

Transcript: Foreword, Season 1 Episode 3 “Bookscapes in Early Modern Britain”

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Episode Title: Bookscapes in Early Modern Britain

[Alison] Welcome to a new episode of Foreword, a podcast where we meet researchers from Brock University’s Faculty of Humanities. I’m your host, Alison Innes.

[Theme music]

[Alison] You’ve heard of landscapes and seascapes, but have you ever heard of bookscapes? Today’s researcher investigates the history of reading and attempts to unravel the complex relationship between women and written text in Early Modern Britain. Dr. Leah Knight from the Department of English Language and Literature spoke with me earlier this year about textual culture and her digital project featuring the unpublished manuscript of 17th century poet Hester Pulter.

[Theme music]

[Alison] Today I’m speaking with Dr. Leah Knight, an Associate Professor with the Department of English Language and Literature. Dr. Knight studies early modern English poetry, prose, and the culture they emerge from. She’s authored two books, *Of Books and Botany in Early Modern England* and *Reading Green in Early Modern England*, which were both awarded the annual book prize of the British Society for Literature and Science.

More recently, Dr. Knight has been investigating the history of reading, examining the evidence of reading materials, habits, and experiences associated with Anne Clifford (1590-1676).

Leah has also turned to the long-neglected manuscripts of the poet Hester Pulter (1605-1678) and has launched a digital project with Dr. Wendy Wall of Northwestern University that was selected as the year’s best project in digital scholarship by the Society for the Study of Early Modern Women and Gender in 2018.

Welcome, Leah.

[LK] Thank you so much Alison.

[Alison] It is a pleasure to have you here and I am really excited to hear more about your past research and your current exciting research. And just before we started recording you mentioned that it feels like a long time ago that you worked on some of your botany work. But I’m really interested. What’s this connection between plants and books?

[LK] Yeah, I suppose there are any number of ways to answer that and that’s probably why I spent so much time trying to do so and still feel as if I barely touched upon it, although there were the two books, as you say, the first of which derived very directly from my dissertation and looked at sixteenth century plants and print culture, which is where I wound up focussing my direction. I just noticed in the course of my graduate studies and studying early modern literature how frequently English writers were turning to tropes, to metaphors and similes related to plants in various ways in order to explain what they were doing as writers, in order to explain the way in which they read, the way in which they

reproduced, collected, and made use of, made fruitful, a word we still use of course, what they read. Um. And this was not a new set of tropes by any means in the period, but what, stems back to the Classical era, but what I was interested in, since my focus was that time period, as I say the sixteenth century or the early modern period in England, was the new ways in which those old tropes were being deployed, um, by poets, but also by, strangely to me at first, botanists, people who were actually revolutionizing, changing, forming the study of plants in a way that we associate with science now but which also had a very deep connection at the time with medicinal herbalism, and spanned a lot of different fields that we tend to separate, we tend to presume that they have always been separate, art and science, the Faculty of Humanities, the Faculty of Sciences and never the twain shall meet. In fact, that's quite a new phenomenon and that became very apparent when I studied these discourses both technically literary and technically scientific, and saw the same deployment of metaphorical language and thinking in order to explain both poetry and plants.

[Alison] So what are some of those metaphors or tropes that come out?

[LK] Oh there are so many, there doesn't, I think I was aware of these first as a child, we had a book in weirdly in this closet that I would pull out it was called A Child's Garden of Verse, this nineteenth century deployment, and of course the Victorians were keen on the language of flowers, that was that period sort of way of taking up again that very ancient conjunction I guess of plants and verse. Ah, in the period that I studied, there were changes in the study of plants, partly because of, um, European travels and trade that bring new plants into play, often plants that were in their view nameless because they didn't know or didn't understand Indigenous names, or um, that they thought they new the names of from antiquity and so they were working with the linguistic material that we attach to plants, um, as much as they were working with the plants themselves. So in other words, when we think about plants we often think about nature but at this time, as often when humans interact with things in the world, working with plants was as much an art and art form and a linguistic one, it turns out, as it was a matter of encountering nature in some unvarnished form. [laughter] So I'm not sure if that really answers your question. There are so many, there are forests of fancy, I don't remember the specifics, they appear in titles over and over again, but not just titles, it sort of seems to run through, run deeply in the thinking about the commonness, the common property that writing provided. Again, this is an era before intellectual property rights were firmed up in ways we recognize, if they're not dissolving again, so it just seems so ripe for study, yes.

[Alison] And I suppose even the layout of the page sometimes, the title pages with the thick fancy borders and motifs of leaves

[LK] Oh, absolutely.

[Alison] and that kind of thing.

[LK] Yeah, the printer's fleuron, the very word leaf, of course, happens to be a common English word and other languages as well for the, you know, material page as well as for what appears on plants, so yeah,... I couldn't stop... it was really hard [laughter]

[Alison] Why sixteenth and seventeenth century England. What is it about that period that resonated with you for some reason?

[LK] [laughs] That's actually a very good question. Well, I'll be honest, when it became my PhD I was dragged kicking and screaming into the notion of specialization and that there can only be one period that I was either responsible for or allowed to study and think about and teach. And I did some strategic thinking about that. I thought, I shall firmly position myself somewhere so that I can both cast my mind back to the medieval period and antiquity if needed and look forward, it's early modernity after all, so why shouldn't I look at what comes next. So there was something strategic and resistant about that. However, as I went on, I became really intrigued by all the changes in the literary culture in England in that time, um, partly impelled by changes in the technological factors like printing press and movable type that came to Europe middle of the fifteenth century but you know but only slowly migrated in any meaningful way to England and changed the game, really, changed the game for writers, for readers, for just everyone in relation to what I call the textual culture.

[Alison] So in terms of this textual culture, then, was England fairly isolated or was the textual culture, where they engaging with texts and ideas more broadly?

[LK] Oh, no, well, this is one of those "well it depends." England was in many ways considered to have been more or less belated in terms of the flowering, haha, of its literary renaissance, you know, in comparison to, say, Italian, however there was a lot of interpenetration between England and the continent, especially in the Latin side of things, right, when people were writing in Latin and reading in Latin and that was the lingua franca, the sort of passport language that would let you, let you and your words travel, that was a point of connection.

[Alison] So Britain, England, was a little bit behind where Europe was in adopting the print--?

[LK] Yeah, even in adopting the technology of the printing press comes later, a couple of decades later, and then there's just one or two and frankly they produce quite hideous work for a long time when the people, their counterparts in Europe are beginning to produce quite beautiful things. Um, I suppose that was another reason why the sixteenth century was interesting to me, or why I wound up honing in on it for that first book in particular, I recognized that all of these things, all of these changes in the botanical culture and the literary culture in the sixteenth century, they were nascent then, and they just exploded in the seventeenth century in all sorts of fascinating ways but ways that are still more familiar to us and so the work didn't seem as pressing because they were more familiar, more popular, like many people have heard of tulip mania, that botanical sort of phenomenon in Holland and surrounding areas, people are more aware even of seventeenth century texts partly because the way the printing technology changed, or not the technology, but the approach to it, the print culture. So many sixteenth century texts in English are presented in this absolutely god-awful, we would call it a font, a typeface, it's called Black Letter Gothic sometimes, and it looks like if you've ever received a very very stodgy wedding invitation [laughter] it looks like the calligraphy on that, all slanted and thick and each letter looks almost like the last so it's very hard to discern, it's hard to read, for us. And probably for that reason I think a lot of later texts, and it really isn't that much later, by the seventeenth century the text, the typeface being used predominately in England is called, is Roman, and we still use Times New Roman. It's very familiar, it's very accessible. So I sort of felt like I was pushing things back just far enough by going there, ah, although my more recent projects focus on the seventeenth century and I certainly have no aversion to that.

[Alison] I want to come to your work that you've done with Anne Clifford.

[LK] Yeah.

[Alison] Um, because I saw you give a talk a year or two ago now about this idea of bookscapes and I thought that was really fascinating because I'm used to thinking about books as, we study them for the words that are inside them, but you seem to be suggesting that books themselves we can think about as objects and we can think about differently so I'm, I just want you to talk about that! [laughter]

[LK] Thank you. Well, actually, it does present a useful segue from my previous work, although it took me a while to realize that, and I was a little alarmed at one point when I thought, I've been working all this time on plants and so on, now I want to know more about this person Anne Clifford, the books she read, what on earth could the connection possibly be, but there is one and as you say it's partly to do with the material book and its inhabitation of space, same space as we do and when those books are so frequently as I noticed topped as, figured as plant materials, there was obviously more connection there then, then is first apparent. When I first came to Brock actually with a few colleagues here I ran a couple of conferences called Greenscapes and it only occurred to me in retrospect that that was a sort of connection between my previous work on the botanical and my more recent work on books and the history of reading, that's the field in which my work on Clifford, um, appears, and some of it has appeared most recently in a book that I co-edited with my colleague Elizabeth Sauer and with Michline White who is at Carleton called "Women's Bookscapes" and that's where, ah, I guess we do the most work to define that term. Um, it probably looks like we've stolen it from someone named James Raven who has a book of the same title, but in fact it was one of those moments of, I don't know what to call it, convergence or noticing or—

[Alison] Serendipity?

[LK] Serendipity? I don't know. There's not intellectual property on that sort of thing, is there, that's how words come to be. [laughter]. Bookscape is a coining for us to the extent that yeah it refers to not just sort of the surround, the textual surround that is in our world that we tend we think we tend not to notice and again we can look around this room and I'm realizing that even though it's bookless, it's still by no means text free, right, and we're still governed by that. Um, but bookscapes is about the mentality as well that you carry with you, within you, formed by the books and the texts, the reading and the writing in your life. So it has a kind of flexibility in our usage of it, it's not just about a geographical term, which it can be, it can be used that way, um, I think we were influenced partly by, there are many ways in which that term 'scape' can be a suffix to help us sort of relate to media in our lives because of the way in which they suffuse our existence, right. They are outside of us but they are also inside of us and so is a landscape. We think of a landscape as a genre in painting, something we look at on the wall, or as something out in nature that, oh, look at that beautiful landscape when we stand at the edge of the escarpment, but in fact it's in us as much as it's out there and the more we know about perception and so on, and subjectivity, I'm thinking of that, what is it, the dress, gold and white..

[Alison] Gold and white or blue and black

[LK] or blue and back, yeah I was just thinking about that the other day. So getting at the perception of the ways in which the presence of books and texts in our lives, that's part of what that is about as well.

[Alison] So why Anne Clifford? Who was she?

[LK] Who was she? Well, again, it's such a learning process. I actually think, the strangest thing, that she came to be my focus serendipitously. Someone, and I don't know who, it must have been a colleague, put her book, her diary, in my departmental mailbox, and I was looking at it one day in my office and I was thinking, what's this, why's this here, and as I flipped through it, never read this before, it's understood to be one of the earliest, ah, diaries written by an English woman, secular diaries, um and I was reading it and I was thinking my god, this is as dull as dishwater, isn't it, why couldn't you have written a more interesting diary, if you're going to bother and [laughs] I learned more about her and in fact this diary, which we think of as a genre that's very personal or private or expressing one's emotion, I mean, we have to historicize it, and in her case personalize it because it became apparent that diary was really useful to her decades-long litigation in pursuit of her identity, her lands and titles that she saw them as her possessions that she had been disinherited from by her father.

[Alison] Mmm.

[LK] She was his only child and instead of leaving things to her as heir in her will, shipped things over to his brothers and his heirs male, as they put it, masculine, you know, only the male line

[Alison] Yeah

[LK] Anyways, as part of this diary she records her encounters with various male authorities, battling this injustice as she saw it, but she also records the occasional more quotidian things, what she was wearing, what she was eating, who she was visiting, and what she read. And it was those moments that stood out to me and made me think, this is the way in which I can bring the other half of humanity back into focus in my research. As I said, when I was working on the sixteenth century herbals, they are by men, they are not necessarily for men, they are frequently read by women, owned by women, annotated, used by women who were frequently medical practitioners in their homes and in their communities, and yet that didn't feature largely in my research for whatever reason in that area. Here was a moment and a way in which I felt I could in good faith and with the kind of enthusiasm that makes me do good work, bring women's involvement in textual culture front and centre in my work, which I really wanted to do at that point in my life.

[Alison] So, she was a noble woman then?

[LK] Oh yes.

[Alison] So she had a lot of books?

[LK] That's a good question [laughter]. Yes, she was, she was a noble woman, she was born to an earl and a countess, so she was a big wig, um, and she has her own no doubt collection of a lot of books but also was exposed to an enormous amount of books from her father, her mother, her peers-- the woman socialized like a mad woman, she was all over the place. She had, by the time she inherited this property, which she eventually did

[Alison] Oh good

[LK] At 54 she won, but not because she won in a court of law, because the men had died and were all dead and someone had to take over, she had six castles and migrated amongst them after she renovated them, because they were all falling down, no doubt she had a lot of books. But not just books, that's the other thing. She wrote many, many letters and she made these inscriptions on plaques

that she embedded in the walls of these castles, some of which are still there today, so her em, her embeddedness was really rich and personal but also largely a very seventeenth century literary or textual culture, seemed so emblematic. In many cases she is treated as a kind of textbook case in the history of reading, which is a field that again has sort of seen its stock soar since the start of the century. She's much studied for her role as a reader and the role of reading in her life. Um. I wanted to kind of consolidate that work and also amplify it and make it more—I wanted to make it speak, I suppose. Reading is often silent, as we know, and reading leaves few traces. And so even in that diary, where I found these remarks by her "I read Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, I read Sidney's *Arcadia*," she would leave it at that. And I was intrigued and frustrated and motivated by that. What can we do with this? We don't have extensive annotations in the margins of your copies of your books, Anne Clifford, so what do we do with the fact that you read this book and not that one, you read Sidney but not, apparently, Shakespeare. Ah. What do we do? And I'm still working on figuring that out a decade later.

[Alison] And I know you take your students in your class up to the archives here at the, in the, library and you get them looking at old books. Can you tell me a little bit about what they're doing and what you're doing with that?

[LK] Yeah, what I try to do with those assignments is make the impression upon them that when they study a text in edited form, in an anthology, often in a textbook, maybe in an excerpted form or modernized, that, that is a text and that is one version of the text or the title they think they are reading. But it is only one, and one of the ways to make that most vivid is to bring them back to when that text first manifested itself in the world, say in an early printed book, ah, a Bible from 1609 or, um, Raleigh's *History of the World*, published from, he was imprisoned in the Tower of London when it comes anyways, or one of those herbals. We actually happen to have two copies of Gerard's up in special collections and rare books. Um. When they encounter those as individual material objects it's much like meeting a person. It's completely different from reading about a person, um, they are meeting it in all its material individuality, turning its pages, finding the marginal notes, finding the little things stuffed between the pages, confronting simply the size of some of these books, the monumental size of some of them, um, and, I mean, many students have spoken about it as a transformative experience, so I always value that, it's my favourite part.

[Alison] That's great. Um. Yeah. I've seen some of those books when you've had them out with students and it's, it's amazing to think of, like, this ginormous book, and somebody consulting it or reading it and how they would just hold it—or if they would even hold it or if they had—

[LK] Book furniture that would surround it, or if you wanted to be taking notes about it, yeah, all of that sort of thing is fascinating to me as part of the idea of bookscape as well that needs to be historicized as well.

[Alison] So then you move from Anne Clifford into, into another woman, a poet, um, Hester Pulter. Am I saying that correctly?

[LK] Um, I like the way you say it. [laughter] I don't think anyone knows so I can say Pulter if I like [laughter] We tend to say Hester Pulter. It's quite a funny name, it does tend to make you giggle the first few times you say it. Um, and, yes. I feel as if I first adopted Anne Clifford and then into my life pops some other. Hester Pulter arrived in my life I think it was in 20, oh goodness, 15? I didn't really bring Hester Pulter into my life, Wendy Wall did, she is a professor at Northwestern University and being in a

faculty seminar with her at the Shakespeare Association of America, these conferences where we shared our ideas, and it had just sparked the idea of a collaboration, and the collaboration was just based on another seminar for that conference, called “What to do with a found object” I think, or I can’t remember, the idea was when you have a recovery of something that’s lost in the archives, that hasn’t been read for hundreds of years, and now you realize this is really interesting, an interesting artifact from that period, how do we begin to integrate that into our account of that period, when we teach students or when we write books, where do we, how do we make it fit, how do we popularize it. So we invited all sorts of other scholars to find ways to do that specifically with the manuscript of Hester Pulter, which was, as far as we know, unread between the late 17th century, when she died, and the 1970s when it came up for auction, was bought by a university, University of Leeds, and then it seems to have disappeared again from view, partly owing to cataloguing matters, back into view in the 1990s and scholars start to attend to it. And it’s this magnificent, bound volume, a fair copy, a lovely script, over 120 original poems by another noble woman, Hester Pulter, that she’s, who’s living from 1605 to 1678, so roughly at the same time as Clifford, um, but whereas my interest with Clifford is in her reading, my interest with Pulter is in her writing, although there is a lot of cross over between those as we might imagine.

[Alison] So what do we know about her as a person?

[LK] What do we know about Pulter as a person? We’re learning more every day, I can tell you, including her birthdate, which if you look in the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography it still says her birth date was 1595. We now know with, I think, reasonable certainty that she was born ten years after that, which is not a trivial amount of time, um, so we’re learning more every day. Just this summer, ah, actually as a result of publishing her work in what we call the Pulter project online, which is an open access site, we were contacted by an Australian scholar, Kerry Plunkett, with the information that let us confirm date of her marriage, which as 1620. And again, these might seem like the most trivial facts, when she was born, when she was married, but given how little we often know about women from this period, literally any fact, almost like literally any text, is incalculably valuable. Ah, and that becomes truer with Pulter, partly because a lot of her verse has an autobiographical cast to it, she’s frequently reflecting on her daughters, ah, the death of her children—she had fifteen, almost all of them died before she did—

[Alison] [Sympathetic noise]

[LK] Ah, and she lived through the civil wars in England in the 1640s, and so when you’re working with a writer who’s work has that autobiographical cast to it, these sorts of facts also come into play. Pulter was born in 1605, in Ireland, but she was an English woman, and returns to and is raised in England and marries a man who owns a property called Broadfield in Hertfordshire and she spends, it appears, most of her adult life on this country estate, Broadfield, ah, where she frequently speaks of being confined. And confinement there could have many reasons, partly to do with her fifteen pregnancies and the illnesses that exude before and after, partly to do perhaps with other illnesses, ah, also to do with civil war that lead frequently to the confinement of royalists like Pulter in the 1640s when they were not the popular crowd and it’s not necessarily safe to be moving about. She writes about that sense of confinement but what’s fascinating is that in that confining circumstance she’s motivated to find such freedom as she can, partly through her verse, and she speaks very movingly about that, through her verse and through her mental universe that she enlarges by imagining herself flying up into space and revolving with the stars, as well as dissolving into dust and then revolving into different atomic forms.

She has this most amazingly wide-ranging mind despite apparently being so limited and isolated in her person, in her body.

[Alison] So how many poems do we have from Hester?

[LK] Um, it depends how you count them and that's why I always say, this is my phrase, one-hundred and twenty odd poems, ah. The person who really first put them on the map and counted them for us was Alice Eardly, who came up with the first printed edition, came out with that in 2014, based on her earlier dissertation work, and we've tried to, I mean, because our work in the Pulter Project, our editions, really follow on her, we did the original work, went back, photographed the manuscript, transcribed it and so on, ah. But we also recognize that we're with Eardly part of an emerging tradition on Pulter, a scholarly tradition of thinking about her, and so we've tried to keep those same numbers in play in order to make the conversations about her verse more feasible.

[Alison] So this project you are working on with Wendy Wall, introduce it to us. [laughs]

[LK] Good idea! The Pulter Project, ah, emerged out of the seminar that Wendy and I did where we were asking people to reflect on different ways of incorporating Pulter's manuscripts truly brought to light into our discussions, into our courses, op-ed pieces, different ways of bringing her further to light. So often what we find is that these sorts of figures or their works are found and there's a great big celebration and hurray, hurrah, everyone loves the new find, the moment of discovery is validated and valorized. But what comes after that is the hard work. And one form of hard work we decided to take was to edit her work, not because it hadn't been done, Alice Eardly's work was out there and is very valuable, but in part because we found very rapidly it fell out of print. And what once was found was once again lost. Now as it happens there's a happy ending there, which is that her work is back in print now, um, more or less at the same time as our editions in the Pulter Project came to light in November of 2018 we launched the site. It's not complete and we launched it in that state deliberately in order to attract the contributions of more editors. It's very much a collaboration, Wendy Wall and I direct it but we have at this point it must be over a dozen contributors, both of what we call amplified editions, which are elaborate, often lengthy, sometimes more scholarly editions that are meant to contrast with the ones that Wendy and I made as a sort of baseline, we call them elemental editions with minimal notes, and they're modernized and they're really meant as an easy on ramp for a first time reader of Pulter. Um, but we set those in conjunction and in parallel to these amplified editions, which come from a whole host of contributors, with the transcriptions of the manuscript, which are a more technical way of looking at it. And images of the manuscript page by page images of the manuscript itself. So it's an open access website and we've both used it in our courses, as have others, and, ah, it's been really rewarding, it's been a wonderful experience and connecting with scholars all around the world.

[Alison] So what's your long term goal or hope for this project?

[LK] Well, our long term goal is certainly to finish the editions, but not just them, we also, and again this is one of the affordances of the digital medium, ah, we pair those with what we call curations, which are virtual exhibits of both visual and verbal material, so other texts that seem to resonate with [Pulter's] or images of the period, portraits or drawings that again bring to life some of the things that she's talking about that aren't as familiar to us, so those curations we'd like to have for all the poems. We'd also like to have a pedagogical arm to the site in which we, like I said, we and many other instructors we know of

have already incorporated this material into our courses, and that we can share that again as part of a larger collaborative approach to the site.

[Alison] So I was just thinking as well as you were talking about the digital images and I was thinking back to our physical books we were talking about earlier and about the physicality of books, um, how is it different as a scholar when you're working with an image or copy compared, even if it's like, you know, a nice photograph, compared to that original?

[LK] Oh boy. It's very different and they are both necessary, that's one of the interesting things that I found. So as I said, I did visit the book in Leeds with my camera and so I was there and was able to photograph each and every one of its pages in the most high resolution could come up with with whatever camera I had, and brought those images home to work with them. And that was great, but what you also find is that's also not enough. And so we would zoom in to the highest possible resolution to try to determine what is that word, what is that letter, that single character, or, and sometimes it was simply impossible to tell, it didn't have to do with resolution, it had to do with, you know, if you can check on the reverse of a leaf you can see if it's bleed, if the ink has bled through from that side, or if it is a mark, it's sort of technical and a little trivial, but that's the kind of work, the kind of nitty gritty work that needs to be done when you're editing a text, ah, and so it was a real lesson in the value again, those rare book rooms and maintaining the integrity of those materials. No matter how good our facsimile technology might grow.

[Alison] Well thank you very much for joining me today and for the wonderful conversation and we will be providing links to the, to your Pulter Project in our show footnotes for our listeners as well. Thank you very much.

[LK] Thank you very much, Alison.

[Theme music]

[Credits]

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