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England's Troubles: Seventeenth-century English political instability in European context

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Jonathan Scott's major reinterpretation of the seventeenth century, the most turbulent period in English political history, is timely. It coincides with the ongoing debate over Britain's place in Europe, the current experiment in devolution and the recent discussion of the monarchy's relevance. The book's theme is there on the cover depicted in a contemporary Dutch painting entitled 'English ship driven before a gale'.

Previous histories are treated as parochial. England's crisis is viewed in European perspective. Sir Geoffrey Elton had argued that England had modernised at the time of Henry VIII's break with Rome; the effect was to make the seventeenth-century civil war a belated war of religion after Queen Elizabeth had managed for forty years to maintain her virginity and the nation's singular church settlement intact. Elton's *Tudor Revolution* was the product of the mind of a central European Jew escaping the Holocaust. An empirical historian par excellence, he mined masses of administrative documentation and showed how change could be achieved without upheaval. The solution had been parliamentary and Elton had found in English history the constitutional stability he lacked in his childhood.

Another answer came from New Zealand from the great historian of political thought, J.G.A. Pocock. When the United Kingdom joined the European Common Market and abandoned imperial preference, he launched an appeal for British history. It was a response to a perceived threat to the British identity of white New Zealanders and the constitutional basis of their body politic. Pocock's appeal found adherents - Irish, English, Welsh and Scottish historians re-evaluating connections in the British Isles, there were Unionist historians wanting those links maintained and American historians who saw their colonial heritage as more than just an offshoot of England. The Pocockian approach enabled a wider reappraisal of developments after the union of the Scottish and English crowns under James VI & I and in particular the causes of the English

civil war in 1642. This was an obvious approach to the Civil War since the crisis was ratcheted-up by a two failed invasions of Scotland by Charles II and then by the 1641 Rebellion in Ireland. Furthermore Oliver Cromwell himself secured the English Republic only after invading and defeating both the Irish and the Scots. However at the end of the day, these explanations did not do the job. 'The New British history' - as it has been called - proved a *cul de sac*. It is only a partial explanation, in the same way as devolution is only a partial solution to contemporary dilemmas.

It has taken another historian from New Zealand - this time Jonathan Scott - to tell English historians, what Irish and Scottish historians had always insisted, that the real issues and problems were in fact European. In a sense Scott is in a similar mould to Pocock. He is this generation's leading scholar of early modern English political thought. In distant New Zealand one is perforce a theoretician since there are no record offices full of ancient documents to make you into an empiricist. *England's Troubles* is an arrogant and insightful book. Scott kicks other interpretations into touch from the start. Yet in elaborating his alternative European thesis, he gives far too much of his final conclusion away and in the middle of book he gets bogged down in detail in an unnecessary attempt to provide a new interpretation of civil war radicalism. A firm editor should have stopped Scott ego-tripping across the century but what a brilliant ego-trip it turns out to be.

The Scott thesis is about England and the military revolution. In early modern Europe the state was organised to fight war at an ever-increasing pitch of intensity; indeed it might be said that the need to fight bigger and bigger wars created the state as we know it. England was a very late starter. Even though James I succeeded to three kingdoms he had to watch from the sidelines as his son-in-law Frederick was evicted from Bohemia and then the Rhineland Palatinate and when Charles I finally intervened in the Thirty Years War the English army proved a laughing stock. Taxation from a compliant, complicit population was what the modern state required. England did not have that. Henry VIII in need of divorce had put himself and his successors in hock to parliament. Scotland's political estates were even more uppity. They had turfed out Mary Queen of Scots and it was one reason James thought he might have more leeway in England but he soon got a rum awakening when his plans for a united Britain were cold-shouldered. Only in recently conquered Ireland did the state under Wentworth begin to collect taxes on a systematic basis and to build a modern army. The Stuarts began to look longingly at how their Catholic fellow monarchs on the continent ran their states and began to toy with Counterreformation ideas of sovereignty that made for more obedient taxpayers. The Catholic threat from Europe had in other words become an internal manifestation at the highest possible level. Meanwhile the political nation, steeped for a hundred years past in anti-popery, was being influenced by the republican ideas of ancient Rome rolling off the printing press and by the successful contemporary example of the United Provinces.

Cromwell cut the Gordian knot in every respect. For a short space England had a modern military machine and gained respect across the continent. The problems of paying for the army were temporarily resolved by a Roman-style solution in Ireland. But his regime lacked legitimacy and was becoming a military dictatorship in England itself. The Catholicising Stuarts were asked back but the Restoration, as Scott shows, solved nothing. The final solution came from the continent in the form of William of Orange. He needed English arms to withstand the aggrandisement of Louis VIII's France. He became the constitutional-style Protestant monarch England wanted. The English political nation could at last tax itself without fear of being coerced by the army of its own king. The bank of England was set up, modelled on the Bank of Amsterdam, to underpin the fiscal arrangements. England had at last stabilised and modernised sufficiently to its place in Europe. The circumstances in which this compromise political settlement was reached left no place for republicanism.

Scott promises that his next book will be a history of English republicanism. If *England's Troubles* is Scott's own working out of his frustrations with English (and New Zealand) provincialism, so his next one will doubtless reflect his other frustrations about deference, amateurism and the class system. As with English republicanism, so with Scott - England's loss is likely to be America's gain. Because, like John Pocock before him, Scott is seeking his fortune in the States away from the impoverished élitism of British academia.

The author is pleased to accept the review and will not be responding further.

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