

## ***“The Whole Body of the Fenne”*: Bodily Metaphor and Seventeenth-Century Fen Drainage**

*Aneurin Merrill-Glover*

“The Whole Body of the Fenne” seeks to understand the humoral and bodily mechanisms which underlay early modern representations of the drainage of the Fens. This project energizes the fairly well-trodden source base of the Fens with recent developments in the cultural history of the body, finding that the drainage of the Fens was represented in profoundly bodily terms by both its supporters and detractors.

Human and environmental resistance to the storied attempts to drain the Fens are one of the classical subjects in England’s environmental history. H. C. Darby’s foundational work of historical geography *The Draining of the Fens* has been built on recently by Keith Lindley, Clive Holmes, and Robert Butlin. The *General Drainage Act* of 1600 provided a mechanism for the financing of drainage projects in the east of England, promoting a wave of attempts to drain increasingly large areas of freshwater Fen in the east of England. Properly speaking, fen is the name given to a wet peatland which is hydrated by groundwater in addition to precipitation, the nutrient-rich groundwater giving them their characteristic lush vegetation and fertile soil. “The Fens” is the term for an area on England’s east coast. These wetlands were characterized as stagnant, unhealthy, and unproductive wastelands by those that sought to drain them, though they met with serious resistance from locals, skeptics, and the landscape itself. Attempts to drain these permanently and seasonally wet areas commenced in 1589, with long straight “cuts” such as the New Bedford River made to expedite the passage of water. For the most part, histories of the Fens have avoided recent developments in cultural history and cultural geography in order to produce outcomes which are compatible with contemporary environmental science. This is a powerful explanatory force. However, we can add a key dimension by providing a deep socio-cultural context to how contemporaries understood the changing, or unchanging, Fenland. This project will use “thick description” to understand the interacting intellectual and cultural frameworks which structured the representation of early modern landscape change on the Fens.

The most important cultural mechanism structuring early modern understandings of landscape change on the Fenlands was the metaphorical relationship between the human body and the world. The early modern body was conceived in an enduring analogical relationship with the world—the body as the microcosm of the macrocosmic world. Gail Kern Paster has found that in the early modern period one’s internal life and personality was “ontologically coextensive” with the outside world. Rather than certain substances or surroundings causing an internal change, the “substance embodies this significance,” in Charles Taylor’s phrase. This meant that agricultural knowledge of soil and water was readily analogized into contemporary understandings of the body and the mind, and vice versa. This has obvious consequences for the interpretation of terrestrial waterways; Walter Raleigh’s *History of the World* claimed that blood “may be resembled to those waters which are carried by brooks and rivers.” Broadly, the humoral system conceived of the environment as conditioning and being conditioned by the bodies and minds of its inhabitants. This project will apply these theoretical insights, as well as those from Mary Floyd-Wilson, Rebecca Totaro, Garrett Sullivan, and others, to understand the bodily ways in which early modern landscape change was understood.