

Puritan Iconoclasm in the English Civil War

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Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, laments the excesses of Puritan iconoclasm in her poem 'An antient Cross', first published in 1656 in *Natures Pictures*:

An antient Cross liv'd in our Fathers time,
With as much Fame, as did the Worthy's nine;
No harm it did, nor injury to none,
But dwelt in peace, and quietly alone;
(. . .)
Yet peacefull Nature, nor yet humble Minde,
Shall not avoyd rude Ignorance that's blinde,
That superstitiously beats down all things
Which smell but of Antiquity, or springs
From Noble Deeds, nor love, nor take delight,
In Laws, or Justice, hating Truth and Right;
But Innovations love, for that seems fine,
And what is new, adore they as divine;
(. . .)
And so this Cross, poor Cross, all in a rage
They pull'd down quite, the fault was onely Age.⁽¹⁾

Cavendish's poem points us towards some of the issues raised by Julie Spraggon in her analysis of the nature and development of iconoclasm during the Civil War. The cross in question may be the famous Cheapside Cross, finally demolished on 2 May 1643 after becoming the focus of bitter controversy in press and pulpit. The Cheapside Cross had been attacked several times in 1642-3, causing a riot in February 1642, when a group of apprentices intent on bringing the cross down was met by another group who had come to its defence.

Erected to commemorate Queen Eleanor at the end of the thirteenth century, this 'poor Cross' and others like it had assumed a much greater symbolic significance than Cavendish is willing to admit in her poem. The Cheapside Cross had niches containing statues of saints, apostles, kings, bishops and a Virgin and child, and had become widely regarded by Puritans as an idolatrous relic of the old religion. In his *Articles of High Treason Exhibited against Cheap-Side Crosse* (1642) the future Leveller leader Richard Overton ascribed to the cross itself a demonic agency: it had 'occasioned tumultuous political and national disturbances' by seducing English Protestants to the Catholic faith. When the cross was finally brought down, according to the Presbyterian John Vicars, 'Bands of Souldiers' reacted by 'Sounding their Trumpets, and shooting off their peeces, as well as shouting-out with their voices, and ecchoing out their joyfull acclamations at the happie downfall of Antichrist in England'.(Spraggon, quoted on p. 159) The fall of Cheapside Cross was interpreted by these Puritans as a sign of the apocalyptic destruction of the false idols of popery, a category that in 1643 included the bishops and their Laudian 'innovations' and by 1649 had come to encompass, for some at least, the Stuart monarchy. Margaret Cavendish had also read the signs: she had fled for Paris as early as 1644 as maid of honour to Henrietta Maria, the real Catholic presence at the heart of the Caroline court.

Richard Overton liked a joke (he quickly became the enemy of the Presbyterians) and may have only been half-serious when he accused Cheapside Cross of having literally caused the Civil War; but the cross had indeed become the focus of a debate on religious images which rapidly widened in scope between 1641 and 1644 as the war itself developed. Parliament's order of 1641 for the removal and abolition of idolatrous images had been limited to the interior of places of public worship, and crosses had not been cited as offending objects. In August 1643 - three months after Cheapside Cross had been pulled down - the Commons ordered that plain crosses were to be demolished in 'any open place', whether religious or non-religious sites (see Spraggon, pp. 42-6).

That the ordinance followed, rather than authorized, the action taken against the most famous cross in England illustrates one of the central arguments of Spraggon's book: the iconoclastic activity of godly groups or individuals on the ground both enforced and drove forward the increasingly radical legislation of the early 1640s. The relationship between official Parliamentary and unofficial Puritan iconoclasm seems to have been reciprocal. Spraggon links the eventual demolition of Cheapside Cross to Parliament's creation in April 1643 of the Orwellian-sounding Committee for the Demolition of Monuments of Superstition and Idolatry. The Committee, under the chairmanship of the Presbyterian Sir Robert Harley, was charged with investigating and demolishing idolatrous monuments in London. Harley was apparently a man who took pride in his work. One story tells of how Harley threw down a piece of painted glass removed from the New Chapel at Westminster and jumped up and down on it, saying he was 'dancing a jig to Laud' (quoted on p. 85).

This story sounds, as Spraggon points out, 'like a classic piece of royalist propaganda'.(p. 85, n. 65) A good deal of what we know, or what we think we know, about Puritan iconoclasm derives from royalist and Anglican sources, whether contemporary or scholarly. The close association of Puritanism with a violent iconoclasm is at the heart of the partisan myth that the 1640-1660 period belongs to the history of politics and religion, not culture. 'And never was Rebel to Arts a friend': from Dryden's declaration in *Absalom and Achitophel* in 1679, through Matthew Arnold's opposition of 'Anglican Culture' to 'Puritan Anarchy', to T. S. Eliot's once-influential notion of the 'dissociation of sensibility' which afflicted English literature in the mid-seventeenth century and from which it has never fully recovered, influential literary and cultural commentators, often with explicitly royalist sympathies, have disseminated images of revolutionary England

as a grim cultural wasteland - a dark 'interregnum' in the history of the nation's cultural achievement which marks the end of the Renaissance golden age. After all, the prime sites of pre-war cultural activity were in a state of ruin: the court was abolished, the theatres were closed, and scholars were expelled from the universities on the grounds of their religion.

Yet Dryden, Arnold and Eliot were continuing a polemical strategy established by contemporary royalist writers in projecting an image of Stuart culture left in ruins by Puritan iconoclasm. Thanks to scholarship over the last decade we now know that the theatre did not vanish for eighteen years but assumed new forms in play pamphlets and closet drama; we know that an English republican culture developed in the seventeenth century shaped by classical education and scholarship; we know that the Cromwellian government continued to patronize literature, music and the visual arts, and we know that a range of architecturally significant buildings were erected under Commonwealth and Protectorate.⁽²⁾ So the time is ripe for Spraggon's new assessment of Puritan iconoclasm, which makes limited use of polemical printed accounts and provides instead a thorough analysis of the surviving records of iconoclastic activity in the localities, London parishes, cathedral churches and the universities - each given a chapter - and places them in the context of Parliamentary legislation and the progress of the Civil War.

Cavendish's 'An antient Cross' participates in the writing of the royalist / Anglican myth of revolutionary barbarism. Cavendish accuses the Puritan iconoclasts of 'beat[ing] down all things / Which smell but of Antiquity' out of a perverse desire for 'innovation' and 'what is new'. Her characterization invokes the perdurable stereotype of the 'Stage Puritan', portrayed most memorably by Ben Jonson in the form of Zeal-of-the-land Busy in *Bartholomew Fair* (1614). Busy is a former baker from Banbury - where local people famously pulled down a market cross in 1602 - who has given up his occupation because 'those cakes he made were served to bride-ales, maypoles, morrises, and such profane feasts and meetings'. Zeal, we are told,

is of a most lunatic conscience and spleen, and affects the violence of singularity in all that he does . he will ever be i' the state of innocence, though, and childhood; derides all antiquity; defies any other learning than inspiration; and what discretion soever years should afford him, it is all prevented in his original ignorance.⁽³⁾

The representation of Busy's iconoclastic zeal reaches its absurd climax in his dispute with a puppet in the fair, which he describes as a 'heathenish idol' and addresses as Dagon, the Philistine idol that fell in the presence of the Ark of the Covenant (1 Samuel 5). The satirical power of Jonson's representation lies in its employment of real Puritan arguments in a setting which itself is realistic but which nonetheless renders those arguments ridiculous through the incongruity of situating the apocalypse in a puppet show. In 1641 the Baptist Samuel Loveday compared Cheapside Cross to Dagon, but it is doubtful the contemporary listener or reader found anything comic in his words: 'now we have great cause to hope that our Arke is coming home . which the Philistins have so long kept from us, and therefor good reason dumb idols should fall before him'.(quoted on p. 44) As the melancholy tone of Cavendish's poem indicates, the apocalyptic language of Puritan iconoclasm was no longer so amusingly excessive in the context of the real-life performance of religious violence.

Cavendish, like Jonson, associates Puritan iconoclasm with ignorance of history and the desire to eradicate 'antiquity'. By accusing Puritan iconoclasts of adoring 'innovation' Cavendish in fact reverses the argument advanced by the iconoclasts of the early sixteen-forties for the need to reform English churches and English devotional practice. Loveday welcomed the fall of Cheapside Cross as a proper consequence of the Protestation Oath, which the Commons decreed in 1641 must be taken by all males over eighteen and which included an undertaking to defend the 'true reformed Protestant religion as expressed in the doctrine of the Church of England, against all Popery and Popish innovations'.(quoted on p. 44) Far from regarding themselves as in favour of 'innovation' in religious matters, Puritan iconoclasts believed that they were restoring the Church to its primitive purity by getting rid of the Laudian 'innovations' of the sixteen-thirties.

Spraggon's narrative of the development of Puritan iconoclasm broadly confirms the now conventional historiographical position that there was widespread consensus in the Stuart church until the Laudian emphasis on the 'beauty of holiness' and devotional ceremony rapidly alienated the godly. The first phase of iconoclasm in 1641-3 encompassed not only images but communion rails, painted glass and rich furnishings, which were 'lumped together . as "innovations" which threatened to bring the English church into line with Rome'. This iconoclasm was obviously distinct from that of the Reformation 'in that its targets were within the Protestant church, a church which was already supposed to have been reformed of such things.'(p. 30) The enemy, as Spraggon puts it, was now within. The reaction against Laudian innovation, officially sanctioned by Parliament in the Protestation Oath and the order of 1641 for the removal and abolition of idolatrous images from religious places, seems to have commanded broad popular support, although Spraggon emphasizes that the paucity of evidence for the enforcement of iconoclastic legislation in the localities forces her to speculate on this issue.(p. 130) However as Parliament passed more radical legislation against images, including an ordinance of 1644 against symbolic images such as lambs, lions and triangles, the task of enforcement was increasingly assumed by the 'enthusiastically godly' who 'pushed the reformation beyond the point at which it might have expected to command a certain broad support', extending their iconoclasm to include items which had previously been the concern of separatists and sectarians, such as vestments, organs and the Book of Common Prayer.(p. 131) To some extent, then, Spraggon's narrative is also compatible with John Morrill's insistence on the survival of popular attachment to Anglicanism: once the Laudian 'innovations' had been removed, it was only the zealous few who sought to go beyond the Elizabethan church settlement.(4)

The most enthusiastically godly individual in Spraggon's book, alongside Robert Harley, is William Dowsing, the Parliamentary commander who was given by the Earl of Manchester the brief of enforcing the August 1643 ordinance against images in the Eastern counties. Dowsing's journal, which has recently been expertly edited, records a campaign of iconoclastic reformation on a scale that does not appear to have been undertaken anywhere else in the country, including London.(5) Parliamentary troopers brought down the Cheapside Cross; the Dowsing campaign similarly illustrates the role of the military in the administration of iconoclasm. During Dowsing's activities in the chapels of Cambridge he was challenged by one of the Fellows of Pembroke about the legality of his commission from Manchester. Technically the Fellow was in the right but there was little time for legal technicalities in a time of war, and the academics were hardly in a position to prevent the army taking matters into their own hands. The notorious assaults on cathedrals during the sixteen-forties by Parliamentary soldiers can, Spraggon argues, be variously interpreted: 'as mindless vandalism and the inevitable plunder and pillage of war; as an almost ritualistic destruction of symbols representative of the enemy; or even as the Puritan theology-in-action of a godly and reforming army.'(p. 201)

The ritualistic aspect of more radical forms of iconoclasm is evident in the stipulation of the August 1643 ordinance that offending religious images were not only to be removed but defaced: as Spraggon points out, it was not enough 'merely to remove from sights the objects which defined [the traditional] ideology, but they must also be *seen to be destroyed*.' (p. 81) Spraggon makes some interesting comparisons with the official anti-Stuart iconoclasm that occurred after 1649. The new republican government could hardly pretend that it was not that dreaded thing, an 'innovation'; but it immediately sought to assert its power and permanence by ordering that Stuart symbols be treated in the same way as Laudian and popish idols: they were to be defaced. Thus a statue of Charles at the Royal Exchange was beheaded and the legend inscribed: 'Exit tyrannus Regum ultimus, anno primo restituae libertatis Angliae 1648'.

The extension of the Parliamentary order concerning the defacing of idols from religious to royal symbols continued the polemical strategy of identifying the Stuart monarchy with popery that had driven the latter years of the civil war. Just as the iconoclastic agenda had widened to include objects and images previously accepted as part of the Protestant church, so the conflict had widened to include the very existence of the monarchy. Yet Spraggon's book makes clear that Puritan iconoclasm was 'largely a phenomenon of the 1640s'.(p. 83) Indeed widespread iconoclasm seems to have characterized only the first Civil War. The Committee for the Demolition of Monuments of Superstition and Idolatry disappears from view at the

beginning of 1646. In reaction to the arguments of figures such as the Leveller Samuel Chidley and later sectarian groups such as the Quakers, Parliament made it clear that churches were not in themselves idolatrous and an ordinance was passed in 1648, which required church buildings to be kept in a state of good repair. Both the Commonwealth and Cromwellian governments seem to have taken a less zealous line on the issue of images. An interesting example cited by Spraggon is the treatment of the royal art collection. When the Duke of Buckingham's art had been sold off in 1645, those pictures that depicted the Trinity or the Virgin Mary were removed and destroyed. However the list of former royal paintings assigned to Cromwell at Whitehall and Hampton Court included depictions of religious subjects, while Colonel John Hutchinson purchased paintings that had belonged to the king which featured Mary, Christ and St. Mark.(p. 82)

Indeed much of the interest of Puritan Iconoclasm in the English Civil War lies in its unearthing of fascinating details and individuals, such as the glass painter Baptista Sutton, who worked on installing Laudian 'innovations' in the 1630s such as the east windows in Peterhouse chapel and the New Chapel at St Margaret's Westminster. Sutton reluctantly appeared as a witness at Laud's trial to give evidence concerning the restoration of 'idolatrous' windows on Laud's orders; he then went on to work for the London authorities in the early sixteen-forties removing and destroying stained glass, some of which was probably his own work. By the sixteen-fifties he was making windows containing Commonwealth arms(pp. 151-2). Spraggon also provides a real sense of the impact of historical process on the material fabric of English churches. In 1641 Sutton was paid to assess the work required to 'reform' the east window in St. Lawrence Jewry, London. In 1641-2 the most offensive aspects of the window were removed. However three weeks after the formation of Robert Harley's committee in 1643, it was decided at a vestry meeting to remove all the coloured glass and replace it with clear glass - 'Protestant glass', as it was described by the Parliamentary newsbook *Mercurius Britannicus*.(quoted on p. 98) The king's arms were, however, erected in the new plain window. It would not be long before this image was itself regarded as another false idol.

Notes

1. Peter Davidson, ed., *Poetry and Revolution: An Anthology of British and Irish Verse 1625-1660* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 450-1, lines 1-4, 9-16, 19-20.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. See, respectively, Nigel Smith, *Literature and Revolution in England, 1640-1660* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994); Susan Wiseman, *Drama and Politics in the English Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); David Norbrook, *Writing the English Republic: Poetry, Rhetoric and Politics, 1627-1660* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Laura Lunger Knoppers, *Constructing Cromwell: Ceremony, Portrait and Print, 1645-1661* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Timothy Mowl and Brian Earnshaw, *Architecture Without Kings: the Rise of Puritan Classicism under Cromwell* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995). I explore the nature of literary patronage in the 1650s in *Cavalier Afterlives: Patronage, Politics and the Literary Culture of the British Republic, 1646-1660* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. On the Stage Puritan, see Patrick Collinson, 'Bartholomew Fair: The Theatre Constructs Puritanism', in David L. Smith, Richard Strier and David Bevington, eds, *The Theatrical City: Culture, Theatre and Politics in London, 1576-1649* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 157-69; Ben Jonson, *Bartholomew Fair*, ed. Suzanne Gossett (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), I. 4. 121-2, 136-45.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. John Morrill, 'The Church in England, 1642-49', in idem, *The Nature of the English Revolution* (Harlow: Longman, 1993), pp. 148-75.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Trevor Cooper, ed., *The Journal of William Dowsing* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2001).[Back to \(5\)](#)

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