

Review Article

Writing and Re-writing the English Civil Wars

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Brian Manning (ed.), *Contemporary Histories of the English Civil War*, Caliban Books, 2000, pp. 218, £35; **N. H. Keeble** (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Writing of the English Revolution*, Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp. xxii + 296, £40, £14.95 pb; **M. Mendle** (ed.), *The Putney Debates of 1647: The Army, the Levellers and the English State*, Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp. xii + 297, £45; **R. Wilcher**, *The Writing of Royalism, 1628–1660*, Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp. xii + 403, £40.

Although not 'total war' in the modern sense in which that term has come to be understood – Royalists and Parliamentarians were militant minorities, fighting was seasonal, and some parts of the land were relatively unaffected – the English Civil Wars hit this country with devastating impact. The total death rate for England in this period, it has been estimated, exceeded that experienced in the First World War. For Scotland it was higher still, while Ireland's death rate may well have been in the order of a staggering 40 per cent of the pre-war population. Economic life was severely disrupted, political and religious hierarchies were dismantled, family fortunes were wrecked and families were divided in their allegiances. The number of new publications, documenting and reflecting on the troubled times, shot up; new genres of writing, new kinds of author emerged. That the English language had to be expanded to include new words and terms like 'plunder', 'prisoner of war' and 'sending to Coventry' is a further demonstration of the ways in which the old order was being challenged or changed. Radicalism of all kinds expressed itself unchecked in the freer climate produced by a collapse of

old-style censorship. A plethora of religious sects flourished until a Blasphemy ordinance was hastily enacted in 1650 to check their worst excesses. Levellers and Diggers had their day. The Quakers began their meteoric rise. Women seized, or were forced to exercise, new roles, new responsibilities, and made their voices heard in these rough, masculine times. Monarchy was dispensed with after the trial and public execution of the defeated King Charles I. Britain's one and only republic was ushered in with Cromwell becoming in due course a president in all but name. Scotland and Ireland were conquered and made to toe the line in a way that Tudor and early Stuart monarchs had dreamed of but conspicuously failed to bring about. 'Restoration' might come in 1660 through default and expediency rather than Royalist victory but the Civil War legacy was indelibly etched in the life and memory of this country. As such it has continued to be rehearsed and reinvestigated ever since. These four books tune in to different aspects of the cultural historiography.

Brian Manning's is a valuable sourcebook of extracts from contemporary writings. It has a general preface by the editor providing biographical material on the different historians whose work is featured together with thoughtful introductions to the different sections which are devoted to the coming of war and its impact and to different theoretical frameworks of history in this period such as the concept of the ancient constitution, the Norman Yoke, and millenarianism. The main historians featured provide a considerable range of social as well as political perspectives on the unfolding events. The Royalist Earl of Clarendon with his majestic, resounding prose offers the view from the top. The gentry are well represented by Sir Philip Warwick and Sir William Dugdale. Thomas May and Thomas Hobbes convey very different interpretations from the middle ranks. (High claims are made here for the degree of objectivity which May, secretary to the Long Parliament, was able to achieve, his office and paymasters notwithstanding). Captain John Hodgson of the New Model Army gives a different perspective again, as do the two clergymen, Richard Baxter and John Corbet, whose pioneering local history of events comes closest to seeing the Civil War in class terms. All these can comfortably be regarded as 'historians' – though Dugdale, like all others in this period who wrote about the past, was hardly a 'professional' (p. 6) – since they provided sustained commentary on, and analysis of, the mid-seventeenth-century crisis. So can Edmund Ludlow, Bulstrode Whitelocke, John Rushworth, Edmund Ludlow, Lucy Hutchinson and Margaret Cavendish who are not represented here. The section on 'Radical history', however, is set apart in all kinds of ways, not least on account of the fact that the overwhelming majority of 'contemporary histories' included in it are arguably not 'histories' at all in the strict sense of the term. What Manning offers here is an assortment of different kinds of testimony, informed by historical awareness it is true, drawn from remonstrances, petitions, speeches, declarations and letters of the period. They have a striking immediacy and help underline Manning's reminders

about the active role of the 'people' in the descent into Civil War but these extracts could all find a secure home in a sourcebook about the 'history' of this period not its historiography.

History and historiography both find a place in N. H. Keeble's edited *Companion to the Writing of the English Revolution*, an introductory volume, complete with helpful chronologies of events and a glossary, aimed squarely at the undergraduate market. Historical contexts are provided in Part One with chapters on the causes and course of the British Civil Wars, on the political and religious thought of the period and on the place of the press in the Civil War. In Part Five David Norbrook provides a succinct discussion of the contemporary historiography bringing in writers such as Whitelocke, Milton, Ludlow, and Hutchinson, omitted from Manning's selection. There are top rank contributors here – Thomas Corns, John Morrill, Annabel Patterson, Isabel Rivers, and Nigel Smith, to name but some of them – in a book which gives more prominence to different genres of writing than to individual writers like Bunyan, Marvell and Milton. (Indeed it is salutary to be reminded how relatively little Marvell actually wrote about the English Civil Wars and their aftermath.) This is a book which takes as its starting point the conviction that this was an ideological war, fought in the press as well as in sieges and battles, with literature itself an active part of the struggle and with both sides trying to justify their actions to the greatest number of readers and enlist support in the country at large. The explosion of print, as is well known, was breathtakingly dramatic. Almost a hundred times more titles appeared in 1642 than in 1640 and new genres such as newsbooks, printed petitions and speeches and pamphlets took their place alongside older forms of poetry and prose. Fifteen chapters in Keeble's book enable a broad coverage to be achieved and helpful bibliographies guide student readers to where they can find out more. Women's voices are well represented in this collection. Susan Wiseman looks at women poets and women's poetry during the English Civil Wars, focussing on the obvious contrasts evident in the writings of Katherine Philips, Margaret Cavendish, Anne Bradstreet and Lucy Hutchinson (often overlooked as a writer of anything other than the famous biography of her Parliamentary Colonel husband). Helen Wilcox and Sheila Ottway explore women's histories, both in biographies and memoirs (such as those by Margaret Cavendish and Anne, Lady Halkett) and in letters and diaries; Lady Brilliana Harley and Dorothy Osborne provide two of her examples of this kind of 'history in process' writing. (Strangely, Lady Harley gets located here in the wrong part of the country – Warwickshire rather than Herefordshire). Elaine Hobby examines prophecy and pamphleteering from the women's perspective, not only dwelling on blazing figures like Lady Eleanor Douglas and Anna Trapnel but on obscure writers such as Sarah Blackborow, Dorothy White and Hester Biddle. Royalist writing receives an allocation of three chapters in this volume. Isabel Rivers places the runaway propaganda success of *Eikon Basilike* within the broader context of the

prayer book devotional writing of the period. Using Cowley and Davenant as his examples Paul Salzman considers the Royalist genres of epic and romance. Alan Rudrum's chapter brings the neglected Henry Vaughan into sharper focus and tries desperately hard – obviously with painful university classroom experience behind him – to make the alien conventions of Royalist lyric palatable to today's students. The same students, of course, often struggle to engage with Milton, who gets more space in this volume than any other single writer and whose *Paradise Lost* is hailed here as 'unquestionably the greatest work of literature in the entire century'.

Writing of a very different kind is the focal point of Mendle's edited volume, this being the original shorthand notes taken at the army debates in Putney church in 1647 (in the interval between the First and Second Civil Wars) and their later (post-1660) transcript. The book, with fourteen chapters from contributors drawn from the USA, Britain, Australia, and Canada and from three generations of the historical profession, is the offshoot of a conference held in 1997 at the Folger Library in Washington to commemorate the 350th anniversary of the original occasion. Mendle provides a compact and very serviceable introduction and also contributes an interesting chapter on conflicting notions of identity encapsulated in the pronoun usage of the 1647 debates, the 'we' and 'them' of Putney. It is a fascinating volume which succeeds admirably in taking us into the original record and the man (William Clarke) chiefly responsible for it, the different contexts and ramifications surrounding it, as well as its transmission over time and the various claims made for its significance. This book, indeed, reverberates with historiography; the names of historians provide one of the staple ingredients of the index.

It is not a long historiography, however, as this book makes very clear. At the time the debates seem very largely to have been subject to a 'news black-out' and led to nothing. They were quickly overtaken by other events – the suppression of army mutinies and the Levellers, the outbreak of the Second Civil War, the trial and execution of the King, and the creation of a republic. The original record and later transcript were by William Clarke (1623–66), a member of the New Model Army's secretariat, whose work is painstakingly explored here in an essay by Frances Henderson. Henderson makes a good case for seeing the original record as a collaborative undertaking; there are internal inconsistencies and stylistic variations in the text which in any case would have been too great a task for any one individual to compile singlehandedly. She also makes the telling point that no example of seventeenth-century shorthand, however full, can be treated as the equivalent of a modern tape-recording. The notes and post-1660 transcript gathered dust in the library of Worcester College, Oxford, until unearthed, investigated and published by C.H.Firth in 1891. Even then, Firth did not crack the shorthand code – which utilised Shelton's *Tachygraphy* – nor did he press his researches further to canonise the record as 'the Putney Debates' and to bring the Levellers into greater prominence. That task was left to

A. S. P. Woodhouse whose *Puritanism and Liberty* in 1938, replete with editorial interventions, carefully re-packaged and stage-managed the 1647 record and its democratic message as an urgent tract (or rather three-day, three-act drama) for his own, anxiety-ridden, times. Willie Lamont in a characteristically jaunty essay explores all this and compares the process with a similar one involved in the creation of the sanitised and enduring version of Richard Baxter's *Autobiography* which J. M. Lloyd-Thomas launched in 1931. With new introductions and bibliographies grafted on, decades later, these editions – quintessential products of their own times – still live on at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

The publication of Clarke's record of the 1647 debates did much to bring the Levellers – a derogatory label first coined by Charles I – into the limelight, with Rainborow's resounding rhetoric about 'the poorest hee that is in England hath a life to live as the greatest hee' occupying pride of place. Rainborow's own right to be present at the debates (as a newly appointed vice-admiral), as this volume makes clear, was doubtful and, as John Pocock suggests in a thoughtful afterword, he was an irrepressible maverick whose provocative speeches may well have been as embarrassing to Levellers as they undoubtedly were to Cromwell and Ireton. Patricia Crawford confronts the total silence about women in the record of the 1647 debates but makes clear what political and religious opportunities were in fact seized by women acting not as proto-feminists but as good christian widows, spinsters, wives and, indeed, sometimes as citizens in their own right. Tim Harris looks at the Leveller legacy in the period from the Restoration to the Exclusion crisis and finds that, to understand it, it must be examined in the broadest of ways; 'Lilburneisme' survived chiefly in terms of models for the deployment of mass propaganda and mass movements. In the full sense, as Blair Worden's important essay makes clear, the Levellers need to be seen chiefly as a twentieth-century re-discovery, bound up partly with Firth's publication of the Clarke Papers and fuelled, for different reasons, by both the Liberalism and Marxism of modern historians. The nineteenth-century Chartists had shown surprisingly little interest in the radicals of the English Civil War period and Carlyle's massively influential hero-worship of Cromwell, understandably, had deflected attention away from the Levellers and other tribunes of the people.

The recent Leveller industry notwithstanding, this volume repeatedly underlines the point that the Putney debates took place within the context of the army and that it is from this perspective that they must chiefly be viewed. Levellers get trimmed down to size. Austin Woolrych sets the pace on both counts, emphasising that the grievances which loom largest in 1647 – irregular pay, lack of provision for the wounded and for war widows, and (above all) indemnity – were specifically those of poor soldiers rather than poor men in general. Leveller rhetoric, he goes on to say, produced its own powerful backlash. Barbara Donagan, in a pathfinding essay, examines the issues raised at Putney about the 'proper sphere' of the army in the state and the

tensions in the law relating to the rights of Englishmen and soldiers. John Morrill and Philip Baker carefully scrutinise the text of the *Case of the armie truly stated* and make a convincing case for seeing it principally as an army document (produced by the army's printers) with Edward Sexby as its chief author rather than a Leveller document. Ian Gentles in another essay compares the three versions of the *Leveller Agreement of the People* and relates them to the shifting ground of the years 1647–49. Barbara Taft provides a much needed re-evaluation of Henry Ireton, 'the Socrates of the debates', who at Putney led a minority but who thereafter moved more to the left in the attempt to unify junior officers and men and abandoned his defence of the King.

Mendle's book subjects a particular kind of text to unprecedented scrutiny, familiarising us initially with the procedures of seventeenth-century shorthand and with the transmission, rediscovery and exploitation of a text over a three and a half century period. It shows historians practising many of the same skills and engaging with many of the same issues normally taken as the province of the literary critic; even typography is drawn into the field here to help settle questions about whether particular publications emanated from army or Leveller presses. In one sense the original 'Putney Debates' obviously happened in 1647 in what proved to be a temporary lull in the Civil War fighting. In another sense they were 'constructed' in the twentieth century to serve modern needs by A. S. P. Woodhouse and A. D. Lindsay, Master of Balliol College and late 1930s opponent of the appeasing Chamberlain, who provided the welcoming preface to *Puritanism and Liberty*. Caryl Churchill's pointedly political utilisation of the Putney Debates in the play *The Light Shining in Buckinghamshire* (1978) is a more recent example of the same kind of trend. That the 350th anniversary of what has come to be seen as a key moment in the English Civil Wars and in the debate on liberty should have been celebrated in the United States itself bears comment.

The subject matter of Robert Wilcher's book, *The Writing of Royalism 1628–1660*, cannot claim to have the same resonance as Mendle's and his scholarly investigation proceeds at a suitably stately pace. Others, of course, have been there before him; Richard Anselment's *Loyalist Resolve* (1988), James Loxley's *Royalism and Poetry in the English Civil Wars* (1997), and Lois Potter's *Secret Rites and Secret Writing: Royalist Literature, 1641–1660* (1989) are recent examples which spring to mind. Wilcher is fully aware of these studies and makes frequent reference to them but one feature absent from this book is a systematic engagement with others in the field in a way which goes beyond points of detail. This is a chronological survey, taking the outline of its narrative from the historians, Gardiner, Russell, Ashton, and Fletcher in particular, and incorporating its review of Royalist writing as it proceeds. By so doing Wilcher is able to trace the journeys of individual writers and chart their responses to the developing situation in which they found themselves. He is less successful in achieving his related aim of demonstrating

how Royalist literature in its various forms might have influenced events – *Eikon Basilike* excepted – or controlled the ways in which events were interpreted. Wilcher makes clear from the outset that though much of the literature under discussion in his book was published and so directly entered ‘the public sphere’ most Royalist verse circulated in manuscript and by definition, therefore, had a different rationale. Wilcher sometimes sidesteps the issues here as indeed, in the most general sense, he does by using the term ‘Royalist’ – not actually coined until the politics of the situation demanded it in the early 1640s – to cover ‘the halcyon years’ of 1628–37 as well as the period of turmoil and open fighting which followed.

The work of well known royalist writers such as Berkenhead, Carew, Cleveland, Cowley, Davenant, Denham, Lovelace and Quarles receives extensive treatment here and lesser-known figures such as Henry Vaughan – campaigned for by Alan Rudrum in Keeble’s volume – and the Yorkshireman George Daniel are properly considered. Wilcher has much to say about the different genres of Royalist writing – the transformation of the court masque, the development of lyric and satire, addresses, histories, the outburst of pamphleteering and the emergence of newspapers, and (as the need increased) the swelling tide of elegies and laments. Genuinely popular writing from the royalist camp, especially the steady output from the pen of John Taylor, also comes under review and demonstrates that what we understand as ‘Royalist’ writing was altogether plural in form and style. Wilcher is also helpful in his discussion of the shifting centres of Royalist publication. Oxford receives the attention due to it but we get some sense of what happened to the Royalist publishing industry after the fall of the midland capital to the Parliamentarians. *Eikon Basilike*, naturally, gets the full treatment but chiefly to demonstrate its evolving nature and function. Izaak Walton finds a place in the discussion of the more tranquil and nostalgic note struck by Royalist writers in the changed circumstances of the 1650s. And Wilcher does well to end his book by noting that Royalists who had fought with their pens in the 1640s found that the social, political and mental worlds of the Restoration, where traditional ways and old-fashioned piety struggled for their place alongside looser morals and sceptical rationalism, often turned out to be uncomfortably different from those they had earlier defended. The experience of defeat took many forms and had different chronologies for different groups. But for both Royalists and Parliamentarians – William Clarke of the Putney Debates was one of them – the 1660s can be seen pre-eminently as the decade of the trimmers.

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