

The squire's dead hand: the influence of genealogy on the development of biography in Restoration England

Jan Broadway

The antiquaries who have been the focus of much of my academic research established genealogy and heraldry as central to the study of English local history. Consequently the dead hand of the seventeenth-century squire has been criticised for casting a genealogical blight over the writing of local history in England until the second half of the last century. In my previous research I have explored the balance between the interests of the authors and the preoccupations of their gentry readership in causing this blight. Today I want to consider how the importance of genealogy to the early modern English gentry shaped the formation of a different genre, namely the writing of secular biography as it developed in the period after the civil war. I will argue that here too the squire's dead hand had a lasting and arguably deleterious influence.

I belong to that generation of English historians who cut our teeth writing articles for the great exercise in collective biography that is the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. As I strove to corral the details of an individual's life into the approved template within the word limit I had been allocated, I did not question what I was doing. I was more concerned with meeting the deadline and being paid. The shape of a biography seemed to be natural. You started with their name and dates, one or two words to define the category to which they belonged. Then it was straight into when and where they were born, who their parents were, how many siblings they had, then proceeding through their education and career to their death and burial, noting their marriages and children on the way. I also wrote a number of collective biographies for gentry families deemed significant as a group though not individually meriting an entry. Although I was aware of following in the footsteps of the antiquaries I had studied, I did not really analyse how far what I was doing was influenced by models that they had established. Subsequently during eight years working at the *Centre for Editing Lives and Letters* and while writing my own biography of William Dugdale, I began to think more deeply about life writing as a genre. More recently, when I began editing biographical articles on Wikipedia, I began to think about form as well as content in the short biographical article. Significantly these Wikipedia articles did not launch straight into the biography. The opening paragraph was expected to justify the subject's inclusion in the encyclopaedia. The life was separated from the work. Since it was published online, one article could be linked directly and multiply to others. Working at my leisure within this different environment, I found the space to consider how the traditional form of the biographical article became established.

At first glance genealogy and biography appear to work in contradictory directions. Genealogy subsumes the individual within the collective identity of the family, while biography differentiates and isolates its subject. Yet in reality this dichotomy is blurred. In genealogical catalogues certain individuals are privileged, because they made a particular contribution to the lineage. Conversely,

since no man is an island, the biographer must place the subject within the context of overlapping familial, social, intellectual and professional networks. Works of collective biography by their very nature absorb the individual into a communal identity.

One of the earliest forms of collective biography was the family history, where the importance of genealogy in providing the foundation is such that its precise influence on the genre has been little examined. The heraldic pedigree, concerned as it was with the descent of arms, privileged the direct male line of descent and females only mattered if they were co-heirs who carried a right to bear arms into their husbands' families. Younger sons were of importance, only if the senior line failed, or if a cadet branch established an independent claim to arms. Similarly the pedigrees relating to legal cases were concerned with establishing an individual's rights by descent to property and not with establishing subsidiary branches of the family tree. The complicated network of relations and interrelations in any individual's family tree also favoured a concentration on a single line of descent. The family historian was freer to range over the network of relations, yet the patrilineal approach remained dominant. In part this was a result of the availability of evidence. A family preserved predominantly those records that related to their claims to property and other rights. Pedigrees, funeral monuments, seals and quartered arms all favoured the male line of descent. It was difficult to trace grandmothers and great-grandmothers for whom only their surnames were recorded. Yet the evidential problems were only partly responsible for family histories following the structure of heraldic pedigrees. The length of the relationship between a family and their ancestral lands was the most important element of their lineage. So it is not surprising that the early family historians concentrated on tracing the patrilineal line back as far as possible, beyond the limits of documentary evidence into the realms of family myth.

The importance of lineage and consequently of the way in which genealogy influenced family history can be seen in that of the Rodney family, written by Sir Edward Rodney in the mid-seventeenth century. It was begun for the use of Sir Edward's son George 'that hee might have seene from example of his owne family what to follow and what to flee'. After George's death aged twenty-two in 1651, the work was re-purposed for his five sisters so that their children 'may take both pleasure and profitt to bee made acquainted with there maternall ancestors'. The account presented the 'constant tradition' that the family arrived in England with the Empress Maud in the twelfth century, while mentioning that evidence at Wells cathedral suggested the name might be 'as antient as the foundation of the Church, which was almost 3 hundred yeares before the Conquest'. This mythologising to drive the family's origins back as far as possible might be thought to have been of less immediate interest to Sir Edward's potential grandchildren than some of their distaff relatives. However, relations such as his mother's aunt Jane Seymour, wife of Henry VIII and his wife's grandfather Charles Howard, earl of Nottingham and Lord Admiral at the time of the Armada, rate no more than a passing reference. Family historians had the space and the potential flexibility

of a new form to explore the network of a family's connections. The force of the genealogical tradition, however, shaped the structure of this genre as it emerged.¹ Interestingly, there is evidence after the Restoration of the heralds taking a greater interest in the wider family beyond the direct male line. Writing to the Earl of Huntingdon in 1675 about the possibility of a visitation of Leicestershire taking place, Dugdale explained that Sir Edward Bysshe:

hath performed what he hath done already in some other counties so ill; entring no more than Grandfather father & son, and neither uncles, Aunts, Brothers or sisters, and not half the Armes ... that the Earle Marshall hath thought fitt to give a stop to his further going on to wrong the Gentry in that kinde.²

This may reflect an attempt to re-establish order after the civil war had lain waste to so many gentry families and their records. Any such interest in wider kinship networks among the heralds was stifled by the demise of visitations altogether after 1688.

County histories as they developed in the seventeenth century also enshrined a genealogical view of the world through their pedigrees and details of manorial descents. I have argued elsewhere that this was due as much to the interests of their gentry readership as to a particular mindset of the antiquaries themselves. County history did allow for biographical diversions that were not directly linked to manorial descents, to describe poets, statesmen, churchmen and others associated with a county otherwise than through their lineage. However, little effort was made to expand the scope of their biographical content beyond the genealogical. Much has been made of the significance of William Dugdale's passing reference to 'our late famous Poet' William Shakespeare in his account of Stratford-upon-Avon.³ Yet the level of acknowledgement is similar to that accorded Michael Drayton, 'one of our late famous Poets' who was born at Atherston.⁴ The only additional information we receive about Drayton is that he was one of the esquires who attended Sir Walter Aston of Tixall, Staffordshire when he was made a knight of the Bath at James I's coronation and that he was buried in Westminster Abbey. Dugdale included the epitaphs of both poets. He also included an engraving of Shakespeare's monument taken from his own drawing. This has provided further ammunition for the conspiracy theorists, who do not allow for Dugdale's lack of artistic ability and the difficult conditions under which the original sketch was made.⁵ Drayton was also claimed for Leicestershire by William Burton, on the basis that his family's ancestral home was in that county. While praising his 'near countryman and old acquaintance', Burton sadly did not choose to expand our biographical knowledge of the poet.⁶ In this period the biographical content of county histories was dominated by genealogical concerns and opportunities to move beyond that were not greatly

1 B.L. Add Ms 34239, 2v-18.

2 Bodleian, MS Carte 78, 423

3 Dugdale, *The Antiquities of Warwickshire* (1656), 523.

4 Dugdale, *Warwickshire*, 781-2.

5 J. Broadway, *William Dugdale* (2011), 21-2

6 William Burton, *The Description of Leicestershire* (1622), 91-2

exploited.

It is not surprising that secular biography as it emerged as a genre in the second half of the seventeenth century should have been shaped by genealogical influences. The antiquaries who had such a profound influence on local history also produced many of the works in this new genre and intended them for the same readership. In William Dugdale's magisterial *Baronage* the marriage of genealogy and collective biography found in the manorial descents of *The Antiquities of Warwickshire* was brought to monumental fruition. However, today I want to concentrate on one of the other great works of collective biography of Restoration England, Anthony Wood's *Athenae Oxonienses*, which catalogued the authors and bishops associated with the University of Oxford. John Aubrey's role in assisting Wood with the biographical research for this work is well known. Many other people also assisted him including Dugdale and his son-in-law Elias Ashmole, both heralds and professional genealogists.⁷ It would be intriguing to trace the influence of different contributors on the variations between entries in the *Athenae*, but as they are rarely acknowledged this is possible only where we have the original correspondence or notes for comparison.

The attention given to genealogical information in the *Athenae Oxonienses* is variable. In what follows I am going to consider just the opening lines of a selection of articles. It is by no means an exhaustive study, but concentrates on figures Wood knew either directly or through third parties, so that he had a ready supply of information about their family background and attitude towards it. Entries typically begin with a sentence giving the subject's name, parentage, place and date of birth. In some additional details of their descent are given. For example:

John Selden, the glory of the English nation, as Hugo Grotius worthily stiles him, son of John Selden, by Margaret his wife, the only daughter of Thomas Baker of Rushington, (descended from the knightly family of the Bakers of Kent)⁸

and

William Cambden, surnamed the Learned, son of Sampson Cambd. a native of the city of Litchfield, citizen, and one of the society of painterstainers of London, by his wife, descended from the antient family of Curwen of Wyrkington in Cumberland.⁹

The claim of Camden's mother to descent from the Cumberland gentry was included in his autobiography, published in 1691 by Thomas Smith, a member of the antiquarian circle around Wood. So we may assume that Camden would have approved of Wood's opening. Selden famously commented on English attitudes to gentility that 'What a Gentleman is, 'tis hard with us to define' and that while 'civilly' a gentleman of blood was better than a gentleman by creation,

7 A. Pritchard, 'According to Wood: Sources of Anthony Wood's Lives of Poets and Dramatists', *The Review of English Studies* N.S. 28, 111 (1977), 268-89 & 29, 112 (1977), 407-20.

8 Anthony à Wood, *Athenae Oxonienses*, ed. with additions Philip Bliss (1817), vol. 3, 366

9 Wood, *Athenae*, vol. 2, 339

morally the latter may be better, 'for the other may be a Debauched Man, this a Person of worth'.¹⁰ It seems unlikely that Selden personally placed much importance on his mother's claim to descent from the Kentish gentry. The inclusion of such additional detail in the *Athenae* does not appear to reflect straightforwardly the availability of knowledge or the subject's interest in their own pedigree. William Burton, who traced his descent back to the time of the Crusades in the *Description of Leicestershire*, was described by Wood simply as 'the eldest son of Ralph Burton esq', while his younger brother Robert, author of *The Anatomy of Melancholy* was 'born of an ancient and genteel family'.¹¹ The Cheshire antiquary Peter Leycester was similarly described simply as the son of an esquire.¹² An obvious difference is that the Burtons and Leycester were undoubtedly of the county gentry, while Camden came from trade and Selden's father was what Aubrey described as 'a yeomanly man'.¹³ So the emphasis on gentle descent on their mothers' side may be interpreted as either intended to enhance the standing of Camden and Selden or to support the idea that great scholars were more likely to arise from among those who had a strong lineage. Given the status of Camden and Selden as emphasized in the first words of Wood's entries, it seems unlikely that he and his circle actually believed that the alleged gentle descent of their mothers gave these scholars an advantage over Jeremy Taylor, the son of a barber, who Wood described as having 'tumbled out of his mother's womb into the lap of the muses at Cambridge'.¹⁴ A humble background may have been viewed as appropriate for a cleric following in the footsteps of St Peter, or since Taylor was a friend of Dugdale's from the time of the civil war in Oxford, Wood's text may reflect the cleric's own response to enquiries about his background. As such Taylor may exemplify the perceived waning of interest in lineage after the Restoration.¹⁵ A decline that was not apparently felt among early biographers.

My initial hypothesis that it was possible to draw a direct line between undoubted social status and a lack of genealogical flourish in Wood's opening sentences was rapidly disproved. John Spelman, for example, 'son of the learned sir Henry Spelman knt. was born of, and descended from, an antient and genteel family in Norfolk'.¹⁶ This life was included only in the second edition, so it is not certain that Wood would have published it in this form. However, a similar apparently unnecessary elaboration also occurred in the opening of the life of Sir Kenelm Digby:

the magazine of all arts, or as one stiles him, the ornament of this nation, son and heir of sir Everard Digby of Dry-stoke in Rutlandshire, knight by Mary his wife, daughter and sole heir to Will. Mulsho of Gothurst commonly called Gadhurst in Buckinghamshire.¹⁷

10 J. Thornton ed., *Table Talk by Various Writers* (1934), 48

11 Wood, *Athenae*, vol. 3, 153; vol. 2, 652

12 Wood, *Athenae*, vol. 3, 1173

13 John Aubrey, *Brief Lives* (ed. Oliver Lawson-Dick, 1992), 271

14 Wood, *Athenae*, vol. 3, 781.

15 B.L. Add MS 29,549, f. 87; Felicity Heal & Clive Holmes, *The Gentry in England and Wales 1500-1700* (1994), 38-42.

16 Wood, *Athenae*, vol 3, 62

17 Wood, *Athenae*, vol 3, 688

So, the inclusion of genealogical detail varied in Wood's lives and the variation is not immediately explicable. It may have been influenced by variations in the material provided to Wood by his assistants, but there is no doubt that as editor Wood was in full control of the first edition at least.

If evidence of a man's lineage enhanced his status, it is curious that Wood's book included extended details for men about whom he clearly had ambivalent feelings. Edward Hyde, earl of Clarendon was described as

son of Henry Hyde of Pyrton in Wiltshire, (by Mary his wife, daughter and heir of Edward Langford of Trobridge in the same county) third son of Laurence Hyde of Goosage S. Michael in Dorsetshire, and of West-Hatch in Wilts, third son of Robert Hyde of Northbury in Cheshire, son of Thomas, son of Hamnet Hyde alias Huyd of the same place¹⁸

This is similar to the information included in Hyde's autobiography, which inaccurately claimed that his family had held Norbury since before the Conquest.¹⁹ The remainder of the article did not hold Hyde up as a paragon, but criticised his exercise of public office. The second earl was so incensed by the implications of Wood's assertion that Hyde had 'enjoyed the benefit of his place with abundance' following the Restoration and his hostile description of his conduct as Chancellor of Oxford University that he sued the author. Hence, it seems curious that Wood would choose to embellish Clarendon's entry with a detailed exposition of his lineage claim.

Another ambivalent figure was Sir Edward Bysshe, whose entry in the *Athenae* opened:

son of Edw. Bysshe of Burstow in Surrey esq; a counsellor of Linc. inn, was born at Smallfield in the parish of Burstow, the capital tenement of which, he and six of his ancestors, or more, were not only lords of, but of divers other lands in Horne nearethereunto, and elsewhere in the said county; and some of them also owners of the manor of Bysshe or Bysshe-court, situated and being between Burstow and Smallfield²⁰

His claim to descent from medieval gentry was important to Bysshe, whose father was a Court of Wards lawyer and his grandfather said to be a miller. The family were described locally as 'a new-raised upstart family of yesterday's growth'.²¹ His interest in heraldry had got Bysshe appointed as Garter during the Interregnum, while his practical support for royalist scholars during that period helped him to remain in the College of Arms as Clarenceux after the Restoration. Yet by his death Bysshe had alienated most of his colleagues and was a controversial figure. While acknowledging his help to scholars, Wood also sniped that he passed off the work of others as his own. Once more Wood's inclusion of a detailed lineage claim seems out of keeping with his ambivalent attitude towards his subject.

18 Wood, *Athenae*, vol 3, 1018

19 Richard Ollard, *Clarendon and His Friends* (1988), 7

20 Wood, *Athenae*, vol 3, 1218

21 *History of Parliament, House of Commons 1660-1690*, vol. 1, 760

Both Hyde and Bysse were close to Dugdale and it may be that he influenced what was written about their pedigrees. Certainly in the case of Bysse Dugdale provided Wood with various pieces of information for the life. He was also responsible for putting Wood in contact with the second Earl of Clarendon, who in his turn provided the antiquary with information about members of his family. Clarendon's action against Wood in defence of his father's reputation was no doubt in part motivated by a sense of betrayal by someone he had helped.²²

In *Writing Lives* Kevin Sharpe and Steven Zwicker suggested that 'civil war, regicide, and revolution transformed not only the lives lived through these events but as well all lives written in their shadows'.²³ They argued that biography emerged as a stable genre from the political instability of the mid-seventeenth century. I would further suggest that it was as a response to the turmoil rather than a persistence in reverence for lineage that enshrined genealogy as a feature of biography. Furthermore, I would argue that the emphasis on continuity rather than novelty was given greater weight by the Exclusion Crisis and its aftermath. Significantly it was in this period that Wood was working on the entries for Clarendon and Bysse and I would suggest that the lineage claims were included to emphasise the continuity represented by their rise to positions of influence..

In order to explore this further I would like finally to turn from the *Athenae Oxonienses* to the autobiographical accounts produced by Wood, William Dugdale, Elias Ashmole and the astrologer William Lilly. We know that Dugdale began to write an account of his life at Wood's instigation in 1679, the year of the Popish Plot and the death of Sir Edward Bysse.²⁴ Their correspondence shows that Wood was actively involved in shaping Dugdale's narrative. Although there is less direct evidence, it is reasonable to assume Wood also influenced Dugdale's son-in-law to write an account of his own life and Ashmole in turn encouraged his friend Lilly. All four narratives are hence linked and originate in the period of political upheaval towards the end of Charles II's reign. None of the four men could make a straightforward claim to ancient lineage. Yet rather than ignoring the subject and concentrating simply on their own achievements, each makes a claim for continuity.

William Dugdale's *Life* begins:

He was the only son of John Dugdale, of Shustoke (neere Coleshill) in the County of Warwick, by Elizabeth his wife, daughter of Arthur Swynfen, (a younger son to William Swynfen, of Swynfen in the county of Stafford, Esq.) and there borne the 12th of September, anno 1605. This John, being the only childe of James Dugdale of Cletherow in the county of Lancaster, (which name and family had been of long continuance in those parts) had his chiefe education in St. John's Colledge in Oxford.

22 Bodleian, MS Wood F 41, ff. 126, 174, 178, 180; Bodleian Ms Tanner 34, f. 205; Hamper, 440-1.

23 *Writing Lives*, ed. K. Sharpe & S. N. Zwicker (2008), 8

24 Broadway, *Dugdale*, 188-9

This echoes the account of his background he gave at the end of the preface to *The Antiquities of Warwickshire* and replicates the information from the Dugdale pedigree recorded at the Warwickshire visitation of 1619 apart from the addition of his great-grandfather William Swynfen's name and the wife of his grandfather James Dugdale being omitted. The visitation pedigree established Dugdale's right to arms not his father's and was probably presented to the heralds by the teenage Dugdale, as the visitation coincided with his father becoming ill and the consequent ending of his own formal education.²⁵ John Dugdale described himself as a gentleman and was accepted by his neighbours as such, but he had sought no confirmation of his status through the College of Arms before the visitation. His accepted gentility was founded upon his Oxford education and his role as manorial steward for the Paulet family. He was born into an extensive family network of yeomen based around Clitheroe in Lancashire.

Anthony Wood attempted to give Dugdale a Saxon pedigree, based on his surname and coat of arms: 'which conception, having been severall times told to Sir William, he seemed to approve it as true. But as concerning matters relating to his owne family, he seem'd to me to have but little regard'.²⁶ Certainly, this is my own impression, having looked through much of Dugdale's archive. There is little evidence of interest in his own pedigree. Although he conducted the visitation of Lancashire and had several keen genealogists among his acquaintance, he does not appear to have researched the Dugdale family's origins. When Stephen Dugdale came to public notoriety during the Popish Plot, Dugdale wrote to Wood that 'the person of my name, whom you mention, is a meere stranger to mee, and not of kin, that I can discover'.²⁷ He did not, as some of his contemporaries would have done, quote chapter and verse to prove the lack of connection. Nor did Dugdale seek to create a pedigree for himself by forging links with the more creditable and successful branches of his family. He made no mention of the kinsman who preceded his father as clerk of the accounts at St John's, preferring instead to mention that the more significant Sir James Whitelock succeeded his father in the post. Nor did he suggest a link to James Dugdale, who rose to be Master of University College, Oxford in the mid-sixteenth century.²⁸ The Wiltshire branch of the family would subsequently contort the evidence to claim a relationship to him, but William Dugdale showed no interest in such manipulations.²⁹ Rather than manufacture a stronger lineage claim on his father's side, Dugdale satisfied himself with his descent through his mother from the Swynfens of Swynfen in Staffordshire. The association of surname and manor suggested a link to long-established medieval gentry, although in reality his grandfather's family could trace their pedigree reliably no earlier than the fifteenth century. Nevertheless, the implied passing of some of the Swynfen inheritance of medieval lineage into the Dugdale stock demonstrated to his readers

25 Hamper, 5-6; *Visitation of Warwickshire 1619*, 327

26 Hamper, 6

27 Bodleian, MS Wood F111.

28 *Alumni Oxonienses*

29 *Wiltshire Notes and Queries*, 3 (1899-1901), 127; *Visitation of London 1634*.

that while social structure was not immutable nor was it chaotic.³⁰

The opening of Elias Ashmole's autobiography makes a similar claim to stability through civic virtue and gentle descent through the female line.

I Elias Ashmole, was the son and only child of Simon Ashmole of Litchfield, sadler, eldest son unto Mr Thomas Ashmole of the said city, sadler, twice chief bailiff of that corporation; and of Anne, one of the daughters of Anthony Bowyer of the city of Coventry, draper, and Bridget his wife, only daughter to Mr ... Fitch of Ansley in the county of Warwick, gentleman.³¹

The inclusion of his great-grandfather Mr Fitch of Ansley is interesting, as the Ashmole pedigree in the College of Arms makes a more substantial claim to gentle status through his grandfather Anthony Bowyer's alleged descent from the Bowyers of Knypersley, Staffordshire. This link through a younger son, though plausible, does not seem well-substantiated. If, as I suspect, it is the result of similar manipulation to that which linked the Wiltshire and Warwickshire Dugdals, this would explain the different emphasis in Ashmole's autobiography. Mr Fitch was obscure, but his gentility was independently attested.³²

William Lilly's family were Leicestershire yeomen. The use of genealogy to suggest continuity in his autobiography is interesting in its indirectness. Having emphasised that Diseworth, his birthplace, was 'a town of great rudeness', Lilly distinguished his grandfather as the only farmer there who sent a son to Cambridge. This grandfather had brought gentility into his family by his marriage to Jane, 'the daughter of Mr Poole of Dalby ... a family now quite extinguished'. The emphasis, however, is not on his own ancestors, but on his grandmother's brother Henry Poole:

one of the Knights of Rhodes, or Templars, who being a soldier at Rhodes at the taking thereof by Solyman the Magnificent, and escaping with his life, came afterwards to England, and married Lady Parron or Perham, of Oxfordshire, and was called, during his life, Sir Henry Poole. William Poole the Astrologer knew him very well, and remembers him to have been a very tall person, and reputed of great strength in his younger years³³

Henry Poole thus serves as a link from Lilly not only to the gentry, but also to a notable astrologer. The link is, however, shaky on several grounds. Henry Poole of Dalby was a Knight of St John, but he did not join the order until six years after the siege of Rhodes and his wife was Dorothy Smith, the widowed daughter of Sir Richard Cave. Henry Poole died at the beginning of Elizabeth's reign. Since William Poole, according to Lilly, died more than nine decades later, he can hardly have known him well – or indeed at all.³⁴ This passage does, however, serve to suggest that Lilly is part

30 *Burke's Landed Gentry* (1863), 1465

31 C. Burman, *The Lives of those Eminent Antiquaries Elias Ashmole, Esquire, and Mr William Lilly* (1774), 287

32 *Visitation Bedfordshire*, 158

33 Burman, *Lives*, 1-3.

34 Bindoff, *The House of Commons 1509-1558*, Poole Henry II

of a continuous succession.

Finally we turn to Wood's own autobiography, which emphasised continuity and stability through his scholarly inheritance from his father and his birthplace:

Anthony Wood or à Wood (son of Thomas Wood or à Wood, bachelaur of Arts and of the Civil Law) was borne in an antient stone-house opposite to the forefront of Merton College

He too could claim gentility through his mother. At the heraldic visitation of Oxfordshire in 1634 his father had claimed his status through membership of the university, while apparently submitting evidence of descent on behalf of his wife's family the Pettys.³⁵ Wood complained that it was

when he came to understand those things a great trouble to him that his father did not enter three or more descents of his owne familie, which he had then been better able to doe, than those of the familie of his wife. And the reason is, because his father dying when he was young, those things which he knew of his family dyed with him, and his son could never obtaine them from any other person of his kindred, nor can he yet from any place of record, unless he take a journey into Lancashire from whence his grandfather came about the beginning of the raigne of queen Elizabeth

This is disingenuous. Through Dugdale Wood had access to extensive genealogical records for Lancashire and to a network of enthusiasts and heraldic deputies capable of locating and copying the necessary records, if he had not wanted to undertake the task himself. The truth was that Wood's father came like Ashmole's from trade and the claim to ancient gentility was maintained only through a shroud of obscurity.

Our sample of autobiographers all thus used a few genealogical details in the opening of their accounts to imply continuity and stability. They did not deny they were exceptional men – otherwise they would not have been writing their lives for eventual publication – but they wished to demonstrate that they had not arisen from nowhere, they were not 'mushromes of a night's extraction' and their eminence did not imply mutability in the natural ordering of the world.³⁶ It is doubtful that any of them truly believed that their indirect links to the medieval gentry had greatly influenced the course of their lives. In the preface to *The Antiquities of Warwickshire* Dugdale had written that his was 'an undertaking (I acknowledge) that would have been more proper for such a one whose Ancestors had enjoyed a long succession in this Countie, whereunto I cannot pretend'. This reads like a pious nod in the direction of received opinion, rather than a belief that someone else would have made a more appropriate county historian, since he ends by submitting himself to the judgement only of 'the ingenuous, and learned'.³⁷ The juxtaposition of the account of his family

35 *Visitation of Oxfordshire*, 215

36 J. Broadway, *No Historie so meete* (2006), 163

37 Dugdale, *The Antiquities of Warwickshire*, preface

background here reinforces the impression that genealogy could be used to reassure those who were insufficiently learned.

Still, whatever importance they attached to these genealogical pieties, the influence of the early compilers of secular biographies and autobiographies had a distinct and lasting influence on the genre. A century later David Hume wrote:

I was of a good family both by my Father and Mother. My Father's Family is a Branch of the Earl of Home's or Hume's; and my Ancestors had been Proprietors of the Estate, which my Brother possesses, for several Generations.

One might suggest that his 'ordinary Course of Education' had more influence on Hume's scholarship than the length of his family's pedigree, but it receives less notice.³⁸ Of our four autobiographers only Dugdale with his small estate in rural north Warwickshire truly merited the epithet squire. However, since I have suggested that Wood and his contemporaries included genealogical details to match the expectations of their readership as much if not more than to please themselves, I think we can say that the dead hand of the seventeenth-century squire rested over the developing genre of secular biography.

Let me conclude with the opening of the entry for Elias Ashmole in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*:

Ashmole, Elias, astrologer and antiquary, was born on 23 May 1617 at Lichfield in Staffordshire, the son of Simon Ashmole, a saddler, and his wife, Anne, daughter of Anthony Bowyer, a Coventry draper whose family was of gentry status.

And compare it with the opening sentences from Wikipedia:

Elias Ashmole was a celebrated English antiquary, politician, officer of arms, astrologer and student of alchemy. Ashmole supported the royalist side during the English Civil War, and at the restoration of Charles II he was rewarded with several lucrative offices.

I am not suggesting that the free-for-all of Wikipedia is a match for the careful scholarship of the DNB, but perhaps it does indicate that at the beginning of the twenty-first century it really is time to shake off the squire's influence.

38 E. C. Mossner, *The Life of David Hume* (1954), 611.