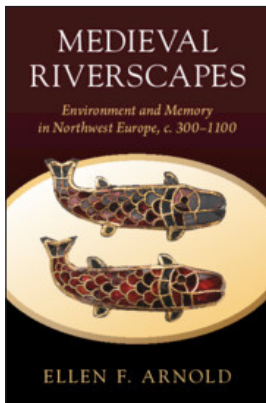


Ellen F. Arnold: Medieval Riverscapes. Environment and Memory in Northwest Europe, c. 300–1100, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge
2024, 302 pp., 1 map, 23 figures

Riverscapes medieval and early modern: Ecological conversations

As a historian of reformation and pre-industrial Europe interested in all aspects of that history, including cultural history and memory studies, I use my knowledge



of the early modern period to offer some reviewing reflections on Ellen Arnold's *Medieval Riverscapes*. This knowledge was even once practically used because I was an expert witness in a case about fishing rights in rivers as they passed the great medieval cathedrals, grants made by King Henry I (1100–1135) were still legally enforceable. This is an important historical background for looking at how rivers, their curtilages and appurtenances were appropriated by the state to be disposed of at its pleasure. Ellen Arnold, who calls herself a “water historian”, gives a different account of premodern river geographies beyond politicised and commodified orders of knowledge. Her approach draws far more on historical community-based approaches.

The book appeared in Cambridge University Press's *Studies in Environment and History* series. However, it is also a book

about literary constructions of riverscapes, and indeed, Cambridge University Library accessioned the book as a monograph on literature and not history. This captures nicely how eco-criticism straddles disciplines, and indeed, *Medieval Riverscapes* draws extensively on poetry and visual imagery (including cartography) as well as on annals, chronicles, hagiographies and law codes, all of which contribute to the place of rivers in imagination and memory. In defining “riverscape”, Ellen Arnold calls them “complex, socio-cultural networks of use, appreciation, fear, respect and value that people build up around rivers” (p. 9), and her book is very much an exploration and vindication of that definition. A little later, she discusses the huge Peutinger table map from late antiquity in which “Rome is where all roads and rivers lead. Space is condensed, bodies of water and land masses stretched and shrunk... the mapmaker has distorted time and retold and reimagined the history of empire” (pp. 15–16). And this, too, acts as a motto for what follows. We follow rivers at their most limpid and sparkling; at their most commanding in defining boundaries and directing the movement of peoples; at their most dangerous; and at their most *violated* and *contested*, as they are appropriated for human benefit – first by watermills, then by weirs, dams, sluices, and then by bridges. The contestation blurs into the anthropomorphic, as Christians sought to (literally) convert the demons and river gods to the world of miracles and divine warnings.

The book is arranged thematically but each theme has a particular chronological focus. We begin with “poetries of place”, introducing three poets, especially

Venantius Fortunatus, who celebrated most of all not the only natural luxuriance of the riverscapes of late antique Gaul, but the human flourishing enabled by riverside locations. Next, come “rivers at risk” (the hazards of navigation especially), then “river resources” (fishing, watermills, bridges, and “river system interventions”); then comes “rivers and memory” above all memories of disaster; then “ruptured rivers”, which focuses on rivers as frontiers, physical, military, political, and on the ways they promote disruptions and restorations – ending with an account of rivers as agents of miracles); “meanderings” (tales of fabulous fish and monsters), rivers as warnings (when they go into reverse), and recollections of Noah and the Great Flood and covenants over the waters. The final chapter is a miscellany with the unhelpful title “the same river twice”, in effect an account of riverine themes in surviving ceilings and mosaics and also in some poetry and imaginative prose writing later than those of the first chapter.

This amounts to a study of riverscapes strongest on memory and human/nature interaction, with the rivers giving as good as they got, and a strong sense of rivers as suffering actors and as oracles of warning and reproach. Much of this can be replicated in both the sources and scholarly writing about rivers in the middle centuries of the second millennium. I am entirely aware of what is being done in Britain, so I will concentrate on that. The sources are much richer, of course. Now, we have far more state records, far more local legal records, and far more evidence that can measure the scale of human/river interaction and its consequences. Much of this is very recent. That said, an eco-history of early modern British rivers to match Ellen Arnold’s *Medieval Landscapes* has yet to be written. In the authoritative online Bibliography of British and Irish History, with more than half a million items, only 414 of the items tagged to

the period 1500–1750 published before 2020 contain the word “river” (none contain “riverscape” and only one “riverine”).¹ The great majority of these volumes are descriptions and antiquarian works. None that I could see were aware of the eco-turn in historical studies, and very few have used literary or visual evidence.

Let me give four representative examples. The University of Liverpool (but drawing in colleagues from across the UK) has produced an online database drawing on all known evidence of extreme weather events in the UK over the past 500 years.² Concentrating on local government records and personal information (letters, diaries, etc.) from five large regions (about one-third of Britain), this is a cultural but not really an eco-history resource. In parallel with this is a 2021 doctoral thesis also from Liverpool entitled ‘Learning from the past: Exploiting Archives for Historical Water Management Research’,³ an evaluation of the various kinds of evidence that exist for a study of historic flood and drought. It includes a case study for the county of Staffordshire 1550–1750 (linked to a 10-page spreadsheet appendix of events across all 200 years) and an account of a project in which volunteers were used to examine the obstacles to environmental research, leading to proposals on how these obstacles could be overcome. There are many appendices, including one offering preliminary reviews of surviving evidence in ten regional and national repositories. A third example of new work is that of Dr Rose Hewlett (Bristol PhD on the 1607 Seven Estuary Flood, the greatest natural disaster in recorded time in the UK – this does not seem to be available online). From

¹ J. Putley, *Riverine Dean: the maritime & waterfront archaeology of the Forest of Dean*, Dean Archaeological Group occasional publication, 5 (Lydney: Dean Archaeological Group, 1999).

² See <https://tempest.liv.ac.uk/>.

³ Helen Clare Houghton-Foster’s dissertation available at: <https://core.ac.uk/download/481471089.pdf>.

the abstract, it seems that she argues that all previous work, based on sensationalist London pamphlets, misrepresents what happened, and in two open-access works, in an article⁴ and more substantially in the introduction and matter of her edition of the records of the Gloucestershire Court of Sewers 1583–1642,⁵ she explores the tension between the records kept by those who had to deal with the aftermath and the rather different agendas of London journalists. One more pioneering thesis is that of John Emrys Morgan (Warwick PhD, 2015) entitled ‘Flooding in Early Modern England. Cultures of Coping in Gloucestershire and Lincolnshire’.⁶ The two counties are well chosen, for while Gloucester is the basin of the Severn, Lincolnshire was a low-lying, wetland county with the greatest amount of interference in the period, converting fen to rich agricultural land with important social and cultural consequences. The main thrust of Morgan’s work is on the blame game between the venture capitalists who financed the transformed waterways and the locals, many of whom lost out, and many more who found the changing flooding patterns wrecked their lives.

These works are not randomly chosen. They are, as far as I can see, representative of the recent river research, and while they demonstrate advances in historical geography and pointedly attempt to draw lessons for the present, none of them really engages with eco-history as Ellen Arnold defines it, as “complex, socio-cultural networks of

use, appreciation, fear, respect and value that people build up around rivers” (p. 9). And these studies, rooted in (if not confined to) the methods and preoccupation of geographers and economic historians, do establish the different stories of rivers over time. Most obviously, the extent of human disruption of the natural flow of rivers in the early modern period was far greater and with it, the extent of regulation and conflict. I cannot put numbers on it yet, so let me give my own vivid example. In Nottinghamshire in the 1620s, a leading family built new fishing weirs for their own use, obstructing the movement (which could only be done by river) of coal from upstream mines. A legal dispute ensued and got snared up in conflict between different jurisdictions. The owners of the mines (the Cavendishes), who controlled the local apparatus of the quarterly meetings of magistrates, told their supporters but not the owners of the weirs and their supporters (the Stanhopes) that they were moving the Sessions from its usual venue, and to empanel a partisan jury of freeholders to present the weirs as a public nuisance which would permit their destruction by the sheriff and his men. The Stanhopes found out what was happening at the last moment and rushed to the new venue, where a pitched battle occurred. Inevitably, this led to a trial in the King’s Court of Star Chamber, which kept impeccable and voluminous records. Here, economic, social, political, and cultural history all coincide around the river Trent. It is a story awaiting its historian.

The nearest we get to a sense of a specifically early modern eco-history of English rivers is from a stand-alone study by the great and popular biographer Peter Ackroyd, stepping out of his comfort zone in his biography of the Thames,⁷ a cultural history in which all chapters are thematic, not chronological, with a bias towards

⁴ R. Hewlett, ‘Weird weather in Bristol during the Grindelwald Fluctuation (1560–1630)’, *Weather*, vol. 76, no. 4 (2016), pp. 104–10.

⁵ Courts or commissioners of sewers were leading gentry appointed by the Crown to regulate and to enforce rules governing all watercourses, natural or manmade, within a single county. They were formally established in 1531 and only abolished in 1930, replaced by more bureaucratic Internal Drainage Boards. Very few of the records of these commissions have survived for the early modern period. See R. Hewlett, *Gloucestershire Record Society, Record Series*, vol. 35 (2020).

⁶ Available online at: https://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/id/eprint79945/1/WRAP_THESIS_Morgan_2015.pdf.

⁷ P. Ackroyd, *Thames: Sacred River* (London, 2007).

cultural history and to the river's vulnerability, and with a focus on its differing moods. Ackroyd draws on a similar range of sources to Arnold, but his aim is a vivid description, not an analysis.

Ellen Arnold calls us to look at human-river two-way interactions and she uses chronicles to illustrate adaptive memory and attempted understandings of angry rivers in flood. There is patchy reportage for the early modern period, but it does not seem as important in making memory. I am struck by the apparent fact that fires were more central to popular imagination and collective action than floods. I think I am right in saying that while, following many fires (Nantwich, Dorchester, London, and Newmarket, spring immediately to my mind), national collections were organised by Parliament to support those affected, there is no similar national relief efforts after the many floods, even the worst of them, the "tsunami" of 1607 in the Severn estuary.

Rivers were polluted by human effluent in the medieval period, of course, but not to the extent they were in the early modern period. One area I happen to know about is the disposal of waste from breweries, which became semi-industrialised early on and did nothing for the fish or the fisheries. Indeed, there was a steep decline in river fishing and the popularity of river fish in the middle centuries of the second millennium in relation to the previous period, with the rich creating fishponds on their estates and the poor eating salted fish from the sea.

Any eco-riverscape studies for England, in particular, would begin from two bases. The first would be the overwhelming importance of the Thames (navigable for all but twenty-four of its 215 miles and in many of its twenty tributaries) and bringing much of one-third of all English counties into its hinterlands. It is no coincidence that almost half of the 414 items in the English Short Title Catalogue

(460,000 works published in Britain in any language or in English anywhere before 1800) relate to the Thames. London's well-established domination of the English government, economy, and culture is very much the product of the nature of the Thames.

The other base position for any eco-history of English rivers in the pre-industrial era would be the shape of England and its consequent river systems. In the early modern period, all the major cities were ports on the coast or on rivers navigable to the sea. Because so many of those rivers were navigable for most of their length, it has been established that only a handful of the 180 corporate boroughs were more than 20 miles from water navigable to the sea. For example, ten of the forty largest towns in England sat in the riverscape of the Severn.

A cultural and eco-history of rivers would be able to explore the particular significance of these issues. But ultimately, what would be most necessary is how rivers represent both constancy and variation of appearance, utility, and mood. It is striking that rivers have the oldest names of any features of the landscape. Britain was conquered and acculturated by Romans, Saxons, Norsemen and Normans, and all have left their mark on the names we give to mountains, wild areas, cultivated areas, and built environments. The etymology of the names of all our larger rivers (Thames, Severn, Mersey, Ouse, Clyde, etc.) are from old Celtic and predate any of these waves of settlement. The rivers are always the same but constantly changing, as we see in the tropes of poetry, painting, folk tales and folksong, all of which mingle the river as fixed, calm, resolute, the river as angry and vengeful, the river as sluggish, clogged, dejected, the river as impulsive, quixotic, in control. It leaves me lost in admiration for the richness of Arnold's study. If the journeys of Fortunatus speak of the glories of many

riverscapes,⁸ the equivalent for Britain would be John Taylor the Water Poet (1578–1653).⁹ Taylor was born neither into wealth nor poverty, was apprenticed as a Thames waterman and spent many years ferrying goods and persons across the Thames or from ships to shore with a lucrative contract to bring wine ashore for the King's Court. He was also secretary to a group of royal privy counsellors charged with improving navigation between London and Oxford, rowing them upstream and noting all the obstructions; he was restless, however, and eventually lost his wine contract to the relation of the man who doled out the contracts. He then took to the road and to water to write highly entertaining and politically challenging travelogues to an ever-larger readership. His twelve entertaining picaresque adventures took in all forty English counties and many in Scotland and were published in pamphlets with titles like *A verry merry wherry voyage* (from London to York), or *Part of this Summer's Travels, or news from Hell, Hull, and Halifax* (the reference to Hell being a scatological reference to a Derbyshire hill or peak he rowed past, called locally the Devil's Arse). Written in rhyming couplets alternating with chatty prose, this is a wry, keenly observed and critical account of all the people and places he encountered, noting the character of each river and of the ambiguous relationship (human benefit, environmental degradation, changing moods) between the rivers and their human exploiters/tormentors. Here he is in prose about the river Dee at Chester, where he described

a river “spoyled and impeached [=impeded] by a bank of stones all over it, only for the employment of a mil or two which river other ways would be passable and profitable to the whole country for many miles”.¹⁰ Then, in verse, after he describes a desperate fight against a tidal race on the Humber, he celebrates a fruitful alliance of man and nature:

And thus by God's grace, and man's industry
 Dame Nature, or mens art doth it supply.
 Some 10.yeaes since fresh water there was scant,
 But with much cost they have supply'd that want;
 By a most exc'lent water-worke that's made.
 And to the towne in pipes it is convey'd.
 Wrought with most artificiall engines, and
 Perform'd by th'art of the industrious hand
 Of Mr William Maultby ...¹¹

John Taylor was unique and is more easily assimilated to the genre of topography than poetry, but his unique background as one of thousands of men (even then) who derived their livelihood from the Thames gives his description special riverine significance. Rivers are everywhere in poems, sometimes evoking classical or biblical or macrocosmic tropes, as, of course, in the literary works discussed by Arnold.¹² Milton's sonnet listing Oliver Cromwell's victories and warnings for the future (“new foes arise // Threat'ning to bind our souls with secular chains”), uses well-established names for most of his battles but changes

⁸ See for example the section headed *Reading rivers* in the chapter entitled *Poetries of place* (Arnold, *Medieval Riverscapes*, pp. 21–9, which begins with this quotation from Fortunatus: “Does the Meuse, sweetly sounding, haunt of crane, goose, gander, and swan, rich in its threefold wares in fish, fowl, and shipping, detain him, or the Aisne where it breaks on grassy banks and feeds pastures, meadows, and fields ...?” [p. 21]).

⁹ There is an excellent summary of his life by Bernard Capp in *The Oxford History of National Biography* (online and in hard copy [2004]), and a full biography and evaluation of his writings by B.S.Capp, *The World of John Taylor the water poet 1578–1653* (Oxford, 1994).

¹⁰ *Part of this summer's travels, or news from hell, Hull and Halifax...* by John Taylor (1639), p. 29 (viewed on Early English Books Online, STC (2nd edn)/ 23783).

¹¹ *All the vworks of John Taylor the water-poet, being sixty and three in number* (1630), p. 88 (viewed on Early English Books Online, STC (2nd edn)/ 23725).

¹² See Arnold, *Medieval Riverscapes*, esp. in chapters 1 and 4 – as for example in the following (p. 171): “In his account of Sturm's exploits, Eigil built on both the rich *locus amoenus* tradition and *encomia* of classical and Late Antique Latin literature and to biblical descriptions of a bountiful paradise. They actively worked to frame local landscapes as sites blessed by God, and thus tied to the broader heritage of Christian lands. The rivers of Gaul could be connected to the famous rivers of classical history, and to the rivers of Paradise [...]”.

the battle of Preston to the river Darwen: He “Hast rear’d God’s trophies, and his work pursu’d, // While Darwen stream with blood of Scots imbrud”).¹³ And on the eve of the civil wars of the 1640s, and rewritten many times as the wars developed, John Denham [in *Cooper’s Hill*] wrote about the Thames as it crossed his lands, carrying with it all the vicissitudes of its and of any life, seeking out the one certain destiny: “Hasting to pay his tribute to the sea // Like mortal life to meet eternity”.¹⁴ Such work – and, of course, the visual representations of riverscapes (in English, the word was coined in the nineteenth century specifically in relation to painting and visual evocations)¹⁵ – has still to be integrated into eco-histories.

A final reflection. From (especially) the second century CE to the Enlightenment, medical science was dominated by the Galenic theory of the four temperaments or four humours, the elements of the human body – blood, phlegm, yellow and black bile – and treatments consisted of correcting imbalances (blood-letting, purges, etc.). But if the human body is a single

body made up of these elements, so, it might have been imagined at the time, is a body of water. An eco-history could be built around *the phlegmatic river* (fixed, calm resolute), *the choleric river* (angry, resentful), *the melancholic river* (sluggish, dejected) and *the sanguine river* (impulsive, assertive, quixotic). Such a history would reflect the different moods of a single living entity. It has a constant life, and it has its humours, and when those humours get out of balance, it gets sick, clogged by idle weeds, angry in the form of tidal surges, pollution and nausea, a benign host to the pageant and excitement, a stillness and place of peace. Early modern rivers did not have their monsters, but if they did not have minds or perform miracles, they had agency, and that agency came from God-given rain and man-made disruptions and exploitation. Such a history would be resonant for our times, just as Ellen Arnold has shown us a *histoire totale* has for the medieval riverscape. ■

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¹³ <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44749/sonnet-16-cromwell-our-chief-of-men-who-through-a-cloud> (checked against standard scholarly editions).

¹⁴ <https://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/content/coopers-hill-1642> (the best scholarly and annotated edition).

¹⁵ See the entry in the *Oxford English Dictionary*: The earliest known usage is 1854 as a compound noun: “Another shower; another sunlit and magical land and river-scape”; and the earliest usage without a hyphen is given as 1884: “one would certainly have taken the medal for land and riverscape had one been awarded” [citation to *Photographic News*, 24 Oct. 1884].