RALPH TAILOR’S SUMMER
TO THE MEMBERS AND FRIENDS OF THE
NORTH EAST ENGLAND HISTORY INSTITUTE
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THIS BOOK IS A STUDY OF A SOCIETY UNDER IMMENSE STRESS: THE city of Newcastle-upon-Tyne during the devastating plague of 1636. It is also a study of what that experience reveals about an urban culture in this period: the attitudes and values of its people, their material culture, and the social and institutional bonds that shaped their world. Unlike most studies of the plague in early modern Europe, its perspective is primarily “from below”. The focus is less on the response of magistrates and public health officials, on the demographic impact of epidemic mortality, or on its religious interpretation (though all these figure) than upon how ordinary people responded to, and coped with, a devastating threat to their families and their community.

The project began with an accidental archival discovery, described in my prologue. It developed as I tried to elaborate upon that initial find; as chance gave way to purposeful research. It was still developing as I began to write the book, as the attempt to address one question triggered others, prompting me to return to the sources repeatedly; rereading, sifting, and combining them to provide answers. I was able to do that more readily because I was working on a relatively small scale, on the records of a particular event in a particular place, and on the role in that event (and in the making of its records) of a single individual. In short, I was engaged in what has come to be known, since the late 1970s, as “microhistory”.

Microhistory is not so much a school of history as a distinctive approach to history. Its practice is much older than the label, but the label is useful in drawing attention to certain characteristics of this approach. First and most obviously, it involves a reduction of scale:
the “analysis, at extremely close range, of highly circumscribed phenomena – a village community, a group of families, even a single person”.¹ This in turn facilitates closer scrutiny of the sources, the “patient attention to small details” that is its second characteristic.² Such intensity of focus can not only provide a more vivid sense of the “lived experience” of the past, but also, by revealing things previously unobserved, discover new meanings that expand the interpretative potential of the evidence.³ This deserves emphasis. Microhistory is undertaken not to illustrate a preconceived argument, but to explore things otherwise inaccessible. If it is concerned with the close examination of the particular, that is precisely because such specificity can illuminate larger issues. The particular is not in opposition to the social. Close study of a place, a person or an event can help to reveal “the invisible structures within which the lived experience is articulated”, or, put more directly, “people making choices and developing strategies within the constraints of their own time and place”.⁴ It is a way of observing and trying to comprehend the networks of relationships and the webs of meaning within which they lived their lives. For that reason, a third essential characteristic of microhistory is its concern not only with specifics, but with context. “The discipline of history,” as E.P. Thompson observed, “is, above all, the discipline of context.”⁵ It is knowledge of its larger context – institutional, social, economic, political, ideological – that enables us to understand the significance of the evidence that survives, and permits its meaning to be teased out.

These, then, were the procedures that guided me in this study: looking very closely at the records generated by a particular event; exploring the potential of those records (whether individually or used in combination) to answer questions; contextualizing the evidence (in terms of both the available historical literature and additional primary sources) in order to understand it better. In writing the resulting book, I have also worked in the microhistory tradition in a further way. For a fourth characteristic of microhistory is that its practitioners tend to be both reflective and remarkably open about what historians actually do.

By this I mean two things. On the one hand, microhistorians tend to involve their readers in the conduct of the analysis and in the construction of arguments. They are sensitive to the role of imagination, conjecture, and interpretative decisions in the writing of history, and there is a certain transparency about the way they
introduce the evidence, explain procedures, pose questions, and involve the reader in the dialogue between the historian and the sources. Ultimately, of course, the author usually advances a particular case, though rarely in a very assertive manner; more often as the best interpretative option, with some possibilities left open. Second, microhistorians also tend to be self-conscious about what historians do rhetorically when they engage in persuasive argument. They frequently adopt a narrative form: often because the evidence itself is that of an event, a case, a life; sometimes because it can be used to reconstruct a process. But these are not the “unproblematic” narratives of historical advocacy and polemic, cheerfully papering over cracks and rugosities, skating fast over thin ice, and shouting loudest when the argument is weak. Rather, they tend to be analytical narratives, proceeding step by step through an explanatory process in which alternative readings are clearly on the surface, and carefully crafted in order to explore and assess them.

This book derives its somewhat unusual structure from an attempt to provide such an account of a particular moment in the history of a city and in the life of a man. The overall structure is provided by the course of the epidemic itself, and by the life and activities of Ralph Tailor, who did much to create the records of that event. Both of those interconnected stories, however, are punctuated with explanatory and contextual discussion. The many short chapters, and the alternation of narrative and analysis both within and between them, result from my efforts to sustain the momentum of those narratives, while at the same time explaining events, exploring particular dimensions of the experience of the plague, and reflecting on their meaning. The chapters are intended to be “units of sense”, by which I mean stages in the gradual unfolding of a meaningful analytical narrative. This structure seemed to me to arise naturally out of my efforts to make sense of the evidence of the plague. I hope that it will carry my readers with me through that process of exploration, reflection, and interpretation. It is a sombre story, to be sure, but, as I hope will become apparent, it is also one that gives grounds for optimism.

In researching and writing this book, I have benefited from a great deal of help, and it is a pleasure to acknowledge it. I must thank the staffs of Durham University’s Department of Archives and Special Collections, of the Tyne and Wear Archives, of the Northumberland Collections Service, Durham County Record
Office, the Local Studies Collection of the City Library, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, the National Archives, and the Huntington Library. Annual visits to the north-east of England were facilitated by the generosity of the Universities of Northumbria, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, and Durham in appointing me to visiting or honorary professorships, and by the North East England History Institute (NEEHI), comprising also the Universities of Teesside and Sunderland, which appointed me a visiting Research Fellow.

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One final debt; the largest. My wife, Eva, as always, has been closer to this enterprise than anyone, and more important to its shaping and eventual completion than even she can know.

K.W.
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Prologue

It was his signature that first drew me to Ralph Tailor: an elaborate and distinctive signature placed at the bottom of a deposition made before the Consistory Court of the bishop of Durham in February 1637. The “R” is large and confident, almost brash, with loops to the side, one of which extends boldly to the right to become the horizontal line of the first letter of his surname. It seems the product of one elaborate swirl of the pen. Then the stem of the “T” is executed as a skein of swirling loops. The “l” sweeps up to touch the horizontal before curling around it. The final “r” extends down into a further eddy of loops. The effect of the whole is arresting in its extravagance.

This impressive display of penmanship lies a quarter of the way down one of the folios of a fragment of a deposition book, in a box described by the Archives and Special Collections Department of Durham University Library as “Box of loose depositions, 1633–4.

1. Ralph Tailor’s signature.
1637, 1662–6”. I was examining it simply because it was a collection of fragments. The series of large bound volumes of Consistory Court depositions ends in 1631. I was short of time and thought I could best use this afternoon in the archives by skimming these fragments to see whether they contained anything useful for the project on which I was then engaged: check them out; eliminate them from the research plan. So I thought.

Historical records have a way of confounding such complacent expectations. They reveal unanticipated things. They disrupt the progress of attempts to sweep too purposefully through the evidence that they provide, to commandeer rather than heed it. I was finding a few things for my then purpose, but was more or less on automatic pilot when I encountered Ralph Tailor’s signature. It caught my eye simply because it was so very different from the stiff and laboured autographs, or more often the simple marks, with which witnesses usually signed their depositions in this period when only a minority knew how to write, and even those who had the skill to do so might use it rarely and sometimes clumsily.

My curiosity aroused, I turned back a page and began to read the deposition. The formal heading identifying the witness told me that Ralph Tailor was from Newcastle-upon-Tyne and that he was twenty-six years old. I read on, and the story that he told soon captured my full attention. He described how, “upon the eight of August last”, having been “sent for” to come to the house of Thomas Holmes, he climbed up “upon the townes wall of Newcastle adjoyning of the key nere the river”, and standing on the wall “over against [Holmes’] window where he then lay, he the said [Holmes] speakinge through the same window did by worde of mouth declare his last will”. This Ralph “did presentlie after comitt to writeing as now it is and after the writeinge therof . . . he redd the same to the said testator whom very sensiblie did acknowledge the same for his last will and testament”. Also present “and hearinge” were John Hunter and Hugh Ridley, both of whom “subscribed their hands and marks thereunto”. Pressed on a couple of points by the court, Ralph added that Holmes, “being then extreame sick”, had retired after he had “declared himself”, but “after the writeing therof he came againe to the same window and acknowledged it”. Ralph also admitted that since the writing of the will he had indeed said “that he was not certaine whether the testator was of perfect mynde and memory at the makeinge therof yea or noe”. That was scarcely
surprising. The man declaring his final wishes from an upper room to the scribe and witnesses on the wall was confined there because he was dying of the plague.²

Intrigued by this vivid scene, I checked the search room’s card index of probate records to see whether the will of Thomas Holmes survived. It did. I filled out a request slip, and a few minutes later I was looking at the document that Ralph Tailor had written that day upon the city wall. It is short – only eighteen lines – and bears some signs of the circumstances of its composition. The hand is clear but seems hurried. It is certainly less neatly executed than the accompanying inventory of Thomas Holmes’ goods, which was also prepared by Ralph Tailor (along with John Hunter and two other men) some two months later. I thought I could detect a slight slant to the lines, possibly occasioned by using a writing board awkwardly propped on the parapet of the wall, but perhaps that was fanciful. The signature of the scribe, however, is a beauty: just like that beneath the deposition, but executed with yet more panache; three times the size of the simple signature of John Hunter, and starkly contrasting, in its elegance, with the wobbly mark that Hugh Ridley managed to scratch beside his name.

The will describes Thomas Holmes as a “yeoman”, a term implying middling social status in this urban context, rather than his actual occupation. In fact, he was a keelman. He made his living transporting coal in a keel boat from the pits that lay close to the Tyne, downriver to the colliers that shipped it to supply the fuel needs of London and other coastal cities, or to the urban markets of continental Europe. He left his half-share in “the cole bote I goe in my selfe” to Hugh Ridley, “my cozen”, “if he live soe long”; a telling qualification. Modest bequests in cash were made to two married daughters – suggesting that he was around fifty years old – another cousin, and a brother and a sister, and “all the rest” went to his wife, Ann, who was also named as executor. The will was of course “nuncupative”, made “by word of mouth” and unsigned by the testator. The inventory specifies the contents of a three-room house consisting of a hall, kitchen, and loft room. Holmes was surely in the latter when he declared his will through the window.³

I took some notes, thinking I would certainly find a use for this striking material one day. It had refreshed me. I moved on. On the next folio, however, I came upon another reference to Ralph Tailor – mentioned by a witness in a different case. There was yet
2. The will of Thomas Holmes, written on the city wall on 8 August 1636 and witnessed by John Hunter, Hugh Ridley and Ralph Tailor.

another on folio 12. On folio 13 he popped up again, giving evidence in a further cause, and I now learned that he was a scrivener, a writer of documents by trade. That explained the superb signature: this young man was a professional penman. On folio 23v he appeared again in yet another case, and when I opened the next folder for 1637, I soon encountered him once more. This fragment of a dismembered deposition book begins on folio 84; he appears on folio 85, giving evidence a few months after his first appearance. “Ra: Tailor, 26 – our old friend,” I pencilled in my notes, before reading another peculiarly arresting deposition. By now I also knew that his name was pronounced “Raiph” or “Raph”; that was how the court scribes took it down phonetically when other witnesses referred to him. All of the incidents recorded related to an outbreak of the plague in Newcastle in the summer of 1636, and I now knew that the records contained a good deal more of the same. Given their fragmentary nature, a lot had probably been lost forever. But much survived, and Ralph Tailor’s presence seemed to run through it like a connecting thread.
I left the library that afternoon preoccupied with Ralph Tailor. His recorded words, and the stories told by him and his fellow witnesses, had caught my imagination. There was still time to walk down Palace Green and slip into Durham Cathedral, turning right into the Galilee Chapel at the cathedral’s western extremity. It was quiet, as it usually is, and bright; the warm light of late afternoon soothing the severity of the elaborate dog-tooth chevrons decorating the arches that spring across the chapel on clusters of slim columns. I knew that this was probably where Ralph Tailor had made his depositions to the Consistory Court in the late winter and early spring of 1637, 368 years before. The court met here. What would he have seen? There are faded medieval paintings on the inner wall. He would not have looked at them: they had been whitewashed out almost a century before his time in the destructive zeal of the Reformation and not yet been rediscovered. From the two small windows in the west wall one can look across the wooded gorge of the river Wear to South Street on the other side. He might have glanced at the view as he waited for the court to hear the causes in which he was concerned. But perhaps there was more to distract his attention. It would have been busy here on court days. There were probably chairs and desks for the court officials in the space before the present altar; clerks; proctors to plead cases; witnesses waiting, whispering nervously; tables piled with papers exhibited before the court; wills, inventories, and recorded testimony. One thing he might have observed, though. As a visitor to the cathedral noted in 1634, “in the Galliley, or Lady Chappell...is...the marble Tombe of venerable st. Bede”. It is there still, and there is an appropriateness in the fact that the dust of the eighth-century author of the Ecclesiastical History of the English People lies in this space where so many documents were made and exhibited; the records from which history can be created. “Time, then, is locked in this place, but its passage is also recorded. Its presence, whether still-stand or passage, contributes to a spirit of reflection and quiet.” I felt as I sat there that I had stumbled on a job to be done. I would put to bed the project on which I had been working and come back next year to dig deeper into the records generated by the Newcastle plague of 1636. And I was already pretty sure that Ralph Tailor would be at the centre of it. He seemed to have tugged at my sleeve.
CHAPTER ONE

Stories of the Plague

The threat of plague was one of the defining characteristics of the early modern period in European history. From the devastating incursion of the Black Death in the late 1340s to the last significant outbreak at Marseille in 1720, plague constituted a live and present danger. When it struck it was “both a personal affliction and a social calamity”, “decimating communities, destroying families, bringing pain and grief to individuals”. Even when dormant, its menace, and the anxiety that this entailed, gave it a “central place in the social imaginary” of the age.

In consequence, plague has been much studied. Analyses of parish burial registers and of the “bills of mortality” compiled and published by urban authorities have revealed much about the incidence of epidemics, their seasonality, their characteristic patterns of mortality, social topography, and demographic impact. The records of national governments and civic magistrates have enabled historians to chronicle the developing governmental response to plague: the elaboration of public health regulations; the imposition of quarantine; the measures taken to sustain food supplies, to relieve and police the poor, and to restrain the desperate.

Historians have also addressed the vast contemporary printed literature on plague, elucidating how the people of the time understood (or rather misunderstood) the nature of the disease, how they justified efforts to combat or contain it, and more broadly how they interpreted its meaning. The fact that, medically, plague was “shrouded in mystery and evoked immense fear” made non-medical texts particularly important in what has been called “the sociocultural construction of a disease that effectively rendered the
physician ineffectual”, and the outcome was its “extreme moralization”. Colin Jones has suggested that there were three interwoven “scripts” for understanding plague – the religious, the medical, and the political – all of which contributed to a fundamentally “dystopic vision”. Plague was a judgment of God upon a sinful people; a sign of mankind’s estrangement from the divine. It was also “an aggressive, ravaging force” attacking both individual bodies and the social body. In the cities most at risk, “plague signifie[d] urban catastrophe, a vertical slice across the horizontal trajectory of normal existence”, “an inexplicable, cataclysmic wrenching of a society”. As one contemporary put it, plague “cuts and severs all ties of blood, duty and friendship”. Outbreaks of plague were represented as “catastrophic collisions with the life and values of the Christian community”, in which personal, religious, and community life were “violated and inverted”, and “the very principles of collective sociability seemed threatened”.

This image of the plague remains powerful. And yet, as Jones also argues, we cannot assume that the accounts presented by the plague tracts are a full or wholly faithful reflection of what actually happened in an epidemic: “the texts are just too heavily freighted with pedagogic or persuasive intent, with symbolic meanings, and with metaphoric interplay.” They arguably elaborated a dystopic myth that laid the ground for a further myth of “salvation and integrity refound”. Many aspects of the actual experience of plague, in fact, remain relatively obscure. Above all, as Paul Slack observes in his magisterial study of the impact of plague on Tudor and Stuart England, “the reactions of the common people to plague are the most difficult of all to reconstruct”.

Personal narratives of the plague might appear to be our best point of entry to that experience. In contrast to the “routine impersonality” of the public records of epidemics, they offer “testimony to the direct experience of plague”, our best chance of recapturing the “emotions, attitudes and behaviour of common people, which all too often remain in the dark corners of history”. Yet even these rare texts, written by unusually literate individuals, tend to reflect their writers’ familiarity with the conventions of the plague tracts of the times. They “drew upon a a shared vocabulary”, “a common stock of metaphors and narrative devices”, “a shared stock of images and rhetorical devices” – “sufficiently shared, in fact,” concludes James Amelang, “to lead the disease-weary reader
to suspect that if you’ve seen one plague account, you’ve seen them all”.11

This should not surprise us. While each is in one sense unique, the authors of these memoirs of the plague almost inevitably employed the language and narrative forms deemed appropriate to their subject within their own culture. They followed familiar scripts because they were concerned to reinforce the same messages as the plague tracts. Thus, while Miquel Parets’ narrative of the Barcelona epidemic of 1651 has distinctive features, and breaks, in its account of the deaths of his wife and children, into a deeply moving “memoir of acute personal crisis”, it is shaped for the most part by the dystopian conventions emphasized by Jones.12 As Amelang argues, Parets was concerned to depict how plague produced “the breakdown of the normal relations of friendship, neighbourhood, and family and kin obligations which had previously united and bound the urban community”. “The triumph of plague becomes the triumph of egoism” – “the sordid victory of private interest over the public good...at all levels of society”, “the abandonment of the most sacred of social obligations”, “the suspension of relations of mutual trust and assistance within the family and the abandonment of obligation within society at large”. The pervasive trope is that of abandonment.13

Similarly, the letters of Father Giovanni Dragoni from his Tuscan township in 1630–1 depict a threatened “disintegration of social life in Monte Lupo”.14 The most widely read account of the plague in England, Daniel Defoe’s fictionalized Journal of the Plague Year, published in 1722, but based upon records and memories of the great London outbreak of 1665, is deeply coloured by the same tradition.15 And the dystopian vision continues to influence historians’ attempts to assess the social and psychological impact of plague. In his account of the social response to plague in early modern England, Paul Slack is cautiously pessimistic. “Plague was especially destructive because it was divisive. For most men the impulse to preserve self and family necessarily triumphed over other loyalties and obligations.” The threat of contagion placed immense strain upon ties of neighbourhood and friendship, the bond between householders and their servants and apprentices, the obligations of kinship. While acknowledging exceptions and sensible of the likelihood that much may have depended on the pre-existing state of social relations – holding out the hope that “a
desperate sense of community” might have survived among the poor – Slack’s picture is ultimately sombre. “Above all, the sick themselves were shunned. Fear of the plague produced fear of its victims.”

That grand fact can hardly be gainsaid. Thomas Holmes’ isolation in his loft room bears it out. Yet the dystopian vision elaborated in contemporary plague tracts, and shaping even personal narratives of the plague, distorts as well as illuminates. It exaggerates the undoubted human capacity for betrayal and abandonment. More, it neglects the role of the social in the imperative of survival. Ralph Tailor, John Hunter, and Hugh Ridley kept their distance from Thomas Holmes, but they were there. They listened to him. Ralph wrote down his wishes “in these words following or words to that effect”. Slack hints at the continuing importance of such realities. Giulia Calvi’s work on the Florentine epidemic of 1630–1 suggests ways of exploring them. Her histories of a plague year are not carefully composed narratives, but vignettes, culled from the trials of those accused of breaches of the regulations laid down by the public health authorities of the city. They are nonetheless deeply revealing of the attitudes, values, motives, social ties, and, above all, survival strategies of the people concerned.

To the best of my knowledge, there are no equivalent English records of comparable richness. But we have alternatives in the records of the ecclesiastical courts pertaining to probate (validating a will) and to testamentary litigation. Death always generated documents. Plague mortality generated many. These, too, provide stories of the plague – stories that have very largely been neglected. Some are simply brief scraps of information. Others are surprisingly full descriptions of particular moments in the unfolding of an epidemic. Taken together, contextualized, and where possible linked, they enable us to look again at the experience of plague in early modern England; to adopt a different perspective; to find alternative meanings in the evidence pushed up from inside that experience. That is what this book attempts to do: to explore how far the records of the Newcastle epidemic of 1636, and Ralph Tailor’s part in it, provide an opportunity to think again about “what we learn in time of pestilence”.

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