

The Restoration: England in the 1660s

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Ronald Hutton begins his account of the Restoration, *The Restoration: a Political and Religious History of England and Wales* (Clarendon; Oxford, 1985) by contrasting the attention historians had paid to the English Civil War with the relatively few monographs devoted to the subsequent phase of history: in his words, 'the history of the English Revolution now reads like a marvellous story with the last chapter missing'.⁽¹⁾ The Civil War has continued to make and break academic reputations, but it is striking how much things have changed since Hutton wrote. Historians (Richard Greaves, Tim Harris, Jonathan Scott among many) have gradually remade what the 'Restoration' can mean. So the Restoration Keeble comes to is one that has recently been reworked and reconsidered. However, Keeble's study takes a more specific focus than most recent explorations, being part of a series which studies decades: it sits between John Spurr's excellent culturally-oriented study of the subsequent decade [*England in the 1670s*, published 2000] and Ann Hughes's forthcoming version of the 1650s. The format of a study of a decade makes one realise once again that the 1660s *per se* – though perhaps slightly less so than the 1670s – remain in some ways the partly-charted terrain that Hutton saw. Keeble reminds us that '[n]either those who relinquished nor those who gained power in 1660 knew what had been won and lost' – or for how long. Arguing that '[n]o previous decade had been so determined to have its voice heard by subsequent decades', his avowed aim is 'to listen' (pp. 2, 4). What he hears is fascinating.

Keeble's task is to make sense of a decade in which went from the (for some) grand moment of the Restoration to the stalled culture of the close of the decade. His study ends, perforce, just before the beginning of experiments with licensing Nonconformists in 1672. Taking this decade alone does make one realise that, for all the new work on the Restoration, it is itself still often characterised as an interlude of plague, fire and fine theatre or – more often – a prologue in the drama of a new kind of political and civic

modernity. Although much of what, culturally, seems to define the 1660s has powerful connections to the 1650s, it still *seems* as though what we think of as 'Restoration' culture took its rise from that event. So while the Restoration can hardly now be characterised as an absent chapter, it is the location of some enduring myths that an examination of a decade brings under useful scrutiny. As a scholar of John Bunyan and Lucy Hutchinson, Keeble is admirably placed to link the Restoration to the struggles of the Civil War and Protectorate from the point of view of those who felt that 1660 was not a marvellous last chapter, but a catastrophe much in need of reversal. As this book makes clear, the dissatisfied, even at the moment of Restoration, were numerous. Keeble's approach to the assumption of scholars and students about the Restoration is identifiable in the choice of topics covered; the pointed use of a wealth of contemporary comment, and the nature of his sources.

With the careful attention to language that characterises the study, Keeble spends some time illuminating the term 'Restoration' itself. He notes that while many represented Charles as welcomed 'an unanimous consent' the rejoicing was neither wholly spontaneous nor unanimous. As he reminds us, the very *term* Restoration was carefully chosen and nurtured. Keeble's examination of the word 'restoration' in contemporary usage makes it admirably clear that that term is, and was for contemporaries, far from describing the decade. 'Upon this King's most happy Restoration, there was seen from all parts his loyal Subject contending how to express their Gratitude to Heaven for its glorious Favour, and the King's no less than miraculous Return': thus Keeble quotes Sir Richard Bulstrode on Charles II's 'return' in 1660. Even amongst those whom Keeble presents as evidently in favour we might find some tension at least. One commentator's suggestion that the people 'exhausted themselves in festivals and rejoicings for his return' may be a little more pointed than it seems: 'exhausted' is not exactly reinvigorated (p. 46). John Milton and Edmund Ludlow saw calling Charles to England as choosing 'a captain back for *Egypt*' (p. 48). On the other side, Clarendon recognised both the fragility and the importance of the Restoration, asserting '*This sudden Revolution*' ought to be called '*by the name of the Restauration*'. As Keeble helpfully reminds us, Clarendon was absolutely alive to the importance of how the event was to be understood – the future depended on it.

In a triumph of winner's history, Restoration became the standard term which tended to bring with it not exactly royalist sympathies but certain assumptions about the fairly widespread acceptance of, and even rejoicing at, the event. Indeed, Keeble's must be one of the few studies of the Restoration to quote so much and so well from the variously dispossessed and annoyed, and so – comparatively – little from the theatre. Keeble's witnesses, in general, have complex feelings about the return of the Stuarts and it is very welcome that Keeble's attention is not overwhelmed by the evidential bias produced by the 'success' of the event. One of his main informants in a book full of perfectly chosen witness statements is Lucy Hutchinson and she called it a 'change'. Indeed, in the 1660s this acid observer appropriated the term 'Restoration' for her husband's attempt to achieve the people's liberties in the Civil Wars. Of the Colonel's military involvement she wrote 'Such killing weapons too he wore / Not to destroy but to restore'.⁽²⁾ If there was one 'change' then there might well be others. Through this book Keeble follows the course of those who while not necessarily involved in anything remotely like a plot, had reason to dislike the Restoration and to hope for change. He illuminates clearly why, in terms of facts and perceptions, many feared it – often allowing them to use their own words to make the point.

If 'Restoration' as a word troubled contemporaries, it was precisely because of the way that word named the relationship of past and present. As a way to describe the meanings of 1660 and after for contemporaries, 'Restoration' can, perhaps, be paired with 'oblivion'; for what was at stake in both words was what was to be remembered, what forgotten and in what form. The Act of Oblivion notwithstanding, the debates of the war were to continue in new forms. Ostensibly writing about her own situation, mourning the death of her husband Colonel John Hutchinson, Lucy Hutchinson wrote of the condition and treatment of mourning widows:

commonly all objects are removed out of their view, which may with other remembrance renew the grief; and in time these remedies succeed, when oblivion's curtain is by degrees drawn over the dead face, and things less lovely are liked, while they are not viewed together with that which was most excellent. But I that am under a command not to grieve at the common rate of desolate women.⁽³⁾

Rather than 'grieve at the common rate of desolate woman' and permit herself the degraded consolations of replacement and ultimately 'oblivion', Lucy Hutchinson commits herself to a project of memory and memorial. The 'life' of her husband that this comment precedes is full, detailed, self-justifying but, above all, it represents an absolute refusal to go along with the idea of 'Restoration' and all the forgetting that would need to accompany it. For Keeble, Lucy Hutchinson is one of the most articulate voices of those who would not go along with the Restoration, would insist on building a future out of remembering rather than forgetting. As David Loewenstein points out, Milton was not alone in attaching himself grimly to memory.⁽⁴⁾ Even those who were not stubbornly refusing oblivion could, and did, remember. In 1667 Keeble reminds us, Samuel Pepys saw the Stuarts as 'this family', 'doing all that silly men can do to make themselves unable to support their Kingdom' (quoted on p.167).⁽⁵⁾ Pepys imagined a return of Commonwealth, writing 'people will remember better things were done, and better managed' and 'with much less charge, under a commonwealth than they have been under this king.' In this study there does not seem to be a Catholic voice of the same pungency and intensity as Hutchinson and Pepys, but Keeble uses his witnesses very well to make the points they want to make themselves – things could, some felt should, have been otherwise.

Late modern historians and to a lesser extent literary scholars writing on the English Civil War have argued endlessly over terminology. Was what happened in the period 1641-60 a 'revolution' (and if so what kind)? Was it a 'rebellion'? Was it in any case a national manifestation of European unrest? Was it sparked by religious or political 'causes'? Did it have 'causes', as such? Did the Civil War express 'conflicts' that fissured English society throughout the early seventeenth century, or blow up suddenly because of the incursion of the crown? Such debates remain gloriously unresolved. Yet, given that the term 'Restoration' was a bugbear in 1660, whatever happened in 1660 has no comparable terminological scrum amongst historians now: the 'R word' is still quite often used as if it describes rather than shapes an event. The terminological calm, however, coexists with much historical work on the substantially unresolved political situation, an increasingly intense debate amongst historians about the status and nature of religious and political activity in the period 1660-90, and increasing attention to the cultural expression of the crises of the period by literary scholars.

In terms of the sources used and the topics it addresses *England in the 1660s* is sharply aware of the debates about the nature of the 'Restoration'. Alongside 'Monarchy Restored', 'the Cavalier Settlement', 'The Act of Oblivion' Keeble calls our attention to 'The Experience of Persecution', 'Nonconformist Culture', 'Radicals, Republicans and Plotters', and some of the new literary political modes – 'Porno-Politics'. Thus, *England in the 1660s* certainly uses and registers the last two decades of scholarship reconsidering England after the Restoration. Readers might have been given more explicit information about the state of these debates in history and literary studies. It would also be interesting to know explicitly where Keeble thinks the 1660s and the troubled term 'Restoration' itself do or do not fit in to the current narratives of the second half of the century (and, come to that, the first). An overview of the debates would have been welcome and useful to readers, too, in a study in a series of this kind.

Keeble certainly does succeed in his aims. He has crafted the narrative to give us the voices of a very full range of witnesses – men and women, royalists, nonconformists, politicians, diarists, poets. Around these contradictory voices Keeble builds up a rich picture of the crises of the decade. *England in the 1660s* will illuminate a still strangely obscure decade for both students and scholars.

Notes

1. Ronald Hutton, *The Restoration: a Political and Religious History of England and Wales, 1658-1667* (Clarendon; Oxford, 1985), p.1.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Lucy Hutchinson 'Upon two pictures', in David Norbrook, 'Lucy Hutchinson's 'Elegies' and the situation of the Republican woman writer' *English Language Review*, 27: 3 (1997), 468-520, on p.494. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Lucy Hutchinson, 'To My Children', in *Memoirs of the Life of Colonel Hutchinson* ed N.H.Keeble (Dent; London, 1995), p.16.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. David Loewenstein, *Representing Revolution in Milton and His Contemporaries* (Cambridge University Press; Cambridge, 2001).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. The Diary of Samuel Pepys. Volume 8: 1667, ed. Robert Latham and William Matthews (Bell and Hyman; London, 1971), p. 377.[Back to \(5\)](#)

The author appreciates the attentiveness and generosity of this review, and regrets that he is not himself at the moment able to pursue the questions it raises.

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