

Abstract

Ted Vallance - Petitioning, addressing and the historical imagination: the case of Great Yarmouth

Subscriptional texts (oaths, petitions, addresses) have been identified as key sources for understanding both the social and political 'imaginary' of early modern England. This paper will explore another connected facet of subscriptional activity: its capacity to record and preserve individual and corporate action, and thereby inform the historical imagination.

Petitioning activity played a critical role in historical narratives: Lucy Hutchinson saw the Covenanter armies as thwarted petitioners who had been forced to resort to violence in order that their grievances could be heard. Later, the American Declaration of Independence would depict the revolutionary war as the product of the refusal of the British monarchy to respond to the colonists' petitions. Other subscriptional texts, notably oaths, required subscribers to assent to a particular version of English history: in the case of the Protestation of 1641 that, since the reformation, the English church and state had been under threat from a popish plot. A different conspiracy theory was connected to petitioning activity after the Restoration. In this version of history, it was popular subscriptional activity (oath-taking and petitioning) which had fomented rebellion and revolution.

The particularly mnemonic features of the related genre of loyal addressing, which emerged as a political form during the Cromwellian Protectorate, it will be argued facilitated the integration of local and national historical memory. In the shorter term, these aspects of addressing activity encouraged a reflectiveness and self-awareness regarding recent political history which facilitated the formation of political identities and encouraged a more general sense of public opinion as a political force.

Focusing on the case study of Great Yarmouth and, in particular, this borough's address to Richard Cromwell, the paper will explore how, in the longer term, loyal addressing facilitated the production of history through examining histories of the town produced from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century. Andy Wood has shown how Tudor histories of the town were produced for practical purposes – in part to assist with the production of petitions and other documents on behalf of the borough. This paper will argue that as history-writing informed subscriptional activity, so subscriptional activity could be critical to the fashioning of civic history.