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# HERALDS IN THE NEW DNB

## Part II

David Gelber

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- Borough, Sir John (?-1643), Garter, *by* S. A. Baron
- Brooke, Ralph (c.1553-1625), York, *by* Wyman H. Herendeen
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- Wyrley, William (1565-1618), Rouge Croix, *by* M. W. Greenslade

Sir Thomas Kendrick characterised the seventeenth century as the 'great age of the heralds'. It is largely to the support of this claim that the new *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* contains entries for no fewer than thirty kings of arms, heralds and pursuivants appointed to the College of Arms between two fundamental milestones in its history: the re-incorporation of 1555 and the final visitation of 1687. The



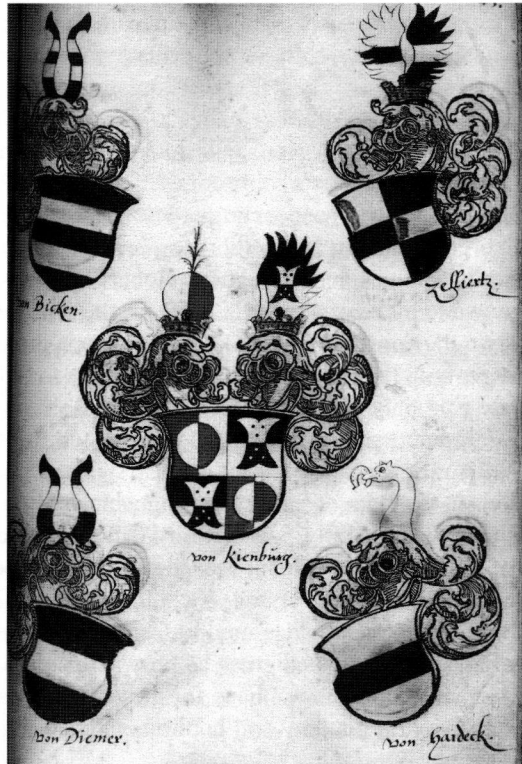
first of these drew the heralds into a single community and provided them with a permanent address, that they 'may dwell near together and may meet sometimes at fit and opportune days, times and places ..... to deliberate, debate and confer among themselves one with another for counsel and advice for the good estate, erudition and government of their faculty aforesaid, and that they may be able the more safely to keep their records and enrolments and other emoluments touching their faculty'. The second deprived them, if not of their actual dwelling (the premises granted to the heralds by Queen Mary in 1555 had already succumbed to the Great Fire and a new edifice — the present College of Arms — was only completed on the site in 1688), then at least of their principal source of evidences, pedigrees and fees — the combination of which had furnished the College physically, intellectually and fiscally since its foundation 132 years earlier. There are a further five entries on deputy heralds and artists.

The history of the heralds has often been told as the history of the College of Arms, most famously by Sir Anthony Wagner, whose *Heralds of England: A History of the Office and College of Arms* — as the title suggests — skilfully elides the distinction between the two. Yet such an approach posits an indissoluble connection between the individual and the institution that overlooks the extra-collegiate activities of the heralds. It barely needs iterating that heralds were operating long before their sixteenth century successors were driven into communion by Mary. Even Richard III's ephemeral efforts to inaugurate a corporation of heralds in 1484 — the earliest example of an English monarch attempting to regiment his officers of arms — were directed at a time-honoured trade with its origins in the feudal past, and not the bastardised parody that then prevailed. Long after Mary's incorporation of the College (a term that was notably absent from the letters patent of 1555), certain heralds continued to profess and practise a separate existence. William Dethick, while still York Herald, was perhaps the most notorious trespasser on the kings of arms' monopoly of awarding arms, while also transgressing the requirement to register all new grants in the College records, yet his conduct reveals a readiness among the heralds to pursue their calling free the College's embrace (Sir William Dethick entry). As late as 1673, Sir Edward Walker fought unsuccessfully for exemption from the Earl Marshal's jurisdiction over the heralds on the grounds that, as Garter King of Arms, he was an officer of the Order of the Garter and not of the College (Sir Edward Walker entry).

Almost involuntarily, the new *DNB* shatters the prism through which the heralds of the early-modern period are conventionally observed. With the exception of its Victorian precursor, almost all the standard points of reference for biographical information about the English officers of arms — Noble's *History of the College of Arms*, the 1963 Survey of London monograph *The College of Arms*, and Wagner's own mighty tome — consider the heralds with a very audible accent on their careers at the College. The new *DNB* thus provides a much-needed antidote to the tendency of casting the heralds as casual actors in the history of the College, rather than the College as just one component in the often extremely catholic careers of those that served there.

The eclecticism that characterised the interests and activities of the heralds in their golden age may be gleaned by glancing at some of the names that adorned the College's roster in this period. William Camden and Elias Ashmole are remembered foremost for their contributions to historical and archaeological scholarship, and only incidentally in their capacities as heralds. Both had passed the age of forty before they were appointed heralds and had already harvested renown in other fields. Indeed, Wyman Herendeen goes so far as to show that Camden demonstrated no active desire for the post of Clarenceux, to which he was presented in 1597, and that it was only on the courtier Fulke Greville's insistence that his appointment would inject an iota of integrity into the heraldic profession that Elizabeth agreed to consider him for the post (William Camden entry). Others, though career heralds, owe their fame primarily to achievements outside the office of arms. This is especially true for Sir Edward Walker, sometime Chief Secretary to Charles I, and Gregory King, author of the celebrated 'Natural and Political Observations upon the State and Condition of England'.

The names of some of the other heralds embraced by this edition roll less readily off the tongue, yet their obscurity is no promise that their attainments were any less varied. John Hart (Chester Herald from 1567) authored three orthographic treatises and was an early proponent of standardised spelling. William Smith (Rouge Dragon from 1597) kept a tavern with the sign of a goose in Nuremburg before his



Right: a page from a manuscript of 'Armes of the Nobilitie, and of the Gentilitie, in Germany' by William Smith, Rouge Dragon, 1597; stated on the title page to have been gathered by him during his twenty years of residence there, 1571-91. CA Ms SML 11, p. 45.

appointment as pursuivant. Edward Norgate (Windsor Herald from 1633) served as tuner and subsequently keeper of the King's virginals under James I. A not inconsiderable number of those included in this survey were journeymen of sorts, whose routes into the College were often adventitious.

The great multiplicity of interests that the individual officers of arms boasted invites consideration of the nature of heraldic work during the early-modern age. Established opinion holds that the heraldic business grew simultaneously more professional and scholarly over the period, facilitated by the forces of supply and demand. According to this view, a stream of increasingly able antiquarians and genealogists (among them Camden, Augustine Vincent and Sir William Dugdale) were able to reap the dividends of the burgeoning desire of the English gentry to demonstrate their nobility through coats of arms and pedigrees. The second of these developments is not much in doubt. The early-modern age witnessed a flood of new grantees, with the number of arms officially awarded increasing by over fifty percent on average between 1560-1640. Such, at least, paid for the gilding with which this era was supposedly decorated if you were a herald. A far greater number of devices either went unrecorded or were simply assumed unlicensed by families flung suddenly to the pitch in the great social swell (Edward Elmhirst, 'The Fashion for Heraldry', *CoA* 1st ser. 4 (1956-8), no 26, pp. 47-50).

Yet while the fees that they were able to collect from the granting and registration of arms made this a great age for the heralds, it does not follow that this was an illustrious epoch for heraldry. Indeed, accuracy and honesty — staples of good genealogy and heraldry — were anathema to those ambitious gentlemen who proved the heralds' best clients, and whose motives for acquiring a pedigree were not to reveal their ancestry, but rather to obscure it. The Elizabethan heralds connived in these schemes and were notorious for their unscrupulousness, even suffering the sting of Ben Jonson's satire for their sins. In 1597, William Dethick was censured in Star Chamber for concocting a descent from the Lords Grey of Ruthin for a certain George Rotheram and authorising him on this basis to adopt the arms of that noble family. Dethick and his nemesis Robert Cooke (sometime Clarenceux King of Arms, known to his adversary as 'Clarentius the drunkard') hurled accusations at each other down the corridors of the College of Arms, the former parrying the latter's taunts of forger with the charge that he granted arms to 'base and unworthy persons for his private gain only' (William Dethick entry; Robert Cooke entry).

Indictments of this kind echoed down the seventeenth century. Ralph Brooke, William Segar and even the august William Camden were exposed to like accusations in the reign of James I, during which animosities in the College reached a feverish state. The saintly figure of Sir William Dugdale to some extent stands watch over the reputation of the heralds of the Restoration period, yet his contemporary and colleague Sir Edward Bysshe (who was made Garter King of Arms by the Long Parliament, but was demoted to Clarenceux when the Commonwealth expired) was as cavalier in his pedigrees as he was in his loyalties. Upon his demise, the Earl Marshal wrote, 'since I have for these many years without success endeavoured his conversion to his duty and brethren and could never wash this blackamore into any



other colour, I am, I confess, very little mortified at his death'. Bysshe was one of several early-modern heralds to utilise his advantageous position as a herald to invent a fanciful pedigree for himself — in his case claiming a right to the arms of the ancient family of de la Bishe (Sir Edward Bysshe entry). Old habits were slow to expire.

The controversies that smouldered among the above-mentioned heralds for much of the early-modern period are well-known, and inevitably receive much oxygen in the new *DNB*. William Lant's description of the College of Arms in the 1590s as 'a company full of discord and envy' has, on this showing, a ring of truth to it (William Lant entry). Some of the stories are too good to omit, among them the brilliant hoax sprung by Brooke on his senior colleague Segar, who was tricked into granting the arms of Brabant and Aragon to the common hangman of London, an episode that landed both men in the Marshalsea, 'the one ... for plotting such a device, the other for being so grossly overtaken' (*Letters of John Chamberlain* vol. 2, p. 48). Yet the impression left by many of the entries is that such disputes occupied an overwhelming portion of the heralds' time. It is conceivable that such quarrels were the birth-pangs of a proper scientific (to use the contemporary idiom) discipline. Certainly, the avariciousness that characterised the early-Tudor conflicts about competing jurisdictions (and hence, profits) between the kings of arms gave way to a more cerebral discourse which, while no less bitter, focused instead on the supposed deficiencies in the scholarship of the several antagonists. All the same, while there is a sense from these articles of some improvement in the standards of genealogy over the period (particularly in Nigel Ramsay's entry on the Elizabethan herald Robert Glover, the first person to substitute the modern quadrilateral pedigree for the old radial scheme, and in Graham Parry's appraisal of Dugdale), it is difficult to escape the sense that many of the personalities who served as heralds in this period contributed little to heraldry.

This impression is enhanced by the virtual absence in these entries of any reference to the part played by their subjects to the creative elements in heraldry. This is a little perplexing, since one of the great revelations in these volumes is the extensive overlap that existed between the heralds and the painter-stainers — two groups whose relationship is normally portrayed as intrinsically inimical. Instead, the association between the two appears to have involved as much cooperation as competition. Ralph Brooke and Henry Lilly were themselves apprenticed to the Painter-Stainers' Company before becoming heralds, while William Camden's father was likewise a member of this guild. The first Randle Holme, Deputy Herald for Chester, similarly owed his appointment to the touch of his brush. Others included in this tranche also arrived at the College gates after practical experience in related trades: Segar, for instance, trained as a scrivener and Norgate as a limner. With such a significant cohort of early-modern heralds enjoying schooling of some description in the visual arts, it is surprising to find their influence on the aesthetics of armorials so lightly treated.

The efforts of early-modern heralds to consolidate and improve the laws of their trade are somewhat better covered. Thomas Woodcock offers authoritative comment

on the influence of John Guillim's *Display of Heraldrie* (first published in 1595) on the system of marshalling, even to the present day (John Guillim entry). Peter Sherlock makes reference to John Gibbon's unsuccessful attempts to reform the language of blazoning in the later seventeenth century (John Gibbon entry). But the changing nature of heraldry and genealogy in this period is narrated most beguilingly in Michael Siddons's entry on the Deputy Herald for Wales, Lewys Dwnn, whose career affords a glimpse of the almost geological shift from an oral to a literate society in the sixteenth century. One of the last in the line of Welsh bards, Dwnn owed his early fame to his verses memorialising his patrons' ancestries and achievements. But with this tradition lipping its last, Dwnn had to exchange the ethereal art of his ancestors for the hard realities of parchment and quill, and subsequently found employment conducting visitations of his homeland and producing pedigrees on behalf of the English kings of arms (Lewys Dwnn entry). The Welsh situation was exceptional, however, and the overriding impression here is that this was an age of limited heraldic innovation.

Of more interest are the occasional nods that the authors of these entries give to the political role of the heralds. It is a commonplace that the heralds' diplomatic duties had all but dried up by the end of the Middle Ages, but the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries continued to see them employed on missions to confer the Order of the Garter on foreign potentates, which was one of the foremost means by which the English crown buttressed its alliances. That these assignments were more than trivial gestures is demonstrated by the gifts lavished on the heralds by the recipients of the St George: Robert Cooke received two gold chains from Henry III of France for his pains, although (so his enemies claimed) because of his deficient French, misunderstood that one was intended for his interpreter (Robert Cooke entry). The unprecedented circumstances of the English Civil War allowed the heralds to resume their old role of conveying declarations of hostilities and demands for surrender, and more than one suffered sequestration by Parliament for the enthusiasm they showed in the King's service.

The politics of the heralds themselves cannot easily be characterised, although as their social condition gradually rose, so in general did their conservatism. The whiff of treason could sometimes be scented about the heralds in the sixteenth century. In 1538, Thomas Miller, Lancaster Herald, was attainted and executed for supposedly succouring the rebellious Pilgrims of Grace two years earlier. Some thirty years later, William Dethick was suspended from office by Elizabeth for impaling the arms of Mary Stuart with those of Thomas Howard, Duke of Norfolk after the Queen had prohibited a match between the two. At the same time, the readiness of the Elizabethan heralds to grant arms to men palpably of ignoble birth undermined contemporary shibboleths concerning the immutability of the social order. Dissenters like Dethick and Ralph Brooke, whose repeated attempts to deny the authority of the Court of Chivalry during James I's reign amounted to an attack on the royal prerogative, gradually gave way to ultra-loyalists like Walker and Ashmole in the Civil War period. With the ascendancy of Dugdale in the mid-seventeenth century, grants of arms became less promiscuous and were restricted to those who fulfilled his strin-

*Right:* William Camden as Clarenceux King of Arms.

From the frontispiece of Bishop Gibson's edition of Camden's *Britannia* (1695).



gent criteria. Even the 'anti-heralds' of the Commonwealth period, of whom George Owen and Edward Bysshe are covered here, were motivated more by expediency than political extremism — as evinced by their readiness to rejoin the fold after the Restoration. By upholding a tradition with such royalist resonances during Charles II's exile, they might even have nourished monarchist sentiment during those years.

Wyman Herendeen draws attention to a more positive politicisation of the heralds in 1597, when Lord Burghley intervened with Elizabeth to expedite the appointment of his protégé William Camden as Clarenceux, in order to frustrate the ambitions of the new Earl Marshal, the Earl of Essex, who hoped to make the College of Arms a power base of his own (William Camden entry). There were to be more examples of heralds exercising a political function in the next century. In a legal system built on precedent, the antiquarian knowledge of some of the officers could attract a high premium, as John Borough discovered to his credit during Charles I's personal rule. Norroy King of Arms from 1623, Borough was prevailed upon by a government anxious to justify its fiscal impositions to uncover instances where previous sovereigns had established levies without Parliamentary sanction. For his endeavours he was knighted and appointed Garter in 1634 (Sir John Borough entry).



The political role of the heralds is also taken up in a penetrating essay on Elias Ashmole, in which Michael Hunter suggests that the heralds in general, and his subject in particular, were co-opted by the Restoration regime to underpin the established order through chivalric ritual and ceremonial (Elias Ashmole entry). Ashmole's compendious history of the Order of the Garter was surpassed in its royalism by Francis Sandford's lavishly-illustrated volume to commemorate the coronation of James II (the author resigned his office when his patron was replaced by the more insipid William III).

The health of the heraldic discipline in the period 1555-1687 is not easy to evaluate in these very varied articles. It cannot be denied that the admission of men like Camden or Ashmole brought unprecedented fame to the herald's office. Even though their most celebrated achievements were sometimes only remotely connected to heraldry, their association with the profession raised its public standing and very slowly inculcated a more informed standard of scholarship. Yet there were also several heralds in the early-modern period whose successes were native to their trade, most notably Sir William Dugdale.

There is much in these well written and thoroughly researched entries that goes beyond the conventional view of the early-modern heralds as simple component parts in the life of the College of Arms. In these essays, that institution is often little more than an alpenglow against some of the great peaks in the history of English heraldry. The focus on the individual heralds who comprised the College in this key period in its evolution is instructive in the remarkable potpourri of personalities that served this office. Inevitably with such a pungent admixture, their antics were sometimes odious. And while the noxious command a sizeable share of the entries here, deeds of learning and virtue are also chronicled extensively. The moral shortcomings of those documented here ought not to occlude the actions and achievements of the heralds in an age where they reached the peak of their social and political importance. As a contemporary said of William Dethick, 'a herald, though a wicked man, is nevertheless a herald'.