

Britain in Revolution, 1625-1660

Review Number:

377

Publish date:

Wednesday, 31 December, 2003

Author:

Austin Woolrych

ISBN:

198200811X

Date of Publication:

2002

Price:

£25.00

Pages:

825pp.

Publisher:

Oxford University Press

Place of Publication:

Oxford

Reviewer:

Peter Gaunt

Britain in Revolution is a huge book in every sense, the distillation of a lifetime's-worth of teaching, researching and writing, resulting in a large, sweeping narrative account of a very high standard. In over 800 pages and well over a third of a million words, this impressive volume ranges across three and a half decades of English and British history, telling afresh (in the words of the dust jacket) 'the story of the cataclysmic events in England, Scotland, and Ireland that broke the course of royal government'. Like the Grand Remonstrance and Clarendon's classic account before it, the volume picks up the story in 1625, with the accession of Charles I, and it goes on to follow and recount developments down to the return of Charles II in spring 1660, and – in the 'Epilogue' – a little beyond. Very occasionally the chronological imperative is broken by a thematic arrangement – thus the Protectorate's handling of Scotland, Ireland and Europe is largely reserved for a chapter of its own. However, in the main a strictly chronological approach is retained within and between the chapters, with the whole period surveyed in 27 chapters grouped together into six parts, arranged pretty much as one would expect: the 'background and beginnings' of 1625-40, the war years of 1640-46, the troubled period 1646-49 (described here as 'towards a kingless Britain'), the Commonwealth of 1649-53, the Protectorate of 1653-58, and the collapse of the Good Old Cause in 1658-60. At the outset Woolrych makes clear that his main focus will be the period 1637-60, from the Scottish troubles and wars onwards, and that he sees his opening three chapters, on Charles's inheritance and his handling of his three realms down to 1637, as something of an extended introduction. He even invites readers who already know their bearings to skip through to Chapter 4, though it would be a shame if they did so, for these opening chapters provide a clear and judicious discussion of the first decade or more of Charles's reign and a firm foundation for what follows. Overall, then, this volume recounts the history of England and of Britain from 1625, though deepening markedly from 1637, through to 1660, and provides a grand and overarching narrative of that troubled period. It is by some margin the longest and most substantial single-volume history

we have of these years.

At heart, this is a political history, though the many faces of politics in this period – royal, republican and Protectoral, executive and parliamentary, military and radical – are all embraced. It is, therefore, predominantly top-down in its approach and coverage, focusing on the political elite and the application of their policies, and on the military commanders and the grand national campaigns they mounted. The workings of successive national regimes and their political and administrative impact form the backbone of the volume. The ordinary mass of the population in the towns and countryside of England and (to a lesser extent) Scotland and Ireland are certainly not overlooked. They are shown reacting to Charles's religious and Scottish policies in the 1630s, electing MPs in 1640, tumultuously swilling around London and the Palaces of Whitehall and Westminster in spring 1641 and winter 1641-42, rising up in rebellion in Ireland, petitioning king and parliament in vain hopes of a settlement in 1642, and responding – often half-heartedly – to musters and recruiting drives by both sides in the summer and autumn of 1642. In due course, some consideration is given to the civil war allegiances of the English provinces, to neutralism and the clubmen, to the personal, financial, material and physical impact of the English civil war of 1642-46, to army discontent and the rise of radicalism in later 1640s, and so forth. Thus it would be quite wrong to suggest that this volume overlooks popular expressions or the experiences of the masses.

However, these subjects are generally covered quite briefly and for the most part primacy is given to the centre, the elite and the political and military high command. Thus while detailed accounts of parliamentary debates and developments and of the campaigns of the principal armies and generals dominate large parts of the volume, there is limited coverage here of issues such as 'the people's war', the grass-roots, bottom-up, popular perspective on the war of the sort recently pursued by Philip Tennant, John Wroughton, Mark Stoyle and others.⁽¹⁾ Similarly, while the question of popular rural allegiance in the civil war is addressed (pp. 255-6), it receives just two paragraphs and seems surprisingly kind to the 'ecology of allegiance' thesis. Again, the clubmen are discussed at various points in Chapter 10, but we never get a really crisp or sustained evaluation of the recent alternative explanations of the factors that triggered risings in some areas but not others, or of the neutralist or partisan nature of clubmen groups. Excellent as the account of high politics undoubtedly is, perhaps some of the very detailed, at times almost day-by-day recounting of parliamentary events and debates might usefully have been pruned back just a little to allow for fuller exploration of some of these grass-roots issues.

The volume chimes in with the recent fashion for taking a British or three kingdoms perspective, but is not slavishly wedded and glued to the preachings of the most fervent advocates of that faith. Convinced that 'the story of the period covered by this book can only be told intelligibly if it embraces all three nations' (p. 3), Woolrych is throughout careful to survey Scottish and Irish developments, occasionally devoting an entire chapter to one or both of those kingdoms, but more often narrating Scottish, Irish and English developments in tandem within a chapter. However, he does not subscribe to the theory that each of the three kingdoms should be accorded equal space and coverage and he vigorously defends the Anglo-centricity evident in the volume. Thus, he argues, while the Scottish wars and the Irish Catholic rebellion may have helped trigger war in England, both Celtic kingdoms had been reacting to English policies and English threats, real or imagined. The course and outcome of the English civil war shaped subsequent events in all three nations, led to the execution of the British king and in due course produced an English conquest of Ireland and Scotland and an enforced union of those two kingdoms with, but also very much under, England. Moreover, the political philosophy, the radical political and religious stances and groups and the new ideas of all sorts which burst forth in England during and after the civil war had at best only very pale equivalents amongst the Scots and Irish. Woolrych concludes, surely correctly, that 'the fact is that England was where most of the crucial decisions were taken, and most of the crucial battles fought, which determined the fates of all three kingdoms'. (p. 3) Like the broader revisionist reinterpretation of the causes of the English civil war during the 1970s and 1980s, the British approach which underpinned much of the writing of the 1990s corrected lazy or narrow assumptions and enriched our view of the mid-seventeenth century. But like revisionism, the British pendulum can be – and in some cases probably has been – pushed too far. The balance struck in this volume, of what might be termed enriched Anglo-centricity, seems both sensible and

plausible. The centrality of England is recognised and English developments are accorded fullest coverage, but they are set beside meaty accounts of Ireland and Scotland that highlight the inter-relationships and the ways in which the British kingdoms repeatedly impacted upon each other.

The fairly strict chronological structure adopted here creates some tensions, for the author obviously has to keep a number of balls in the air in order to cover simultaneous developments in different parts of England and Wales, and of Britain. Inevitably, therefore, the ‘meanwhile’ approach to history is evident in several chapters – especially those on the war-dominated 1640s – with a few paragraphs or a short section taking forward the story in one particular region or kingdom, before scurrying back to the chronological starting point to explore another geographical area. This is handled as well and as elegantly as possible, indeed with considerable care and skill, and even readers with little prior knowledge of the period should be able to follow the overall story and the various sub-plots. Nevertheless, this is not always the best way to give the clearest account of complex sequences of events, most notably the military history of the English civil war of 1642-46, with its bewildering array of national, regional and county-based armies on campaign, with one side gaining the upper hand in one area, at the same time as it was in retreat in another and with a whole range of very different county and regional stories to tell. In consequence, the military chapters in Part Two are quite dense, with lots of darting around England and Wales from one theatre of war to another. A few more maps and plans, illustrating the campaigns, gains and losses, indeed perhaps a sequence of maps showing the changing territorial possessions of king and parliament in the course of the war years, might have enhanced the text and guided a novice coming to this volume with little prior knowledge of the civil war.

The strong chronological imperative also makes it difficult to break away for sustained analytical discussion of key themes, for there is always a lurking pressure to resume the narrative and to drive onwards. In some ways this volume could be said to explore the big questions of the mid-seventeenth century, the causes, nature and consequences of the civil war(s), but that is not how the material is overtly structured or expressed. There is a tendency to eschew detailed consideration of historiographical debate and division and instead to pursue and narrate a single line. Most obviously, there is little sustained analysis here of the merits and demerits of the interpretations of the causes of the war, and the huge and unresolved historical debate on that issue is directly addressed only very briefly. A preferred interpretation does become apparent, as much by implication and the storyline selected, as by direct and explicit analysis of the range of possible explanations. In his brief introduction Woolrych makes clear that he is sceptical of long-term interpretations which pursue the causes of the war back into the sixteenth century, and that, while sympathetic to the revisionists’ challenge to such long-term explanations, he believes they went too far in the other direction in dismissing or belittling the problems of the 1630s. Accordingly, this account of the descent into war gives a lot of weight to medium- and short-term causation and to the shortcomings and blunders of those at the top. Woolrych acknowledges that Charles I’s inheritance was a difficult one, with political problems and unresolved tensions in all three British kingdoms in 1625, and that these might be seen as ‘preconditions’ for the civil war.(p. 5) But the inheritance was by no means ‘impossible’ and Charles’s ‘success in managing it would depend very much on his personal qualities’.(p. 49) The ensuing portrait of Charles as man and monarch is fairly bleak and negative, stressing his personal and political failings, and much of the blame for precipitating the wars of the late 1630s and 1640s is implicitly or explicitly laid at the king’s door. At one point Woolrych is ‘left wondering how many more of his subjects in all three of his kingdoms might have died in their beds if he had died in his in 1638’.(p. 106) In short, the civil war is portrayed as the result of ‘a series of unanticipated crises’ (p. 5), many of them fomented, provoked, worsened or mishandled by the king:

We are readier to admit the role of the personal and the contingent in bringing even catastrophic events to pass; a civil war, even the overthrow of an ancient monarchy, may be the climactic outcome of a gradual, inexorable increase of stresses in the fabric of society or the frame of government, but it may also come about through a failure of statesmanship.(p. 4)

This stress upon medium- and short-term causation, upon the failures and shortcomings of individual

politicians, especially the king, and upon the unintended and unexpected outbreak of civil war in England and Wales, is supported by many recent studies in this field and has much to commend it. The concern is not so much the line adopted here – although there are plenty of historians currently working in the field who would disagree with it – but that the reader is not led to this interpretation via sustained analysis or assessment of the various alternative explanations, some of which – such as the long-term explanations favoured by Whigs and Marxists – are dismissed after cursory discussion in the brief introductory chapter, while others – such as the recent, more nuanced social and cultural interpretations – are passed over in near silence. It is, therefore, unfortunate that the fairly brief bibliographical note attached to this section of the book does not point the reader to any of the up-to-date assessments of the full range of interpretations on offer, such as the recent studies by Ann Hughes and Norah Carlin.[\(2\)](#)

Woolrych structures his narrative around four so-called ‘climacterics’: that is fairly short but crucial phases ‘in which political crisis was particularly intense and decisions particularly momentous’.(p. 155) These he identifies as the periods from the meeting of the Long Parliament to the outbreak of civil war in England and Wales; from the New Model Army’s defiance of parliament to the regicide and the establishment of the republic; from the ejection of the Rump to the establishment of the Protectorate; and from the ejection of Protector Richard Cromwell to the restoration of the Stuart monarchy twelve months later. Woolrych forcefully presents these four periods as especially important, not only in accelerating developments but also in changing the course of events in ways unforeseen by, and generally unwelcome to, most of the key players. Thus civil war, the regicide and republic, the Protectoral system and the return of monarchical rule were far from the outcomes which most of the protagonists were expecting or intending at the outset of these four periods. This stress upon the unforeseen consequences of the climacterics is consistent with, and itself reinforces, the emphasis found in much of the volume upon unintended developments and unplanned twists and turns of events caused by the actions of a fairly small number of key players.

The term and concept ‘revolution’ are reviewed at the beginning and the end of the narrative, especially in the closing chapter or ‘Epilogue’, which ranges beyond 1660 and explores not only the Restoration settlements in the three nations, but also selected developments of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Although sceptical of comparisons with the later French, Russian and Chinese revolutions and unhappy with the use of ‘English Revolution’ as a label for the period – too English, too Marxist, too self-contained – Woolrych argues that the events of the mid-seventeenth century can be seen as a revolution as defined by Macchiavelli and others and as it was coming to be employed in the seventeenth century: that is, ‘to describe any major cataclysms that violently interrupted the history of the body politic, whether they permanently changed its institutions or not’.(p. 792) Focussing upon political structures, central government and administration and the state church, Woolrych concludes that the case for such a revolution having occurred in Scotland and Ireland at this time is not particularly strong, for he detects many signs of a post-1660 return to the pre-war position in both kingdoms, although the huge shift in land-ownership in Ireland from Catholic to Protestant is noted. He is much happier with the idea of major and permanent changes effected in England, with ‘an irreversible sea change’ there, even in institutions which bore the same name as their pre-1640 predecessors, and with many of the aspirations and goals of the mid-seventeenth century parliamentarians coming to fruition and being firmly secured in the wake of the Glorious Revolution:

Not everything that the reformers of the Interregnum had striven for was secured, for parliamentary reform had to wait for the nineteenth century, and democracy as the Levellers understood it was won even later; but enough has been said to show that they had not striven in vain.(p. 796)

These, the closing words of this volume, are indicative of the pro-parliamentarian tone, which is evident in much of the work. There is no disguising or denying the author’s clear sympathy for the parliamentary cause and for key parliamentarians. While Charles I receives an almost unremittingly bad press here and is accorded much of the blame for causing the civil war, and the war-time record of his nephew Prince Rupert is painted in the blackest of shades – those who stood against him ‘paid the now usual price in butchery and

pillage' (p. 282) – the parliamentary champions are lauded. John Pym, Sir Thomas Fairfax and Henry Ireton emerge covered in glory, while Cromwell is repeatedly supported and praised, even – perhaps especially – when in conflict with fellow parliamentarians deemed to be holding back the cause. Thus in the winter of 1644-45 Cromwell 'was not pursuing a personal vendetta against Manchester, nor did he relish the antagonisms within and between the two Houses that their quarrel was generating' (p. 301) Many historians have seen Cromwell's attack on the Earl of Manchester in a very different light. In due course others who got in Cromwell's way or did not strive to bring about his goals, including the Rump and the Nominated Assembly, Protectoral MPs and even on occasion the army officers, were rightfully sidelined as the Lord General and Lord Protector pursued liberty and justice. With Cromwell dead and the Protectorate gone, George Monck in turn emerges as a hero of sorts, saving what he could from the wreckage. This reviewer broadly shares these perspectives, largely concurs with the warm interpretation of Cromwell and more generally of the parliamentary cause found here and is sympathetic to the liberal, reformist outlook portrayed so positively in this volume and from which it springs. However, those holding a different viewpoint will undoubtedly question or dispute much that they encounter here and readers from the political right or with royalist sympathies will certainly find their blood pressure rising alarmingly as they turn the pages.

The text has been very well prepared and proofed and, considering its great length, the number of surviving literals is remarkably low. Occasionally a slip of the pen or the keystroke has garbled a date, perhaps confusing the unwary. Thus Tawney's century is usually recognised as 1540-1640 and patently cannot be 1640-60 (p. 3), the discussion on p. 166 seems to focus on winter 1640-41 and not winter 1641-42, and Charles opened his Oxford parliament in January 1644 not 1642 (p. 274). Factual errors are equally few and far between and generally very minor. Worcester was firmly secured for the king and not for parliament at the end of 1642 (p. 255), Montgomery castle was very thoroughly demolished at the end of the wars and did not survive as a residence with living quarters intact (p. 339), Chirk castle was not still holding out for the king down to and beyond summer 1646 (p. 344), between December 1653 and September 1654 Protector and Council passed around 180 ordinances not 82 (p. 588), Charles Howard was never a member of the Protectoral Council (p. 700) and Charles Fleetwood, who was a Protectoral Councillor, was not a regicide (p. 781). The text is supported by occasional footnotes and brief bibliographic guidance to further reading, a select blend of old and new works – some expected, some unexpected – placed at the end of each part. A selection of 26 half-tones appears in the centre of the volume, but slightly disappointingly there are just six maps or plans – of the Marston Moor and Naseby campaigns and of Catholic ownership of Irish land in 1641 and 1688, plus a trio of more general maps of the civil wars in England, Scotland and Ireland. The annotation of the Scottish map claims that 'dates of all battles can be found in the index under "battles"', but alas the index itself contains no such entry and many of the battles shown on that map appear nowhere in the index.

Britain in Revolution is a splendid volume and a fitting high point of a very distinguished career. It provides a masterly political (and military) narrative of a complex period. The style is elegant and lucid and it is a joy to read. Woolrych makes particularly good use of contemporary texts and political writings and he is also excellent at laying out and weighing up the alternatives open to key players at crucial moments, with brief counterfactual excursions. Although the portrayal of Charles I and his government is far from glowing, the exploration of court faction during the 1630s is subtle and convincing, with clear assessments of how those around the king were divided on issues such as religious and foreign policies. But the narrative really gets into its stride once the parliamentarians are winning the main civil war, and from the mid-1640s onwards we have an outstanding account of events, reflecting the author's principal interests and sympathies and conveying the excitement and richness of these years. He clearly understands soldiers and his story of the New Model Army from conception to the eve of abolition is bright, vibrant and nuanced; as one would expect given his earlier work (3), his account of army politics during 1647 is superb and provides surely the definitive account of those developments. The story of the republic and Commonwealth is sensitive, full and generous, and the portrayal of Cromwell, though perhaps too fulsome for some tastes, is certainly strong, vivid and resonant; to this reviewer, it rings true and clear. Where some accounts of this decade tend to trail off in 1658-9, losing interest or enthusiasm, rushing through Richard Cromwell's Protectorate and the troubled twelve months which followed in a noticeably half-hearted manner as little more than a prelude to

an almost inevitable Restoration, Woolrych gives us a very full and convincing picture of the unfolding events of these years, exploring the roles of, and options open to, the various key players: notably Richard himself, army leaders such as Charles Fleetwood and John Disbrowe and the figure who came to dominate the closing phase of this period and this volume, George Monck. From beginning to end, a complex story is related with great skill and a deft and judicious touch, and a mass of detail is carefully controlled, managed and moulded to form a clear and magisterial account. *Britain in Revolution* is a magnificent achievement and a magnificent book.

Notes

1. P. Tennant, *Edgehill and Beyond: the People's War in the South Midlands, 1642-1645* (Stroud: Alan Sutton, 1992); J. Wroughton, *An Unhappy Civil War: the Experiences of Ordinary People in Gloucestershire, Somerset and Wiltshire, 1642-1646* (Bath: Lansdown Press, 1999); M. Stoye, *Loyalty and Locality: Popular Allegiance in Devon during the English Civil War* (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 1994). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. A. Hughes, *The Causes of the English Civil War*, 2nd edn (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998); N. Carlin, *The Causes of the English Civil War* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. A. Woolrych, *Soldiers and Statesmen: the General Council of the Army and its Debates, 1647-1648* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987). [Back to \(3\)](#)

Other reviews:

H-Net Reviews

<http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php> [2]

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/377>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/2135>

[2] <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=8748>