Abstract:

A rich case study of early-modern knowledge-making practices may be found in the example of Anne Clifford (1590-1676) and the many substantiating documents she so carefully read, authored, compiled, annotated, and preserved for posterity. Clifford was privileged to occupy much of her long life in the documentation of her personal circumstances and familial history, to an extent and in a variety of forms—memoir, diary, annal, cartulary, biography, pedigree, and portrait—quite likely unparalleled by other early modern women. She embarked on this consuming project of self-documentation largely in order to bolster a central claim: that she was the rightful heir of her father’s estates and titles (despite his having willed them to his brother instead). In this paper, which draws from my SSHRC-funded study of Clifford’s values and habits as a reader, I will explore how she came to feel such unmitigated confidence in her position, despite the difficulties that surrounded the case and her own lack of legal training. Reference will be made to texts such as William Camden’s Britannia, an antiquarian’s account not least of the northern lands Clifford claimed, and the jurist John Selden’s Titles of Honor, of which Clifford’s annotated copy survives, as well as to her own contributions to what are known as her Great Books of Record, in order to determine the nature of Clifford’s research practices—from fact-checking to cross-referencing—and her guiding epistemological values. I will argue that Clifford saw herself not only as discovering knowledge about her past but as creating a past, in her own time, for her descendants to discover by reading her work as she had read the remains of her ancestors before them.