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War, State and Society in England and the Netherlands, 1477-1559

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This book is the result of a bold and innovative research project funded between 1999 and 2002 by the then Arts and Humanities Research Board, with further funds provided subsequently by a number of scholarly institutions. The preface further acknowledges the support of a glittering array of scholars, not least Geoffrey Parker who read through the entire draft. It is not hard to imagine the attraction of this project for scholars and funding bodies. The authors set out to do a comparative study of war and society in two different, but comparable polities, England and the Netherlands, helping to undermine the unnatural, if traditional, division between early modern English and 'European' historians. Some of the difficulties inherent in all comparative work were eased by the choice of active co-operation between three experts. It is a tribute to the authors that the end result is a clearly-structured, clearly-written and coherent book.

The study covers the period from the late 15th century, when both England and the Netherlands experienced civil and foreign wars and major dynastic change, to 1559, when a major European war in which they were active players ended. By then both were in the early stages of new regimes. It begins with an introductory chapter in which the authors explain that they intend to address the question: did war make the state? They express dissatisfaction with most studies of war because of their limited perspective, and express their

intention to integrate military institutions to the rest of society, and to examine how relationships of power throughout society were shaped by war. In so far as they had a model in mind it was David Potter's study on Picardy (pp. 3-4). (1) The lesson they took particularly to heart from this was that war was a two-way process, both helping to integrate the province to the French state and causing tensions that nurtured civil war. Gunn, Grummitt and Cools set out to produce a work which explored 'as subtly as possible' how England and the Netherlands 'were mobilised for war and how that process affected them', weighing the relative importance of war and of other factors in the development of each state (p. 4). It is evident from the start that their conclusion will be that its impact was both positive and negative in terms of 'the state'.

While declaring themselves contrary to adopting a 'sweeping overview' approach - as well as a limited one - they do not inform the reader at the outset what their approach is or why it is superior. It is not until pp. 47-8 that we learn that the authors have undertaken substantive primary research on five towns in England and eight in the Netherlands. The reader is left to work out from the details offered on each of them why these rather than others were chosen. On p. 132 we are informed that they selected two noble houses in England and two in the Netherlands on the same basis as the towns, that is, 'to represent a range of geographical and political experience'. In this they succeed. The book is rich in variety, demonstrating the wisdom of their choices. The inclusion of an explanation-cum-justification at the start of the book explaining all this and how they selected the mix of primary and secondary materials, indeed of their methodology, would have been both informative and useful. Details of the problems relating to the data handled might account for the unevenness of certain sections. Although it might be thought that with two authors working on England and one on the Netherlands there would be a general imbalance, this is not the case. For whatever reason, in many sections the wealth of detail is more marked on the Netherlands side.

The introductory chapter includes a highly condensed description of the two polities, ranging from population to political structures, and a terse, factual narrative of the multiple wars that they engaged in, without much detail on motivation. Inevitably, perhaps, their conclusions here are broad - 'Wars came in many shapes and sizes' (p. 11) - and one wonders if this was entirely necessary. They do include some sensible caveats, however, warning us that 'to equate successful war with successful government is ... to over-simplify' (p. 6) and that successful rulers were often good on all aspects of government, but then state that unsuccessful ones found that 'failure abroad brought breakdown at home' (p. 7). The introductory section ends with a description of the military institutions and fiscal developments in both polities, concluding that while war forged stronger military and fiscal systems in both, these changes did not lead to a permanent increase in the power of the state. There is no simple correlation between the two.

The heart of the book lies in three parts which draw on their primary research: the first is devoted to the topic of towns at war; the second to the nobles at war; and the third to subjects at war. All have the same, clear structure: an introduction, several chapters, each divided into labelled sub-sections, which explore different topics, and a conclusion. Each, invariably brief section, has two parts: one dealing with the English state, the other with the Netherlands. This makes the book relatively easy to consult when searching for specific topics, but makes it somewhat disparate and data-driven. It recalls the warning of J. H. Elliott that comparative works can resemble a historical Wimbledon and leave the reader with a crick in the neck. (2) Gunn, Grummitt and Cools ensure that the reader is not overwhelmed by the data or lost in the detail by constant recourse to conclusions at the end of sections and a final conclusion at the end of each part which summarises the main points thus far. Nevertheless, the book remains more for consultation than sustained reading. Inevitably, there are sections that yield greater findings than others and the questions they ask are diverse and interesting enough to provide something of value for a wide public. There are myriad details for anyone interested in early modern society and not just in war.

In the section on towns at war they review urban military resources, life during wartime, war and urban governments, and towns in the polity. They illustrate how the towns they studied were variously affected by preparations and participation in war, and in particular how different its impact was, depending on the location and duration of the conflict as well as the economy of the town. In some instances war led to greater state interference, whether to fund or organise fortifications, provide artillery or commandeer financial and other resources, but frequently it also reinforced the authority of urban elites as the crown was forced to

devolve powers over tax or for gathering resources to the urban authorities. It is evident from these data that war frequently divided urban areas, as different sectors were diversely affected by tax and other demands. But it also often nurtured urban solidarity, which could turn against the crown and lead to rebellion or civil war. The picture that emerges in many instances is of the monarch attempting to secure the necessary resources without having to relinquish too much power, particularly in the Netherlands. In both states the approach was consensual rather than conflictive. The authors are to be praised for not shying away from an honest reporting of their findings. They assert that war might benefit but might also undermine the power of both monarchs and the local elites. A host of factors affected the outcome. Moreover, they admit (p. 87) that it is 'hard to say' how seriously war affected urban economies, but propose that it did not have as great an impact on the development of urban areas as other, economic factors. This is as true of Netherlands towns, where war played a much greater role, being more frequent and immediate than in England. One major difference they detect is that whereas in the former urban elites were able to divert the burden of taxation to others, in England they suffered most from higher taxes prompted by war.

In their third section, which is devoted to the nobles, they explore the military resources of the nobility, their role as commanders, the costs and reward it brought them both in financial terms and by way of power and authority. There are chapters on the way it affected their identity and their relations with the state. Again, the picture they paint is very complex and varied, but overall their conclusions confirm the received view of the interdependence of sovereign and noble (e.g. pp. 128, 132 and 234). They argue that war played 'a part in defining the social and political position of many leading noblemen'(p. 233). In fact, it retained its 'central importance in noble identity' (p. 234) as can be seen in all aspects of noble culture and their willingness to adapt to the growing technological challenges of war in order to maintain their central role. The authors note the decline of the 'quasi-feudal' system and trace the greater reliance on 'national' recruitment, especially in England, which was often mediated through urban authorities but sometimes also through nobles. Although there was extensive use of foreign mercenaries in the Netherlands, the role of local nobles in all aspects of war remained crucial because much of the war was taking place on their own soil. From organising provisions to the command of provinces, fortifications and armies, the crown relied on them and this in turn helped 'to preserve and develop noble power' (p. 234). The Percies offer a perfect and fascinating case study of the dangers - for nobles and crown - of individuals who failed to fulfil their traditional role as military leaders.

As in the case of towns, the authors accept that it is not possible to distinguish in most cases the precise impact of war on nobles, since, 'at every turn war service blended into other aspects of service to the prince' (p. 188). They admit that most grants of offices and lands as well as gifts were prompted by many factors other than, or in conjunction with, military service. Their conclusion that military success was more likely to result in political favour in England (under Henry VIII at least) rather misses the point that it had a similar impact on Charles V, but he drew on areas outside the Netherlands for his commanders.

The introduction to the fourth and final section on subjects, specifically invokes its determination to shed light on 'state formation' (p. 239). It has interesting material on the representation and justification of war. Although they do not often account for who was responsible for this production, they make a brave attempt to gauge its reception. Some of their findings may surprise us: the English apparently celebrated war more than peace but royal births most of all, while the Netherlands privileged peace in their celebrations (pp. 269-70) which is ascribed to the dependence of the Netherlands on long-distance trade (p. 332). They argue that while England was more interested in debating taxation than war, the contrary was true of the Netherlands (p. 282). This section shows more clearly than most the comparative perspective yielding striking results. In neither state was it found that commercial interest groups formed to promote war, nor did they have a singular attitude towards soldiers, now seeing them as defenders, now as mortal enemies. English attitudes became more negative in the 1540s as the numbers of soldiers on their soil increased. The received wisdom that military traditions in the Netherlands withered under the Habsburgs is challenged (p. 295).

It is argued here that the impact of war on religion and vice versa was 'very different' in both states. Peace, not war, brought religious crisis in the Netherlands, while in England religious change was used to justify war (p. 307). These arguments needed deeper and more detailed development to be convincing. To make just

one point, Charles V was as affected by religious change and used religious validation every bit as much as Henry VIII. What chiefly differed was the faith they chose to promote, not the use they made of religion. Research on both polities (312ff) confirms that war strengthened both local and regional identities, as well as 'national' identity, yet in the Netherlands the former predominated (p. 314) while in England it was the latter, as longstanding traditions of nationhood were strengthened (pp. 317-9). They link this to the continuing reliance of the English crown on 'national' recruitment as opposed to foreign and non-subject troops. Less affected by war, the English ostensibly 'needed less persuading of the benefits of having a warrior prince' (p. 323). But on both sides of the Channel, unsuccessful war could lead to a diminution of the sovereign's power.

The final chapter offers a general conclusion in a very few pages of admirable clarity and concision, if no greater depth (pp. 329-34). It reiterates the main findings of the book and reasserts that 'the ways in which war shaped the state were complicated and often contradictory.' Nonetheless they insist that 'war did shape the state and did so to considerable effect' (p. 329). Overall, they conclude that war played a larger part in the Netherlands as a result of geopolitics and tradition and come to the conclusion that the 'model of state formation' they have provided resembles most closely what M. J. Braddick described for England in the second half of the 16th and in the 17th centuries. (3) They endorse his identification of four primary elements making up the state: fiscal-military, patriarchal, confessional and dynastic, and restate his belief that state power develops in each area at different speeds and for different reasons (p. 333).

Curiously, although the project was looking at war and the state, that most vital of all elements linking them is missing: the sovereign. Once past the narrative of the wars at the outset, monarchs and the court appear, often in passing, in connexion to the urban areas and nobles rather than as the central figures they were in all wars. Much the same can be said of the church. Ironically, there is more on both of these under the section on 'subjects' than in others. There is no adequate discussion of the impact of female rulers and regents even although this certainly affected relations, particularly with the nobility. There are brief comments (p. 245, 252) on the coming to power of Mary and Elizabeth, mostly on how it affected the image of the English monarch. In the Netherlands, two female regents held power for most of the emperor's reign, but there are only brief, passing references (as at p. 190) of the tensions this caused, although Margaret and Mary were involved in all aspects of war and wrote at length of the problems they faced. Perhaps it was the need to concentrate on a limited range of more easily comparable elements that led the authors to underplay (although they are not altogether ignored) some of the differences between the two states, including the reliance of Netherlands rulers on foreign loans often repaid in other states, and the impact of the seizure of church property in England.

Granted that the primary material gathered here has made a valuable contribution to the field, it is still pertinent to consider whether the comparative approach yielded better results than two separate monographs. Elliott is surely right that 'even imperfect comparisons can help to shake historians out of their provincialism', and that this approach can result in provoking new questions and perspectives. (4) The questions here are frequently very good, but the responses usually consist of extremely varied examples from the two polities, some more, some less relevant or interesting, often unevenly distributed. There was such extraordinary variety produced by the primary material in each, that to compare it to the equally varied set of examples of the other polity added to the complexity but did little to deepen our understanding. At the same time, it was impossible to determine from the limited range of examples how far they constituted the exception or the norm. Much of the book is dedicated to the transmission of data, with examples aligned around a given topic, and in-depth analysis is a casualty which no amount of clear, concluding commentary can entirely rescue. All the states of early modern Europe - and this includes England - were extraordinarily diverse, and given the level of knowledge we have, further monographs, be they regional or state-wide, are necessary before comparative works can be effective. In any case, it could be argued that the 'overview' approach discarded here is more suited to comparative works than the partially monographic approach adopted, since a higher level of abstraction suits the methodology better. Ultimately, while this study provides us with a lot of useful data, it lacks both the depth of the monograph and the breadth of the synthesis

The book highlights the shortcomings of the current obsession with studying war in the context of 'state

building' or 'state formation'. Exposing an underlying and perhaps unresolved tension within this work, the authors assert that they have provided us with a 'model' of state formation (p. 333), but conclude the book with a plea for a study of war 'as a process with deep social and political ramifications', that discards 'the teleology of national state formation' (p. 334). What emerges here is not a model but an abundance of often contradictory data. That is one of the book's strengths. Their findings challenge the current tendency to limit - and justify - the study of war in terms of 'state formation' by clearly demonstrating the complex and multi-faceted impact of war on all areas of the early modern state.

Notes

1. D. L. Potter, *War and Government in the French Provinces: Picardy 1470-1560* (Cambridge, 1993). Back to (1)
2. J. H. Elliott, *Richelieu and Olivares* (Cambridge, 1984) p.6. Back to (2)
3. M. J. Braddick, *State Formation in Early Modern England c.1550-1700* (Cambridge, 2000). Back to (3)
4. J. H. Elliott, *Empires of the Atlantic World: Britain and Spain in America 1492-1830* (Newhaven and London, 2006), p.xvii. Back to (4)

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