

Reviews in History

Published on *Reviews in History* (<http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>)

England under the Stuarts

Review Number:

364

Publish date:

Sunday, 30 November, 2003

Author:

George Macaulay Trevelyan

ISBN:

41527785

Date of Publication:

2002

Price:

£546.00

Pages:

13pp.

Publisher:

Routledge

Publisher url:

<http://www.routledge.com/books/details/9780415277853/>

Place of Publication:

London

Reviewer:

David L. Smith

Nearly a century after G.M. Trevelyan's *England under the Stuarts* was first published in 1904, Routledge has issued this very welcome reprint, with a new introduction by John Morrill. I found re-reading the book an immensely pleasurable experience. It is very much a product of the Edwardian era, and reveals many of the attitudes that were characteristic of that period; but it is also the creation of a remarkable and distinctive scholar who became by far the most widely read British historian of his generation. Throughout, the power, richness and eloquence of the writing struck me much more forcefully than those areas in which a century of further research has inevitably overtaken some of its interpretations. The book repays reading both as historiography and as history, and it thus presents a double challenge and a double reward: the opportunity to view seventeenth-century England through early twentieth-century eyes.

Trevelyan was aged just 28 when *England under the Stuarts* was published. He had already produced *England in the Age of Wycliffe* in 1899, which was an extended version of the dissertation that had won him a Fellowship at Trinity College, Cambridge in 1898. He resigned that Fellowship in 1903 and moved to London, where he became active in Liberal politics, helped to found and edit a progressive journal entitled the *Independent Review*, and continued to lecture once or twice a week at the Working Men's College in

Great Ormond Street, as he had done since 1899. *England under the Stuarts* grew out of that teaching experience, and it originally appeared in November 1904 as the first volume in a new Methuen 'History of England' series edited by Sir Charles Oman. It has had an exceptionally long life. It reached its twenty-first edition in 1949; it was first published in paperback in 1965, and that edition was subsequently reprinted five times. Apart from one extensive revision in 1925, the text has remained essentially unaltered.

In a general sense, the book is an expression of the age in which it was written. It is as assured and certain of itself as King Edward VII; as rooted in a rural idyll as the National Trust (founded in 1895) of which Trevelyan was a devoted supporter; and as evocative of a particular vision of Englishness as the music of Trevelyan's close friend and contemporary at Trinity College, Cambridge, Ralph Vaughan Williams. More specifically, *England under the Stuarts* reflects the Whiggish values that Trevelyan had imbibed from an early age. Blair Worden has called him 'the twentieth century's most influential inheritor of the moderate Whig tradition'.⁽¹⁾ His father, Sir George Otto Trevelyan, had been an MP and minister in all five Gladstone governments, while his great-uncle, whose surname he bore as his own middle name, was the historian Thomas Babington Macaulay. Their Whiggish outlook, which Trevelyan inherited, pervades the book: it comes through in his sympathy for Parliaments rather than monarchs, and for Puritans and nonconformists rather than Anglicans; it accounts for his hostility towards Catholicism and the established Church and his inability to get inside Civil War Royalism; and it underpins his sense of the ways in which England's development during the seventeenth century diverged from that of most continental states. As John Morrill argues in his perceptive introduction, the book is also profoundly Whiggish in its willingness to project the values of the present back onto the past, and to celebrate the past for what it has contributed to the present.

Throughout the book, events are interpreted in the light of this Whiggish view of English constitutional and religious history. Here, for example, is Trevelyan's assessment of the New Model Army's victory in the first Civil War in 1646:

It had secured forever that monarchy in England should not be a despotism. Our island had been cut free from the political history of the continent. No King should ever triumph here by the sword. When royalty was restored, it was restored by the restoration of Parliament. And because under a Parliamentary rule, however intolerant it may be for a while, every religious and political party has hope of asserting sooner or later its place in the national life, there never has been that exodus of freemen from England, that abandonment of the hope of liberty, which must have followed the armed victory of Charles I. (pp. 258-9)

Trevelyan returns to these themes in the magisterial peroration with which the book closes:

So the principle of religious Toleration triumphed in England, though many generations passed before it developed into that of religious equality. At a time when the Continent was falling a prey to despots, the English under the Stuarts had achieved their emancipation from monarchical tyranny by the act of the national will; in an age of bigotry, their own divisions had forced them into religious Toleration against their real wish; while personal liberty and some measure of free speech and writing had been brought about by the balance of two great parties. Never perhaps in any century have such rapid advances been made towards freedom. (pp. 497-8)

Such judgements rest on a conviction that the seventeenth century made a decisive contribution in guiding England towards a better future, by which Trevelyan would have meant one marked by the greater liberty, freedom and toleration, guaranteed by parliamentary government, that he perceived in his own time. The premises on which his argument was based were thus not only anachronistic and teleological; they also rested on a profound sense of progress and the distinctiveness of English historical development.

Likewise, key historical personalities or groups are consistently evaluated in relation to whether, and how far

they promoted or resisted these forces of progress. Thus James I could not 'distinguish the great currents of opinion and the main tide of political force, from the bright, shallow eddies that catch and please a monarch's eye', and at the beginning of his reign 'all the main causes that twice combined to drive the Stuarts from the throne, were in three fatal years set in motion by an overwise King'. (pp. 72-3) Charles I sought to promote 'an encroaching and un-English tyranny' (p. 173), while if James II had remained king 'we could not have obtained that union of parties, and that strong monarchical administration on behalf of national and Parliamentary ideals, on which depended the future progress of England and the immediate salvation of England'.(p. 428) By contrast, Cromwell 'well understood that the true method of progress is to realize the best which can obtain general consent, rather than to establish the very best by force'.(p. 270) These verdicts on individual figures correspond exactly with Trevelyan's sympathies towards particular groups of people. He argues that 'the character and public spirit of the Commons under James and Charles I were higher than in . subsequent periods of our history . As an opposition, no assembly of men at once so shrewd and so stalwart ever met to resist the abuse of power.'(p. 96) There is a remarkable passage in the chapter on the Restoration, in which Trevelyan suggests a direct connection between the resilience of Puritanism after 1660 and the emergence of English national identity and achievement:

To the devout Englishman, much as he might love the Prayer Book service and hate the Dissenters, the core of religion was the life of family prayer and Bible study, which the Puritans had for a hundred years struggled not in vain to make the custom of the land. The self-restrained and melancholy strength of individual purpose which armed the English to surpass all nations in economic and industrial enterprise, the struggle towards purity, the deep and continuous affections which freed and ennobled family life, these habits of body and mind were not wholly cast aside by the people, whatever might be the case with the governors at Whitehall. (p. 330)

On the other hand, Trevelyan has much less time for those whom he sees as obstructing the tide of progress and, by extension, impeding England's national development. In particular, he never really gets inside the Royalists of the 1640s because his own attitudes leave him unable to explain why so many people should have sided with forces that he believed were running counter to those of progress. It is notable that his discussion of Royalism associates it with looking backwards rather than forwards: it reflected 'the old-world ideals and associations of kingship', and to many Royalists 'the world seemed still the same as in the noontide of Elizabeth'.(p. 222) If Puritanism was about the future, Royalism was about the past; and the rhetorical thrust of Trevelyan's argument leaves the reader in no doubt as to where his own sympathies lay.

Trevelyan's political and religious values were closely associated with a deep sense of Englishness that is evident in his somewhat idealised, almost elegiac, depiction of English society and the English landscape. He celebrated - and lamented the passing of - a world that was already long lost even in 1904. Such passages are especially frequent in the first two chapters, which offer a panorama of England in the opening decades of the seventeenth century. Take this, for example:

With the single exception of London, the largest cities were still country towns, where the central market cross was never a mile from the orchards and fruit gardens that clustered outside the grey stone battlements, filled the empty moat, encompassed the new white suburb beyond, and led down by pleasant paths to the open cornfield country. (p. 48)

Or this:

A love of beauty, since disappeared, was native to the English of every class. In each village, oak furniture for farm and cottage was carved into pleasing forms, which now win the

admiration of connoisseurs. The commonest objects - the family-coach, the beer-jug, the lintel of the door, or the sign that hung over it - had the touch of natural taste, and often of true artistic effort. But the sense of beauty was perhaps best shown in the pleasure taken by all classes in a native music. (p. 49)

This is powerfully evocative writing, and it is touched by a combination of warmth and wistfulness that raises it above the level of mere sentimentality. It is highly characteristic of a man who loved the English landscape and whose principal recreation lay in lengthy country walks, often of thirty or forty miles or more. This was also a man who was an influential member of the Council of the National Trust from 1926 to 1961, Vice-Chairman of the Trust's Executive Committee (1929-46) and Chairman of the Estates Committee (1928-49), and who wrote *Must England's Beauty Perish?* on behalf of the Trust in 1929. Trevelyan's deep identification with England is further apparent in his constant usage of 'we' and 'our' with reference to England and the English, in a way that assumes a social and political cohesion that would be unthinkable today.

As will be evident from the passages already quoted, much of Trevelyan's power as an historian stems from his extraordinary effectiveness as a stylist. David Cannadine has written that Trevelyan produced 'passages of greater lyrical beauty and poetic feeling than any other historian in the English language' (2), and this quality is apparent even in a relatively early work such as *England under the Stuarts*. The prose is crisp, elegant and fluent, with a natural sense of narrative pace and suspense that grips the reader's attention. Trevelyan's writing has a theatrical quality that enables him to evoke dramatic set-piece occasions particularly vividly. One example will suffice, and is worth quoting at length. This is his wonderful account of Charles I's attempted arrest of the Five Members of the Commons on 4 January 1642:

The Commons, who had known for two hours, by a message from the Queen's ill-chosen confidante, Lady Carlisle, what such a procession would mean, sent off the five members by water to the City. Then came a cry and scuffle of frightened tradesmen closing their booths in Westminster Hall; the noise of an armed multitude entering confusedly with shouts heralding the approach of its chief; a rush of steps and clank of swords across the great hall and up the stairs into the lobby; last of all, as the door of the House of Commons itself was flung open, a King's voice, bidding his followers stand outside on pain of death. Then Charles, with the young Elector Palatine behind him, entered the room. He passed to the Speaker's chair between rows of silent, standing members. From that point of vantage he soon satisfied himself that his 'birds were flown', and after no discourteous language walked back as he had come, while the cry 'Privilege, privilege', rose behind him as he went. All this time the door had been, with insolent suggestion, held open from without, displaying a crowd in the lobby armed to the teeth, cocking pistols and uttering wanton threats of slaughter. (p. 213)

All the hallmarks of Trevelyan's mature style are already in evidence here, even though he was writing while still only in his late twenties: a powerful grasp of human drama unfolding within a strongly delineated historical setting; a feeling for the immediacy, excitement and uncertainty of events; a sharp eye for the telling detail; and a superlative capacity to bring the past alive by recounting a riveting story.

Those stylistic qualities help to explain Trevelyan's aptitude for, and lifelong interest in, military history. Some of the most compelling sections in *England under the Stuarts* are the accounts of battles of the Civil Wars (Chapters 8-9) and the War of the Spanish Succession (Chapter 15). His treatments of military engagements are unfailingly compact and vigorous, with a particularly strong sense of action unfolding within a specific landscape and location. The chapter on Anne's reign and the War of the Spanish Succession in part prefigures the great masterpiece of Trevelyan's maturity, his trilogy on *England under Queen Anne* (London; Longman & Co., 1930-4). His style is ideally suited to describing the interplay between domestic politics, international diplomacy and military developments, and his control of a complex

and fast-moving narrative is masterly.

The fluency of his writing was no doubt assisted by the fact that Trevelyan had not had to absorb the vast literature that has appeared on this period of English history since 1904. John Morrill convincingly identifies the works that served as the bedrock for Trevelyan's account: S. R. Gardiner's great history for 1603-56, and then Burnet and Macaulay for the period after 1660. To these, Trevelyan added a good range of printed primary sources, especially contemporary letters, diaries and memoirs. These foundations help to explain a certain unevenness in his coverage. For example, he is notably weak on the later 1650s. This was the period after Gardiner's history ends in 1656, and Trevelyan was writing a few years before the publication of C. H. Firth's *The Last Years of the Protectorate* in 1909: the result is probably the thinnest and least satisfactory section of the whole book, with just a single sentence on the offer of the kingship to Cromwell, for example (p. 296). Whereas 35 pages (pp. 368-403) are devoted to the years 1678-81, the period 1654-60 is covered in just 23 (pp. 293-316).

Given how much research has been done on seventeenth-century England since Trevelyan wrote, it is hardly surprising that there are many subjects on which his interpretations have been outmoded or disproved. Even when allowance is made for his value judgements and the distortions that arise from his own political and religious sympathies, there are still themes and problems on which research has inevitably moved on. To take just three instances: Trevelyan's account of James I (Chapters 3 and 4) is far more hostile than even that King's sternest scholarly critics would advance today; the account of popular religion during the Interregnum in Chapter 10 drastically underestimates the resilience of 'folk Anglicanism' and attachment to the Prayer Book; and Trevelyan's treatment of Scottish and Irish history is perfunctory at best. He makes no pretence that this is other than English history, and the index entries for Scotland and Ireland deal almost exclusively with the activities of the English in those two nations, or the implementation of English policy there, or their influence on England. The nature and extent of the interactions between the three kingdoms were so varied and intermittent during the course of the seventeenth century that it may well be impossible to write a genuinely synthetic 'British' history covering the entire period. But what Trevelyan offers falls short even of the 'enriched English history' that has become fashionable in recent years.⁽³⁾ Rather, he tells - and celebrates - a story of English exceptionalism.

What is perhaps more remarkable is the number of subjects on which Trevelyan's assessments anticipate later research. For example, his emphasis on the importance of Calvinism within the early Stuart Church (pp. 58-9) prefigures the work of Nicholas Tyacke and others. Trevelyan's view of Oliver Cromwell as a reluctant regicide (p. 276) is intuitively quite close to that recently advanced by John Morrill and Philip Baker. The structure of Trevelyan's account of the Restoration, with its distinction between the two settlements of 1660 and 1661-2 (pp. 317-26), is broadly compatible with Ronald Hutton's influential study. On the politics of Queen Anne's reign, Trevelyan's concentration on the Whig/Tory dichotomy has, after a period of eclipse, again emerged as the prevailing orthodoxy in the writings of Geoffrey Holmes and subsequent scholars. Such areas, where more recent historians have to some extent vindicated Trevelyan, are a real tribute to the power of his historical insight and his instinctive feel for the period.

All these qualities mean that *England under the Stuarts* remains a deeply rewarding book. It is, superbly, a book with the courage of its convictions, and it displays throughout an underlying security and assurance that is neither arrogant nor apologetic. Trevelyan is able to make generalisations with superlative self-confidence, such as: 'While Germany boasts her Reformation and France her Revolution, England can point to her dealings with the House of Stuart' (p. xvii); or: 'The French Revolution was a war of two societies; the American Civil War was a war of two regions; but the Great Rebellion was a war of two parties.' (p. 219) Such a book could not be written today. It continues to be eminently worth reading, and this Routledge reprint deserves a very warm welcome for ensuring that the book's life is still far from over.

Notes

1. Blair Worden, *Roundhead Reputations: The English Civil Wars and the Passions of Posterity* (London: Allen Lane, 2001), p. 18.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. David Cannadine, *G. M. Trevelyan: A Life in History* (London: HarperCollins, 1992), p. 227.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. For this phrase, see John Morrill, *The Nature of the English Revolution* (Harlow: Longman, 1993), pp. 246, 260.[Back to \(3\)](#)

Other reviews:

The NY Times

<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html> [2]

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/364>

Links:

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/2034>

[2] <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=F50D17FC345F13718DDDA10994DA405B858CF1D3>