

## Receptions and Re-visittings



Receptions and Re-visitings:  
Review Articles, 1978-2011

By

R.C. Richardson

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P U B L I S H I N G

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## PREFACE

I have been actively reviewing books since the late 1960s, chiefly for academic journals on both sides of the Atlantic but also for the *Times Higher* – a very large number in that publication – and have always regarded this kind of writing as an integral, fulfilling and important dimension of my work as a historian. What follows represents only a very small percentage of my published output of review articles and reviews – which runs to several hundred – over the last few decades. Selection has been guided by taking into account which books reviewed have best stood the test of time; many of them, undoubtedly, have quickly faded from view and lost much of their original currency. Overwhelmingly the pieces reprinted here date from the period 1997 to 2010/11. Four of them (chapters 1, 3, 5, and 13) first appeared as review articles in their own right in journals in England and the USA. All the rest are confections under a single topic heading of what were originally separate reviews. With the exception of chapters 12 and 13, which are concerned with the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the pieces reprinted here relate to the early modern period, my principal specialism. Several deal specifically with aspects of the history and historiography of the English Revolution. A number of the essays have a pronounced interdisciplinary flavour, another long-standing hallmark of my own research and writing. Many of them expressly deal with historiography (chapters 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 12, and 13).

The title is carefully chosen and is intended to go some way towards providing a justification for publishing this collection. All thirteen chapters here offer substantial stocktakings of the various subjects under review and go to some length to situate individual contributions in the wider context to which they belong. In this respect, as in others, this volume provides an appropriate companion to my collected longer essays published as *Social History, Local History and Historiography*. There is much shared subject matter in the two volumes, but some of the chapters in this collection of my shorter pieces significantly extend the range of the other volume in addressing, for example, issues relating to politics and political thinking, London, gender, servants and servant-keeping, the writing of diaries, and early modern reading habits (chapters 2, 8, 10, 11, 9, and 7). Many were first written for a non-specialist readership which goes some way towards explaining the relative paucity of footnotes. In terms of their

original provenance they derive from a shorter time-span, but that is only to be expected in a publication of this kind.

In bringing together material first published in different places care has been taken to impose a standardised house style. A number of cuts and amplifications have been made where these seemed necessary and to eliminate unnecessary repetition. Spelling in quotations from early modern sources has been modernised in the interests of clarity. Dates are given with the calendar year beginning on 1 January. Pre-metric prices (pounds, shillings and pence) and weights (hundredweights, quarters and pounds) are used where these occurred in the original documents.

Permissions to reproduce the pieces collected here are given in the acknowledgements. My heartfelt thanks go to my good friend Dongyoung Kim of University College London for his expert help in fielding all my computer-related questions and in reformatting these essays, to Dr Stephen MacDonald of the University of Southern Maine for rigorous checking of my typescript, and to Amanda Millar at Cambridge Scholars Publishing for conscientious final editing.

August 2011

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**Chapter Two** consists partly of a review article, 'Political Thinking in Early Modern England', in *Clio* 26.3 (1997), 367-73, and is reproduced by permission of the Managing Editor.

**Chapter Three** is reprinted here in slightly amended form from *Clio* 29.4 (2000), 449-57 by permission of the Managing Editor.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### CONTINUITIES AND DISCONTINUITIES IN SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLAND<sup>1</sup>

Christopher Hill, whose lively and challenging work spanned six decades of the twentieth century, published in 1974 what quickly became one of his most provocative books. This was *Change and Continuity in Seventeenth-Century England*, a collection of twelve essays which was savagely attacked when it first appeared for what were considered to be its methodological shortcomings by J. H. Hexter in a review in *The Times Literary Supplement*. An animated debate followed in that publication and quickly extended out into a number of scholarly journals. In this book, as in many of his others, Hill advanced the view that the middle decades of the seventeenth century witnessed the English Revolution, a defining and momentous discontinuity which effectively brought the Middle Ages in England to a close. It unleashed a series of economic, social, and political consequences which reverberated for long after and made possible the eighteenth-century Industrial Revolution and the arrival of parliamentary democracy. [Later books by Hill - *Some Intellectual Consequences of the English Revolution* (London, 1980) and *A Nation of Change and Novelty* (London, 1990) forcefully revisited these themes]. Grouped into sections dealing with 'Changing Relationships', 'Change in Continuity', 'Continuity in Change', and 'Change out of Continuity' Hill's essays in the 1974 publication moved from witches and cunning men in the dark corners of the land to Newton, 'high priest of modern science', and Locke, 'high priest of modern utilitarian ethics and politics'. But these 'high priests', Hill was quick to insist, pointing forward to a more familiar future, also had one foot planted firmly in the past. Newton combined his path-breaking scientific studies with a keen interest in alchemy and biblical prophecy. Locke, the author of *Two Treatises of Government* (1690) and *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695) also devoted himself to predicting from the evidence contained in the Book of Daniel the date of the end of the world, and believed that pain in the kidneys could be cured by burying the patient's urine in a stone jug in the earth. In this book as in

his others, what had once been inadequately summarised as 'the Puritan Revolution' was Hill's central preoccupation, and the complex climate of ideas which it both generated and put to the test. Losers as well as winners, unconscious (as well as conscious) revolutionaries, and die-hard conservatives (not so many of those!) figured in his pages. So did their shifting reputations in later periods. 'There is a dialectic of continuity and change', Hill declared, 'not only in the seventeenth century itself but also in our awareness of the seventeenth century. We ourselves are shaped by the past; but from our vantage point in the present we are continually reshaping the past which shapes us' (p.284). There is no history without historiography. The four books reviewed here in different ways examine the interface between the two.

The title of the book edited by Alan Houston and Steve Pincus - *A Nation Transformed* - connects itself with the spirit behind Hill's *Change and Continuity*, but here the emphasis is principally on the decades which followed the Restoration of 1660. The book originated in a conference held at the Huntington Library in California, a fertile seedbed of scholarship, and the editors bring together contributions from six historians, four English literature professors, and one political scientist, predominantly from North America. Perhaps too loosely organised for its own good - the editors do not quite succeed in welding together the disparate contributions - the central preoccupation in all the essays is with the forces of change at work in the later seventeenth century. *Continuities* with the recent past, however, are recognised, particularly the 'scorched historical memories' (p.19), the insistent, ineradicable legacy of the Civil Wars. Tim Harris shows how post-1660 popular politics took for granted the inalienable birthrights and inviolable rights at law which had been highlighted in the 1640s. Gary S. De Krey gives this greater specificity by pointing to the fact that a 1640s radical like John Wildman was still in place in London after 1689 as a city alderman. Slingsby Bethel was another active survivor from one age to another. Relatives of William Walwyn, another prominent Leveller, and of the Independent clergyman Joseph Caryl helped perpetuate earlier ways of thinking in the post-1660 age. Post-1660 science, too, as Barbara Shapiro's essay shows, drew heavily on strands of development from the middle decades of the seventeenth century. The Royal Society of 1662 with Newton as its leading light was a new institution, of course, but Shapiro makes clear that its royal patronage was largely nominal and that the self-financing mode of operating left the Society chronically short of funds. Shapiro's essay, positioned last in *A Nation Transformed*, is set apart from most of the others in its emphasis on fundamental *continuities*. For most of the other contributors, change is registered much more insistently.

'Modernity' was indeed much discussed - and sometimes denounced - in the later seventeenth century and the range of contrasts between 'ancients' and 'moderns' in politics, warfare, culture, and learning formed frequent topics of debate. This book of essays revisits the whole question of 'modernity' and concedes that what is uncovered is a patchy and untidy picture (much more so than in Hill's book). But the editors and contributors to *A Nation Transformed* vigorously resist recent attempts by historians like Jonathan Clark to remove the concept of revolution from the historiographical map of early modern England; for Clark, England's *ancien regime* - monarchical, aristocratic, and Anglican - persisted, pretty well uninterruptedly and intact, to the early nineteenth century. The contributors to this volume marshal a great deal of evidence relating to religion, politics, political economy, public opinion, science and literature, and the theatre to prove him wrong.

Religion in a number of respects looms large here. Mark Knights presents a well-argued case for viewing James II's declarations of indulgence as a turning point in the discussion of religious truth. Paradoxically, perhaps, they helped to put civil concerns even higher than before on the agenda of all religious groups whose increased competitiveness in the 1680s brought religion further into the private sphere. Civil and religious liberties might remain inseparable, but the Church-State axis became less strong. Blair Worden extends such discussion even further in a masterly wide-ranging essay on 'the question of secularisation'. Recognising that what has been seen by some as a movement in the late seventeenth century from Puritanism to the Age of Reason affected only minorities, Worden is more convinced that religion was not declining in these decades but changing its character. Atheism was not on the increase. Theology itself was in flux as dogma retreated. Epicureanism, socinianism, and deism featured with increasing prominence, and reason and religion were harmonised by Locke and others. There was less talk of the devil, less witch-hunting, and economic arguments in favour of religious toleration were unashamedly paraded. Toland's edition of the *Memoirs* of the mid-century republican Edmund Ludlow (a favourite topic these days for Worden) perfectly illustrates these cultural shifts. The white heat of Ludlow's own religious enthusiasm, the divine prodigies, the depictions of the regicides dying after 1660 like Christian martyrs, all these were edited out of Toland's late seventeenth-century text which was now aimed at different readers belonging to an age politically and culturally very different from that of the English Revolution.

Moving squarely into late seventeenth-century politics, Alan Houston's essay examines the changing language of 'interest' and 'reason of state'.

Steve Pincus charts the rise of political economy and the notion of an essentially secular 'national interest', and sees the experience of the Anglo-Dutch Wars as a major force of change in England's ideological landscape. Whereas some contributors to this volume use the word 'radical' unselfconsciously, Gary S. De Krey stands back from it and assesses its appropriateness as a label to describe dissenters and London Whigs. Distancing himself from Jonathan Clark and Conal Condren who reject the employment of such terminology in the late seventeenth-century context, De Krey stays clear of the term 'radicalism' but settles for 'radical' as an acceptable tag for men who had 'radical moments' but who were not necessarily radical all of the time on all subjects. Tim Harris's discussion of popular politics emphasises the importance of the oral transmission of ideas rather than the necessary primacy of print culture. He makes much - too much, probably - of the novelty of the role of Charles II's government itself as a major instrument of politicisation of the masses (through the encouraging of popular petitioning and the invoking of loyal crowds in the 1680s), but passes too quickly over the significance of the coining of the word 'mob' in this decade. And did public opinion become important after 1660 '*because* Charles II realised that he could not afford to ignore it' (p.128)? Surely not.

Not all the literary contributions to this volume seem to be firmly anchored. Joshua Scodel's rather arcane essay on 'The Cowleyan Pindaric ode and sublime diversions' is a case in point. Nicolas von Maltzahn's essay on 'The War in Heaven and the Miltonic sublime' has a more obvious relevance, dealing as it does with the increasingly secular readings given to Milton's *Paradise Lost* in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, its adaptation for narrower ends, and its serviceability as a model for poetry celebrating the Duke of Marlborough's military triumphs. Even Milton's own nephew, John Phillips, could become a noted exponent of the new genre. (In another essay Rachel Weil shows how Robert Filmer's *Patriarcha* was recast to suit later needs and serve different purposes). Paulina Kewes offers an even more striking demonstration of the changed cultural conditions of the late seventeenth century in her essay on 'Plays as property, 1660-1710'. Entirely in line with the increasing commercial-mindedness of the age, plays became seen for the first time, she argues, as valuable commodities, marketable works of literature as well as vehicles for performance. Playwrights, not acting companies or publishers, were now recognised as the 'owners' of their plays. Plagiarism, though still commonplace, was now pilloried. Performance conditions, too, changed significantly after 1660 as two chartered theatre companies - the King's and the Duke's, headed by Killigrew and Davenant,

respectively - established exclusive rights to their respective repertoires and introduced procedures which made playwrights' rewards directly proportionate to audience approval of their work.

The intermingling of change and continuity figures no less prominently in the remaining books under review here, all of which take the reader back to the history and historiography of the turbulent middle decades of the seventeenth century, Christopher Hill's own territory. A very clear example from this period of change without continuity forms the subject of Christopher Durston's book. *Cromwell's Major Generals* looks at one of the most contentious episodes of the 1650s, one which for its opponents most starkly and unacceptably proclaimed the military underpinning of the English republic. The experiment, launched in 1655, was bold and unique, and was designed simultaneously to strengthen the security of the Cromwellian regime and to further the purposes of godly reform. It was a system which involved the planting of military governors in the provinces who would work closely with, and energise, the existing machinery of local government. Assistant commissioners were appointed to help them, and limited numbers of cavalry troops were placed at their disposal. Part of the attractiveness of the scheme to the central government was that it was designed to be self-financing; a decimation tax on royalist landowners was intended to pay for it all. Much contemporary opposition was aroused by what was viewed as a distinctly 'unconstitutional' security system. Few later historians have been able to give the Major Generals a good press.

Durston carefully uncovers the circumstances which gave rise to this governmental experiment, looks closely at the personnel involved, and attempts an objective stock-taking of their record of achievement. It is the most complete and balanced treatment to date of this subject. A clear group portrait of the Major Generals emerges. All had military careers behind them, of course, but most were politically inexperienced, most were relatively young in 1655, most had a connection with the geographical area to which they were assigned, and all had a reputation for religious zeal. Durston's view is that most of the Major Generals threw themselves into their new roles with immense energy; indeed one of them, Charles Worsley, worked so relentlessly that he drove himself into an early grave. They were most successful in their security role, least successful with the operation of the decimation tax, with electoral management, and with the building of a godly nation. Their failure, however, as Durston's judiciously argued book makes clear, was by no means entirely of their own making. They received too little backing from the centre - Cromwell had a weary way of becoming alienated from his own political experiments - and were the principal casualties of an anti-army backlash.

This short-lived system with no precedents was never revived. Found odious in the few months in which they functioned, the Major Generals were quickly despatched to the storehouse of bad memories. William Prynne, never one for understatement, declared as early as 1656 that they would 'acquire the perpetual infamy of the most detestable perjury, treachery, hypocrisy, fraud, impiety, apostasy, tyranny, atheism that ever any Christian saint-like army and officers were guilty of in the eyes of God and men' (pp.5-6). Even the infinitely more temperate later Whig historian Henry Hallam, in 1820, could describe their rule as 'a despotism compared to which all the illegal practices of former kings ... appeared as dust' (p. 6). Leopold von Ranke's *History of England* in the 1870s depicted the rule of the Major Generals as nothing less than a horrible nightmare for the country.

As the leading regicide and Protector or president of England's only republic, Oliver Cromwell has an especially significant historical reputation; in comparison with the leader himself, the Major Generals were merely a sideshow. Amongst his own contemporaries Cromwell's reputation was varied and controversial. First as a general and then as politician and Lord Protector, he was the subject of endless disagreement. Laura Lunger Knoppers's recent book *Constructing Cromwell. Ceremony, Portrait and Print, 1645-1661* (2000) makes reference to seventeenth-century biblical comparisons made between Cromwell and King Ahab, King David, Elijah, Gideon and Moses, as well as classical comparisons with both Brutus and Julius Caesar. Panegyrics and popular lampoons extended the range even further. Clarendon, the great Royalist historian of the Civil Wars, looked at Cromwell with mesmerised loathing. Cromwell, however, has had an unstoppable afterlife down to the present as he has been refashioned in ways which later generations deemed most relevant to their own experience; Alexander Pope's *Essay on Man* has Cromwell 'damned to everlasting fame.' The Cromwell bibliography is positively gargantuan; the flow of writing about him never seems to decelerate.

Colin Davis's book is one of the latest offerings and appears within a series devoted to the unpacking of historical reputations. It is a biographical study, not a biography, with a pronounced historiographical dimension. Davis carefully re-examines the sources available for a study of Cromwell's life, guides the reader through the Lord Protector's many paradoxes, and tests the claims made by some later commentators that Cromwell is best understood as a paradigm of the 'Puritan Revolution'. Davis makes great efforts to avoid depicting Cromwell in isolation from his contemporaries, as a self-made man, titanic Hero in the Carlylean mould, or lonely, ruthless dictator. (For W.C.Abbott, the interwar American

historian, Hitler and Mussolini provided the most obvious and instructive, indeed necessary, comparisons with Cromwell). Instead, Davis sees Cromwell as one who was skilled in networking - among relations, co-religionists, and the politically and militarily like-minded - and it is this which is offered as the key to understanding his whole career. The networks changed over time, but it was these which enabled Cromwell, a downwardly mobile country gentleman, first to establish himself and attract notice, and then succeed in the military and political contexts of the English Civil Wars. His lack of prior military training before 1642 was compensated for by his keen aptitude for learning and experiment. In fact, says Davis, his inexperience of conventional military tactics and of waging war by the book was the precondition of his originality as a military commander, particularly his audacious innovations in the deployment of cavalry; he was not in thrall to old rules and conventions of waging war. Cromwell continues to exert a fascination in the twenty-first century. An opinion poll in the United Kingdom, conducted in December 2001, had many respondents nominating Cromwell as Britain's greatest monarch. More recently still, a national television search in this country for the 'Greatest Briton of all time' had Cromwell firmly positioned amongst the final contenders for the title.

Cromwell also figures very prominently in Blair Worden's *Roundhead Reputations: The English Civil Wars and the Passions of Posterity* (2001), a *tour de force* of historical writing, evidently aimed at both a general and an academic audience. The interests of the first constituency are presumably being served by the relative paucity of footnotes and by a preface which has a glossary containing working definitions of basic terms like 'the Civil War,' 'regicide', 'regicides', and even 'historiography'. A cheaper paperback edition has already appeared to extend the book's circulation. The text carries a number of badly reproduced illustrations. Worden's volume leaves Royalist and Tory writing on one side and instead focuses on variations and tensions over time in the Parliamentary or Roundhead tradition of writing about the English Civil Wars, with fractures in the Whig interpretation of the subject, and with the entry into the Stuart period in the later nineteenth century of the first professional historians. (It is curious that Worden, always a fund of knowledge, should make a slip with the publication dates of Macaulay's *History*, the last volume of which appeared in 1861 not 1855. And it is even more remarkable that S.R. Gardiner, one of the towering figures in the historiography of the Civil War period, should be described here as having 'only peripheral contact with the academic world' (p.16). The Victorian academic world was undoubtedly broader than Oxford and Cambridge, from which indeed

Gardiner's own religious nonconformity had earlier excluded him. In the vibrant and pace-setting academic community and institutions of London, however, he was a leading and highly respected figure. *Roundhead Reputations* is a study of 'the unfolding of the generations which have seen their reflections in the Civil Wars ... [a book about] ... the power of the past to speak to the present, and about the present's habit of indicating what it wants to hear' (p. 18).

Unsurprisingly, Oliver Cromwell has one of the longest index entries in this book, but it is *Cromwellianism*, supremely, which features in Worden's pages. The phenomenon existed before the nineteenth century, largely in the form of oral tradition, despite a general eclipse of Cromwell's reputation. But it was in the Victorian period that a striking rehabilitation of Cromwell's standing was really achieved. Worden makes clear that the Cromwellianism of that era was essentially 'a coalition of enthusiasms' (p.243) which brought together originally separate middle-class and working-class strands. The growth of Nonconformity in the nineteenth century encouraged an appreciation of Cromwell's Puritanism. Milton was drawn into this process, and his link with Cromwell, once seen as an embarrassment, now became an advantage and was blown up into something far greater than it had ever been in reality. Milton was now – falsely – presented not as a lowly civil servant but as one who had been Cromwell's colleague and friend. Many in the nineteenth century, Worden argues, needed a Cromwell of their own, a point of view underlined emphatically by Thomas Carlyle's decisive publication in 1845 of an edition of Cromwell's *Letters and Speeches*, 'the one great book to have been written on Cromwell' (p.295), in Worden's judgement. This was indeed a (bulky) tract for the times, written while Carlyle was at the peak of his fame, 'if a little past the peak of his powers'. Far from allowing Cromwell to speak for himself – as he claimed – Carlyle's constant interventions in the presentation of Cromwell meant that half the resultant text was unmistakably his. It was a didactic book of the first order in which Carlyle used Cromwell as a vehicle to preach about the misplaced liberal, utilitarian, rationalist, and materialist values of his own time, and to place his hero's Puritanism at the centre of the stage. 'Carlyle thought that Puritanism spoke for England', says Worden, 'until it let Cromwell down; S.R. Gardiner, at the end of the century, thought that Puritanism spoke for the nation until Cromwell let it down' (p. 289). Cromwell's apparently artless sincerity was much admired by Carlyle. That the Protector was not a particularly polished speaker made him all the more admirable. Ironically, perhaps, in view of his own political sympathies, Carlyle witnessed the Victorian transformation of Cromwell into a

seventeenth-century Gladstone. (Gladstone had a low opinion of Cromwell; Carlyle had a low opinion of Gladstone).

The three hundredth anniversary of Cromwell's birth was amply, if contentiously, celebrated in 1899 - a commemoration which would have been inconceivable at the end of the previous century. Cromwell was by now the pre-eminent national hero whose praises were sung by politicians as different as Lloyd George and Lord Rosebery. The statue of Cromwell which the city of Manchester had displayed since 1875 was joined by Thornycroft's impressive (but relatively small) statue of the Lord Protector outside the Houses of Parliament in London. (Thornycroft's much larger and imposing statue of King Alfred in Winchester dates from the same decade.) Chapter 11 in Worden's book tells the complex story which lay behind it, with the author reminding his readers that Cromwell - a leader who was uncomfortable with his parliaments - is commemorated only and safely *outside* the building, next to the street, that the statue was donated by Rosebery himself, and that to forestall protests the discretely low-key unveiling event took place before a very small number of onlookers at 7:30 a.m. on the morning of 14 November 1899.

The posthumous reputation of Edmund Ludlow provides Worden with another focal point for his review of the Civil War passions of posterity. Worden's discussion of the late seventeenth-century re-invention of Ludlow at the hands of John Toland, the editor of his *Memoirs*, has already been referred to above. As the editor himself of part of the original text of Ludlow's autobiographical writings - *A Voyce from the Watch Tower* (Royal Historical Society, Camden 4th series, 21, 1978) - no one is better placed to take his readers through the transformation process which re-fashioned a strident mid-century puritan into a polite but radical Whig. Worden's fascinating detective work shows how the original text was greatly shortened to perhaps a quarter of its length, softened, and shorn of its religious fundamentalism. So as to be made serviceable to a later and very different age - the one depicted in *A Nation Transformed* - Ludlow's spiritual priorities were converted by Toland into secular ones to give an emphasis only on his strivings for 'the liberties of the nation' (p. 55). Ludlow's growing religious opposition to Cromwell was similarly converted into a matter of political differences. Ludlow's 'revolutionary Puritanism gives way to a poised (and only rarely conspicuous) piety, his enthusiasm to sobriety, his Calvinist faith to a concern for good conduct' (pp. 81-82). To make matters worse, Toland's quasi-fabricated text of Ludlow's *Memoirs* received the stamp of authenticity by being reissued in 1894 with a new scholarly introduction by C. H. Firth, one of the great Civil War specialists of his day. Another seventy years would pass before

the real *Voyce from the Watch Tower* would be heard again. In the interval, Ludlow's important testimony to the troubled mid-century decades was entirely controlled by a later ventriloquist.

The republican Algernon Sidney, the subject of two important books by Jonathan Scott published in 1988 and 1991, provides Worden with his third historiographical focal point. Worden shows how the same 'Whig history factory' which re-fashioned Ludlow did the same with texts by Sidney. The 'international' sympathies of his radicalism were expunged in favour of a greater stress on 'patriotism' and 'country'. Thus revised, Sidney could end up securely placed in the temple of the British Worthies in the gardens of Stowe and, literally fossilised in this way, could quietly survive later reversals of fortune which brought Cromwell into increased prominence, partly at his expense.

Two further explorations complete Worden's survey. The first is a painstaking re-examination of the long-neglected *Biographia Britannica* (1747-66) and its treatment of the mid-seventeenth-century patriots. The lukewarm accounts of Sidney and Russell contained there are contrasted with the favourable treatment received by Marvell and Milton (though his radical prose was side-stepped). The Tolandised Ludlow is handled with forbearance. Not in this case repackaged to suit the different sensibilities of a later age, the unregenerate Sir Henry Vane is castigated as 'an enthusiastic, rigid Puritan ... giddy ... hot-headed ... always an enemy to peace' (p. 201).

Worden rounds off his survey of Roundhead reputations with a chapter on 'The Levellers and the Left' which covers some of the same ground as a contribution by this prolific author to a collection of essays edited by Michael Mendle on *The Putney Debates of 1647* (2001).<sup>2</sup> Worden shows that, while in many respects the Diggers can be regarded as a twentieth-century discovery, historical interest in the Levellers, though it pre-dated twentieth-century Liberals and Marxists, was decidedly selective. It was their political significance as vocal opponents of the monarchy which had been chiefly noted. Their social programme had been largely overlooked. Twentieth-century admirers reversed the emphasis and, to a large extent, allowed the constitutional strivings of the Levellers to fall out of view. A new and different partiality replaced an earlier one. Well might Worden strike a cautionary note. 'If we ask, not how far the Levellers anticipated the values of modern times, but what impact they made on events, then those earlier historians who dwelt on the Levellers' hostility to the King were closer to the mark than many of their modern successors. Whatever the gains of the expansion of historical research over the past century or so may have been, the easy assumption that we may know better than our

predecessors is not among them' (p. 338). The passions of posterity evinced in Civil War studies may have become less heated and more refined than they were in the periods in which Toland and Macaulay did their writing, but, as all the books reviewed here clearly demonstrate, they still affect the ways in which academics approach and discuss the seventeenth-century past today. In different ways, the Civil Wars and their outcome which deeply divided the nation in the seventeenth century are still in a real sense being fought three and a half centuries later. Passions are still easily aroused by this subject. Though they go on being re-drawn, the battle lines are still there to see.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> This piece was originally published under the same title as a review article in *Clio* 32:3 (2003), 331-43. The books under review were Alan Houston and Steve Pinkus (eds), *A Nation Transformed: England after the Restoration* (Cambridge, 2001); Christopher Durston, *Cromwell's Major Generals: Godly Government during the English Revolution* (Manchester, 2001); J. C. Davis, *Oliver Cromwell* (London, 2001); Blair Worden, *Roundhead Reputations: The English Civil Wars and the Passions of Posterity* (London, 2001)

<sup>2</sup> See p. 41.



## CHAPTER TWO

### POLITICS, POLITICAL CULTURE, AND POETRY IN THE ENGLISH REVOLUTION

Political thinking has been attracting more and more interest among scholars in recent years; long gone are the days when J.W.Allen's *English Political Thought 1603-1644* (London, 1938) and Perez Zagorin's *History of Political Thought in the English Revolution* (London, 1954) stood out as fairly isolated landmarks. By its very nature, however, it tends to receive different kinds of treatment from philosophers, historians and literary critics. It is variously presented with or without an anchor in time and place, and with content and discourse struggling for precedence in the resultant secondary texts. But three books published in 1995, though they differ in a number of ways, all attempt to locate the writings under discussion within their historical *milieux*.<sup>1</sup> Two of the volumes, indeed, those on classical humanism and on John Milton, form part of the well-established series *Ideas in Context* and thus have an enforced obligation to fulfil this brief. The third is written by a historian whose professional training has taught him to know that though ideas have a history of their own it is one which is deeply and inextricably embedded in that of the period to which they belong.

The first book is dedicated to exploring the continuities in classical humanism in England in the decades before the Civil Wars. Milton, Harrington, Sidney and their contemporaries are rightly presented as taking up their pens in the midst of new circumstances and new possibilities for citizenship in the heady years of the late 1640s and 1650s. But they are seen also as being part – a very important one, admittedly – of a longer tradition, and dealing in a mode of discourse, a political vocabulary going back to Elizabethan writers like John Barston whose treatise *Safegarde of Societie* was published in 1576. It was a tradition which continued in the reign of James I, nurtured in different ways by Francis Bacon and Ben Jonson, and reinforced by a series of English translations of the Roman historians Tacitus, Livy, Plutarch, and Sallust. Thomas May, later historian of the Long Parliament, translated Lucan in the later 1620s. The partial

assimilation into English thinking of Machiavelli, as Felix Raab long ago demonstrated, also played a decisive part.<sup>2</sup> The humanist writer Richard Brathwait himself provided an element of continuity in the tradition, having a writing career which spanned three decades. His *Golden Fleece and Schollers Medley* came out in 1611 and 1614 respectively while his influential *Survey of History: or a nursery for gentry*, which espoused all the tenets of civic humanism, appeared more than two decades later in 1638. Thomas Headley, John Eliot, Francis Rous, Henry Peacham, and George Wither are all identified by Peltonen in his searching study as participants in this living tradition. Thomas Scott, in a chapter given over almost wholly to himself, is depicted as a civic humanist no less than the familiar puritan that Peter Lake and other historians have presented. Devoted to the public well-being, to Parliament, and to the virtues of active citizenship, Scott denounced the corruptions of the court and those blood-sucking monopolists who single-mindedly lusted only after private gain; ‘their breed’, he said in characteristically robust prose, ‘is from the lazy scum of counterfeit gentility’ (p.236). ‘Scott’s arguments’, Peltonen insists, are in some key respects ‘almost exclusively classical republican in character’ (p.232).

There is indeed much to be said for the argument advanced in Peltonen’s book that Milton, Harrington, and other like-minded writers of the late 1640s and 1650s inherited rather than invented at least some of the components of the republicanism they proclaimed. Of various linkages which Peltonen discusses, there is one which merits extended comment.

The striking similarities between Bacon and Harrington have not been adequately appreciated... Most importantly Harrington grounded the social analysis of his republican theory on Bacon’s account of the social conditions of the great state... It is thus arguable that the commonwealth of *Oceana* was Bacon’s Great Britain writ large’ (pp.311-12).

Peltonen’s book ends in 1640. *Milton and Republicanism*, an edited collection of proceedings held in France in 1992, can therefore be seen as its natural sequel. Of the twelve contributors, only two are historians and the remainder – the overwhelming majority – are literary critics. (Quentin Skinner, the Cambridge political scientist, helped co-ordinate the conference and acted as co-editor but does not contribute an essay). The preponderance of literary scholars no doubt explains why in this volume, unlike the other two in this group, literature and literary strategy are given such extended, high-profile treatment here. Elizabeth Tuttle, for example, discusses the uses of biblical message, language, and imagery in Leveller pamphleteering and compares these with the ways in which Milton

handled biblical tropes in his work of demolition and rebuilding in the late 1640s. Milton, no less than Walwyn, Lilburne and other radicals, could be confident of readers' extensive familiarity with the Bible and appealed to it through his well-judged rhetoric. Victoria Kahn, in an extended treatment of Hobbes, Milton, and scriptural exegesis, continues the same line of enquiry and shows how the latter's logic of metaphor in *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* exhibits a fundamental intersection of scriptural prophecy, sacred covenant, and political contract. Armand Himy, one of the editors of the book, writes about *Paradise Lost* as a republican '*tractatus theologico-politicus*', and by exploring its multiple languages (theological, literary, political, and historical) shows how, for Milton, Christian liberty and republicanism could not in the end be separated.

Part III of the book situates Milton within the general context of the republican experience, and it is here that the two historians in the book are enlisted to make their distinctive contributions. Not for the first time, *Paradise Lost* is read by one of them as 'an epic of empire' in which Satan's colonising efforts are related, by implication, to the passage from Commonwealth to Protectorate and the Cromwellian expansionism of the 1650s. David Armitage examines Milton's antipathy to empire and its origins in the particular lessons he drew from the past and in his attitude to features of Oliver's regime in the present in which the poem was composed. 'In the end', Armitage neatly concludes, 'it was his reading of Sallust and Machiavelli, and his experience of the rule of an English Sulla, which confirmed him in these convictions, lent a critical and nostalgic edge to his republicanism, and caused him to become a poet against empire' (p.225). Blair Worden, the second historian in the collection, writes with characteristic perceptiveness on Milton's unlikely friendship with the opportunist journalist Marchamont Nedham and compares their republican stances. 'Sincerity, the last virtue we could deny in Milton', says Worden, 'is the last word we would think of using to describe Nedham' (p.158). Irreparably divided after 1660, their earlier careers had nonetheless had much in common. The spirits of both of them were fired to celebrate the regicide, and to write *apologias* for the Rump in 1651 and for the Protectorate in 1654. 'In 1660 the names of Milton and Nedham were repeatedly linked by their royalist enemies, who hoped to see them hanged together' (p.157). This part of the book is completed with essays by Nigel Smith on John Streater and popular republicanism in the 1650s and by Martin Dzelzainis on Milton and the protectorate in the critical year of 1658.

Dzelzainis contributes another essay in the first part of this collection on the nature of Milton's classical republicanism and thus forms the most

obvious bridge to Peltonen's book. In part at least the essay is a rebuttal of Zera Fink's well-known interpretation of Milton's reading in the classics, especially the claims made for his reliance on Polybius.<sup>3</sup> Aristotle, Sallust, and above all Cicero, Dzelzainis argues, were much more influential in shaping Milton's ideals and his contribution to his country's republican moment. In another essay in this part of the book, Thomas Corns takes pains to establish what Milton understood by the characteristics of a free commonwealth. Cedric Brown in a contribution on 'Great Senates and Godly Education' surveys a number of Milton's texts deriving from widely separated moments in time and demonstrates a number of recurring priorities, particularly those relating to the progress of reformation.

Just as Peltonen's book looked back to the sixteenth century for the beginnings in England of a classical humanism that was to achieve its high point in the English Revolution, so the collection of essays on Milton looks well beyond the poet's death. Nicholas von Maltzahn considers Milton's selective and at times uncomfortable later appropriation by the Whigs. 'They sometimes thrilled to his determined republicanism, but they were more often embarrassed by it'. Views varied, since on all matters there were different shades of Whig opinion, but the synthesis which eventually emerged made Milton suitably respectable. He was converted, von Maltzahn concludes, from the 'strident pamphleteer' and 'poet of a stern and urgent christian vision' into 'a literary figure of milder sobriety, increasingly freed from the languages of faction and revelation' (p.253). In the final essay of the book, the 'transformative appropriation' of Milton's reputation in the American and French Revolutions is dealt with incisively by Tony Davies who shows Jefferson and Mirabeau debating with, rather than merely revering and slavishly quoting, the English republican.

Henry Parker, the subject of Michael Mendle's book, despite a mere four mentions in *Milton and Republicanism*, is one of the most controversial but at the same time undoubtedly one of the most elusive of the writers of the Revolutionary period. The smoke-screen which hid his back-stage, secret career, as the servant of many masters in the troubled mid-century decades also concealed much of his frenetic and incredibly varied pamphleteering. Necessarily, therefore, Mendle has to devote many pages to establishing at least the outline of Parker's life and to confront the many problems of establishing a satisfactory bibliography and chronology of his publications; no two historians seem to agree on any of this. (George Thomason's collection of tracts, which dated, annotated, as well as accumulated items as they appeared, helped Mendle only with some of the difficulties of attribution of authorship which faced him). 'The curse of Parker', however, which bedevilled previous historians such as W.K.

Jordan and Margaret Judson when they tried to prise open his secrets, prevents Mendle, too, from fulfilling all of his original aims. Where did Parker find his political inspiration? What did he read and how precisely did he internalise and extend the ideas he picked up? Beyond establishing some kind of links with Sarpi, Hooker, Bodin, and possibly Grotius and Machiavelli, Mendle was not helped by his sources to achieve greater precision in establishing his subject's indebtedness to others. In many respects Parker himself remains as stubbornly elusive at the end of this book as at the beginning. The author's scholarly extrapolations and guesswork have their limits.

Such statements – and Mendle himself says as much – belittle this writer's considerable achievement. 'I have preferred to make the book more useful than clever', he says disarmingly (p.xiii). He uses a chronological, narrative, tract-centred framework in preference to a thematic approach which might diminish the importance of the precise moment and the precise conditions in which a particular piece of writing was produced. He rightly makes much of Parker's status – or rather lack of it – as a younger son for his subsequent career, and relates the lack of fixed direction in his public life to the unavoidable and necessary opportunism which stemmed from his insecure beginnings. At various times an administrator, working for the Merchant Adventurers Company in Hamburg, and a civil servant, Parker was on different occasions the servant of Saye, Essex, Pym, Cromwell and Ireton. He wrote ingenious defences on behalf of the Vintners' Company, the Stationers, and the Merchant Adventurers. Ship Money, puritan beliefs and resistance, Archbishop Laud, the competence of Parliament – all these and many other topics received his attention. Since he was commissioned to write on behalf of others, however, the views he expressed were not necessarily wholly his own. Some ideological inconsistencies in the positions he adopted were unavoidable. Parker's mind, revealed in his writings, was complex, sophisticated, and lively but not always sympathetic. Intriguingly, Parker emerges from Mendle's pages as a writer who could on different occasions defend *both* Parliament and absolutism. He was 'a spokesman for the self-proclaimed defenders of liberty and property (but also) a brutally dismissive critic of the ancient constitution and the common law, a voice for popular sovereignty and a sneering contemner of the poor and the unlettered' (p.xv). Such, exemplified in a single man, were some of the competing currents of the English Revolution.

David Norbrook's *Writing the English Republic: Poetry, Rhetoric and Politics 1627-1660* (Cambridge, 1990) is another notable attempt to recover England's lost republican heritage.<sup>4</sup> Milton and Marvell are inescapably

present in this volume and, like Christopher Hill before him, Norbrook wrests these ‘canonical writers ... from their timeless pantheon’. But they are carefully placed alongside other – lesser and long-eclipsed – figures such as Payne Fisher, John Hall, Henry Marten, Thomas May and George Wither. (Marten’s draft poem on Cromwell is published in this volume for the first time, nearly 350 years after it was first penned). They are also placed within what is depicted here as a vigorous and deep-rooted continuity of republican ideas, the origins of which far predated the execution of King Charles I in January 1649. Norbrook, like Peltonen, is interested in the recovery and deployment of classical republicanism with its heavy moral emphasis on civic virtue and responsibility. His book offers detailed and sensitive textual analysis and makes clear the politics of literary form. The writers he brings into focus were not simply observers of events but active participants, partisans and moulders of public opinion. The power and frustrations of rhetoric are amply demonstrated in these pages.

Norbrook has a good eye for detail. The assiduous London collector of tracts George Thomason, we are told, added 652 new items to his stock in 1659, the last frenzied year of the Republic (as opposed to 282 in the previous year.) The Bodleian Library prudently hid its copies of Milton’s political works after 1660 and did not dishonour their author by burning them. Norbrook is also a master of invoking a telling phrase to encapsulate a complex point. How ironic that Thomas Hobbes’s translation of Thucydides should have been placed at the service of revolutionaries and republicans. ‘To counteract the effects of the republican Trojan horse Hobbes had found it necessary to climb inside’. Milton’s resounding *Areopagitica* ‘for all its openness to religious radicalism, retained an aristocratic caution’. Wither, by contrast, ‘democratised the sublime’. The qualities of this book are plain to see. *Writing the English Republic* ranks as one of those rare productions that will be taken seriously by both literary scholars and historians and makes a major contribution to the rehabilitation of the English Republic and its cultural identity and legacy.

Further studies by Sean Kelsey and Sarah Barber, both published in 1998, contribute to the same agenda.<sup>5</sup> The originality of Kelsey’s book consists chiefly in its examination of the initiatives seized by the Rump Parliament to create and buttress a new, and in the event, short-lived experiment in civilian government. Convinced republicans might have been few in 1649 but Kelsey makes much of the pride they took in launching and upholding the new regime. He depicts not only their actions but also the institutions which they revised or created, the political vocabulary and the iconography they adopted, the spectacle that was

carefully devised, and the code of honour that underpinned the republican system. This is primarily a study not of politics but of political self-fashioning and of political culture.

The appropriation of the former royal palace of Whitehall is discussed at some length as a deliberate device 'to supplant and outshine the Stuarts'. So is the republic's cultivation of ceremony and pageantry, 'a collective political self-consciousness which stood in the face of regal pomp'. Kelsey also examines the republican icons that replaced those of the abolished monarchy – its great seals, coinage, the Commonwealth coat of arms and the proliferation of Parliamentary portraits. New ground was broken by the Commonwealth in other respects – significantly different methods of record keeping and new conventions of dating documents were introduced.

Though ultimately there was no hope of completely annihilating the image of the monarchy, the republic did all it could to achieve this result. The Commonwealth re-fashioned 'the gravity and dignity of traditional forms'. As other commentators considered earlier in this essay have observed, much use was made in this strategy of the republican ideology of classical Greece and Rome. Ultimately, however, as Kelsey rightly insists, what emerged in England in the early 1650s in both language and forms was an unmistakably 'vernacular republicanism' in which familiar home-grown motifs were aggressively brandished.

Kelsey's sources are wide-ranging and he draws heavily on the physical evidence of buildings, artifacts, portraits and prints. However he seems most at home with written documents such as the journal of Lodewijck Huygens, the outpourings of political journalists, and the carefully contrived effects and fictions of the diarist Bulstrode Whitelocke. *Inventing a Republic* is a lively and original book even if, at times, counter-evidence that points in a different direction from that in which the author is heading tends to get played down.

Sarah Barber's *Regicide and Republicanism* has some affinities with the books by Norbrook and Kelsey but her subtitle – *Politics and Ethics in the English Revolution* – stakes a claim to a different direction and a different emphasis. Her chief concern is with the intellectual and moral roots of politics in the mid-seventeenth-century crisis, with debates and disagreements about the standing of a particular monarch (Charles I) and the institution of monarchy, and with competing ideologies and agendas. Her subject matter embraces the uneasy and incomplete relationships between regicide and republicanism, the different forms and expressions of 'radicalism' and notions of 'party' and 'public interest'. (Barber argues that it is helpful to identify a group of 'gentry republicans'). Like Norbrook

and Kelsey she is interested in the politics of language and the mechanisms, such as pamphleteering, that were pressed into action to serve different causes. More particularly, Barber analyses the different political platforms occupied during the period of the King's trial and execution, and looks at the problems experienced in 1650 in securing subscription to the Engagement. The cast list in the crowded drama of her study is every bit as diverse as the subject matter. 'Politicians, polemicists, writers, poets, soldiers, clerics, even the occasional lowly citizen' – including the bemused after-hours drinker from Bury, Lancashire who thought the laws had all been 'new modelised and Cromwellised' (p.174) - compete for space here. Harrington, Marten and Nedham figure substantially in this account, as does Milton who had 'such an inflated regard for book-learning that writing about the republic became more important than acting for it'.

The 'Good Old Cause' is the recurring theme of this book and indeed, in one way or another, everything in it is related to it. Barber makes clear, however, that understandings of what the 'Cause' actually meant were as numerous as the people who held them, and that the electrical charge of the 'Cause' was still being felt in the late nineteenth century by Charles Bradlaugh and others. 'The Good Old Cause', the author suggests, 'did not collapse because the English failed to demonstrate the advantages of commonwealth or because it was empty rhetoric. The republicans of the mid-seventeenth century ran out of time before they could establish a workable synthesis of binary and tripartite, secular and millenarian, hierarchical and popular'. It is a bold, if not altogether convincing, suggestion.

The scope of Barber's book is ambitiously broad and it rests not only on a familiarity with contemporary printed materials but with extensive research into manuscript holdings in a large number of archives. If the book is not always easily digestible that is no doubt partly explained by the fact that the author is attempting to come to terms with a period of multiple cross currents and intense political confusion.

The final books considered here, by Nicholas McDowell and Edward Holberton, take us back firmly to political poetry.<sup>5</sup> Milton and Marvell are two of their principal common denominators. Although McDowell and Holberton are both literary specialists, their books are genuinely interdisciplinary and are as alert to recent work by historians like Derek Hirst, Ann Hughes, William Lamont, John Morrill, Kevin Sharpe, and Blair Worden as they are to modern scholarship in their own discipline. Both writers acknowledge debts to the same individuals. Neither book, however rests passively on the foundations previously provided by others.