in this period. By using Newton as an example, Youngs shows how a freelancing provincial scrivener could independently learn enough law to be able to correctly formulate the testaments and conveyances that comprised the bulk of his business. An abundance of evidence of this nature is gathered in Newton's commonplace book, alongside other non-legal items such as drawings, poetry and prose – all of which Youngs has mined for information of both a personal and professional nature in order to piece together her biography of Humphrey Newton. If Youngs' book has a flaw, it can be found in her own transcriptions of Newton's writing which are often haphazard and inconsistent, demonstrating both a confounding faithfulness to the original spellings of words such as 'wyl' in some places and a curious attempt to modernize the spelling of the same words in others – 'will'. Perhaps this idiosyncrasy can be attributed to an overzealous editor, but nevertheless it proves to be a distraction at times from the otherwise excellent content presented in this work.

The second half of Youngs' book focuses on Newton's beliefs, lifestyle and his activities as a writer (Chapters 5-7). The seventy-year period covered by Youngs' investigation into Newton's life marked several transitions in medieval society, including a shift from the medieval to the early modern, from manuscript to print culture, and even bears witness to significant religious reform of the English church. All of these events and more are presented to the reader through the prism of this man and of his experiences navigating the world as it changed around him – a theme which is given a detailed treatment in the last chapter of Youngs' work. It is in her handling of the personal side of Newton that Youngs' writing demonstrates particular skill as she is able to craft a vivid and compelling story which both details Newton's life and connects it more generally to some of the overarching influences on late medieval and early modern English

society as a whole. This is the true strength of this book. Youngs' narrative is firmly rooted in the social and cultural history of Humphrey Newton's time and place but it also showcases the author's ability to simultaneously paint an intimate portrait of a man about whom few outside of his family and immediate social circle would have known. By doing so, this book and its author have ensured that Newton's legacy will endure as representative of all that contributed to the making of both an ordinary – and an extraordinary – early Tudor gentleman.

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