

Propaganda and the Tudor State: Political Culture in the Westcountry

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This book addresses a number of live issues in early modern historiography: the 'New British History', emphasising those nations and regions beyond the English heartlands; post-Eltonian revisionism, which questions the thesis of a centralising revolution in Tudor government; and the new cultural history, which uses a wide range of cultural artefacts – 'texts' – to explore political ideas. In this it enjoys varying success, but taken as a whole it is undoubtedly a work of considerable value in all these fields.

The 'Westcountry' is defined as Devon and Cornwall: this might come as something of a shock to those of us living in or working on Somerset, Wiltshire and Gloucestershire, and 'the Southwest' might have been a less misleading choice of words for the title. While on the subject of presentation, the designer of the dust jacket has chosen, mystifyingly, to use an extract from a mid-fifteenth century Latin text from the diocese of Lincoln: was there not an image available from the region and period actually discussed in the book?

The book, as described in the 'Introduction', 'maps the responses of Devon and Cornwall to the intensifying relationship between the administrative centre, represented by crown and parliament, and the provinces of sixteenth-century England' (p. 2); this is a carefully-chosen form of words which avoids locating this study within a simple 'Eltonian' centre/periphery model. Chapter 1, accordingly, aims to examine the local reception of royal propaganda through such evidence as churchwardens' accounts, ecclesiastical and domestic architecture and sculptural representations. Significantly, this chapter is called 'Allegiance', which might almost be the leitmotiv for much that is to follow. Chapter 2, 'Rebellion', forms a counterpoint to its predecessor, but both are still very much in harmony: this chapter seeks to present the revolts of 1497 and

1549 as in no way exemplifying south-western society and political attitudes as a whole.

Chapter 3 continues this process on another front, concentrating on the intriguing Cornish-language saint's play, *Beunans Meriasek* (The Life of Meriasek). Performed, if not composed, in the immediate aftermath of the 1497 risings, it features a tyrannical king called Teudar: surely, one might think, undeniable evidence of popular disaffection from the Tudor regime! But no, according to Cooper, who points out that Teudar, the character in Cornish drama, predates the coming of Henry Tudor as king of England.

Succeeding chapters deal with the evidence for popular and elite resistance to the Henrician Reformation and the Marian regime, as well as to enclosure and other related issues. Again, the picture is largely one of consensus and conservatism: popular disturbances usually took the form of attempts to protect traditional local customs, and elite conspiracies originated outside of the Southwest and/or had only limited support within the region. In this respect, Cooper's treatment of the 'Exeter' and Wyatt-Carew conspiracies of 1538 and 1553-4 is impressive.

Having dealt thus with the evidence for a rebellious and lawless regional society and politics, the final two chapters build up a picture of obedience. Chapter 7's treatment of the two institutions that have been taken to characterise Cornwall, the Duchy and the Stannaries, stresses how their close royal connections, and intimate involvement with the lives of a broad swathe of local society, helped forge a bond between people and crown that was rare in early modern England and Wales. Far from being unusually rebellious, we are told that Cornwall was in fact unusually loyal to the monarch, a loyalty that would be tested in blood during the Civil Wars. Finally, Chapter Eight expands the focus from regional to national in its discussion of the 'theology of obedience': that is, the use that the Tudor state made of the Church – as an institution and as a set of beliefs and practices – to deliver its propaganda messages. This chapter is by its nature more dependent on other secondary works than the rest of the book, but revisiting this material in the light of Cooper's regional case study is nonetheless illuminating.

So, the theme running through this work is that, contrary to common stereotype, this region was not predisposed to rebellion, particularly lawless, nor disinclined to accept reform. Given this stance, the book begins bravely, with the dyspeptic verdict of the evangelical Simon Heynes on his new posting as Dean of Exeter in 1537, which supports the very impression Cooper is seeking to dispel. (p. 1) By the end of the book, it is not entirely clear that Heynes was wrong, particularly when it comes to the religious 'backwardness' of the inhabitants; the very conservatism that discouraged widespread support for the Wyatt-Carew rebellion may also have encouraged resistance to the reformist policies of Henry, Edward and Elizabeth.

The author takes issue with what might be called (if not, perhaps, caricatured as) the 'Cornish nationalist' school of historiography, most notably represented by A. L. Rowse, and more recently – and in a considerably more sophisticated and nuanced fashion – by Mark Stoyle. For the author of a book of a Ph.D. thesis, Cooper's willingness to take on established opinion is commendable, and his case against seeing Cornwall as a homogeneously 'celtic' region, its resentful inhabitants steadfastly resisting engulfing Anglicisation, is generally convincing. Cooper returns to the question of Cornwall's celtic identity in a postscript, which is interesting in its own right, but which conclusions might have been more effectively presented as an integral part of his final discussion of political culture.

Rather less satisfying, however, is his conception and application of the term 'popular' in relation to culture and politics. In the Introduction and elsewhere Cooper claims to be shifting the focus away from the landed aristocracy towards those below gentry rank. At the beginning of Chapter 1 he points out that most students of Tudor royal propaganda have rarely looked beyond the court and its immediate milieu, and that as a result the deployment of propaganda in the provinces has been under-explored. There is some truth in this, and the book does a good job of surveying the means by which the political elite sought to influence opinion at local level; but there is less here than is claimed on the genuinely popular reception of these efforts.

The question here relates to control over the means of expression and representation at the local level. The

symbols of Tudor legitimacy carved into both the houses of gentlemen and merchants on the one hand and into parish churches on the other were surely like expressions of elite, rather than popular, sentiment: how probable is it that such manifestations in parish churches were the product of the widespread and spontaneous enthusiasm of parishioners? Likewise, the evidence adduced from churchwardens' accounts, showing conformity to the religious policy of the moment, could in many cases be proof of nothing more than pragmatic survival strategies. Again, the care taken by churchwardens in recording royal titles, which is presented as another aspect of local loyalism (pp. 47-8), may have been simply pragmatic, since these titles had to be used correctly in communications with the Crown. Cooper asserts unproblematically that 'the wardens were themselves local people, elected from among the poorer householders as well as the better heeled', citing the democratic election practices at Morebath (p. 51); but even assuming that Morebath was typical, it should not always be taken for granted that the churchwardens actually ran the parish. As the work of Clive Burgess on pre-Reformation parishes in London and Bristol is showing, behind the façade of the wardens' accounts, real power lay in the hands of a small number of 'masters', the heads of the wealthiest families, against whom it is difficult to imagine the poorer, on occasion female, churchwardens prevailing. Reading these accounts as more or less direct reflections of real mass opinion becomes even more difficult in mid-century, with the comings and goings of ecclesiastical equipment, furniture and decoration.

While none would doubt the genuine enthusiasm which attended, for example, Elizabeth's Accession Day celebrations, the degree to which these can be described as 'spontaneous' must be questioned, and so too must the assumption that they necessarily represent widespread devotion to the monarch, as opposed to welcome relief from the daily grind and an excuse for revelry. Cooper's description of the careful orchestration of celebrations, 'triumphes' and thanksgivings for victories and of events designed to soften up public opinion in the midst of controversial revenue-raising expedients actually makes this point.(pp. 31-3)

There is also, perhaps, a tendency to assume that phenomena apparent under the Tudors were of more recent origin than is actually the case. Thus, Henry VII, rather than Edward IV, is credited with injecting Burgundian styles into English court culture.(p. 12) The discussion of prayer provision for members of the royal family by parishioners and fraternity members (p. 17) rather underplays the degree to which this was not only normal practice in the later middle ages, but also probably an unstated yet necessary requirement for the granting of royal licences for chantry foundations, fraternities and the like. To suggest that the origins of a 'national patriotic culture' can be traced back no further than celebrations for the victories at Boulogne and Pinkie (p. 50) ignores similar expressions of national pride and thanksgiving after Agincourt and the relief of Calais in the fifteenth century.

Surveying the popular rebellions of 1497 and 1549, Cooper reiterates that most of the rebels stressed their loyalty to the king, saw themselves as petitioners rather than traitors, were essentially conservative and 'truly believed right to be on their side'.(p. 68) All of this is highly likely, but hardly exceptional, and so may not add much to the case for the essential loyalism of the Southwest. Such beliefs are surely of general application, and comparison with earlier revolts – that of Cade in 1450, or the great revolt of 1381 – would reveal similar notions. Indeed, in both of these earlier revolts, as in 1549, the traditional rebels' protestation that their quarrel was with evil ministers rather than the king was made considerably more credible by the fact that the king was either under age or incapable. When he comes to the treason laws of the 1530s, Cooper questions Elton's contention that treason by words was not a Tudor innovation, drawing heavily upon Christopher Duggan's work on Tudor King's Bench indictments to support his case, but once one goes beyond 1485 it becomes clear that satire at the king's expense could be fatal under Henry VI and Richard III.

In his fascinating and perceptive discussion of *Beunans Meriasek*, Cooper points out that the King Teudar character was but one of a type, the tyrannical pagan king, and cites churchwardens' accounts to suggest the frequency with which Herod, its greatest exemplar, appeared in English parish drama.(pp. 81-2) This point, and the contextualisation of Teudar within this genre, could be further developed with reference to the actual texts and their accompanying critical literature.(1) Similarly, the value of *Beunans Meriasek* as 'confirmation that miracle plays were still being composed during the half-century before the Reformation'(p. 83) might be somewhat qualified by reflecting on the late date of composition of most

extant English 'miracle' and 'mystery' plays.

Cooper's illuminating reading of the play text is often matched by his analysis of court records. A particularly good example is the case of a Star Chamber defendant, the radical Axminster shoemaker Philip Gammon, whose alleged heresy and treason are shown to have been the inventions of personal enemies out to ruin him.(pp. 99-103) However, Cooper's discussion of the frequency with which Devon and Cornwall cases appear before Star Chamber is not entirely convincing. Given that one of the aims of the book is to correct the region's reputation for lawlessness, the statistic that these two counties provided 'a higher proportion of cases brought before Star Chamber than any other part of the kingdom' is potentially embarrassing.(p. 135) Cooper's suggestion that this shows how the counties' special relationship with the Crown allowed their inhabitants privileged access to conciliar justice needs more support than he gives it, and his claim that the similarly far-flung North and the Welsh marches would have been more strongly represented had they not had their own councils and courts, while undoubtedly correct, does not explain why counties closer to Westminster failed to match the Southwest's impressive tally of Star Chamber cases. A comparison with King's Bench cases, initiated before local justices, might be enlightening here.

With more particular reference to Cornwall, Cooper identifies the Stannaries, the Duchy and the county's strategic importance for coastal defence as three factors which led to its people enjoying a closer than usual relationship with the Crown, and he produces some thought-provoking evidence in support of this idea. However, it is instructive to compare his conclusions with those of Hannes Kleineke in his study of lawlessness in fifteenth-century Cornwall.⁽²⁾ Cooper's three factors – two institutional and the other strategic – are seen in a rather different light by Kleineke.

The Stannaries of course regulated the tin industry, the potentially enormous rewards of which Kleineke sees as producing immense temptations to lawlessness, and the operation of which provided the burly miners who were one of the means by which spectacular acts of lawlessness could be perpetrated. Similarly, the region's proliferation of ports gave it a large population of equally volatile sailors, as well as chronic problems with piracy and, increasingly, smuggling. Within the Duchy – which, as Cooper is at pains to point out, covered only about 17 per cent of the county's territory – the fact that the paramount lord was, in the absence of adult male heirs to the sixteenth-century throne, effectively the king, usually present only in symbols and through less than incorruptible local officials, might have led to a local power vacuum. Despite the now rather dated image of 'bastard feudalism' with its overmighty lords and undermighty kings, it seems clear from both studies that in the absence of a dominant local magnate – as when the Courtenays were eclipsed through political miscalculation or simple bad luck – the royal administration was not up to the task of maintaining order on the ground. We would seem to be presented with the apparently paradoxical situation whereby more direct contact with the crown – which might be equated with greater loyalty – results in greater local disorder: the king's persona might be respected, but his peace seldom was.

In discussing the relationship between central and local political power Cooper makes a very useful distinction between 'centralisation', in the old Eltonian mould, and 'state intensification', whereby central control is enhanced by working through existing local institutions with due attention paid to local sensibilities. Propaganda was crucial to this effort, and Cooper demonstrates the importance of the Church in providing the medium through which royal messages could be transmitted to the populace. He is convincing when it comes to the effort that the various elites, from the court to the parishes, put into this propaganda effort, but less so in demonstrating if and how they succeeded. In other words, there is much here of great value about the mechanisms of transmission, but not enough about the popular reception of these ideas.

The author's desire to rescue his region from its reputation as a place disordered and rebellious might be criticised, in the manner of critics of revisionist approaches to the Civil Wars, as seeking to demonstrate why the Cornish rebellions never actually took place. That said, this is still an imaginative and original work, which argues convincingly for a new approach towards both propaganda and political theory in Tudor England.

Notes

1. For example, Herod's close analogue is explored in A. Williams, *The Characterization of Pilate in the Towneley Plays* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State College Press, 1950).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Hannes Kleineke, 'Why the West was wild: law and disorder in fifteenth-century Cornwall and Devon', in Linda Clark, ed., *The Fifteenth Century III: Authority and Subversion* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2003), pp. 75-93.[Back to \(2\)](#)

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