REVEL, RIOT, AND REBELLION

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REVEL, RIOT, AND REBELLION

Popular Politics and Culture in England 1603–1660

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For
SUSAN
Preface

This book addresses two simple and straightforward questions: first, how did the English common people (that is to say, people below the gentry rank) behave during the civil wars and revolutions of 1640–60; and second, how can we explain that behaviour? The questions emerge naturally out of the whole working life of an historian trying in vain to grasp the complex realities of the English Revolution. I can recall two particularly decisive moments in my formulation of them. The first occurred when I was working out the civil war history of my native county of Somerset and grasped the full implications of the simple, obvious fact that the gentry and commons of that county had followed different paths in the conflict. The other occurred in the tea-room at the Institute of Historical Research when I rashly assured John Morrill that regional variations of allegiance could best be understood as a product of cultural differences between the regions in question. Dr Morrill sensibly asked for some evidence of those cultural differences and for their alleged impact on the civil war. At that time, I confess, I was unable to answer so challenging a question; this book is an attempt to do so.

We shall return to the matter of regional cultural contrasts in due time, but let us for the present confine ourselves to the two original questions about popular allegiance. They seem straightforward enough, yet they immediately raise a whole series of related questions. Did the people in fact take sides in the civil war, or did they try to stay out of it? Did those who took sides do so of their own free will, or were they coerced by their landlords or employers, or by irresistible military pressures? To the extent that an element or free choice was involved, what variables—ideological, social, geographical— influenced their alignment with King or Parliament? Since 'the people' cannot be treated as a single, monolithic mass, were there differences of outlook and behaviour between people of different status, wealth, and occupation, between those in different regions or different types of community? What were the aspirations and expectations of these various subsets of 'the people', and how far did the revolution implement or disappoint them? Finally, was the revolution, as far as the common people were concerned, an isolated episode, or had it some relation to their history before and afterwards?

These and many other questions will be repeatedly raised in the course of this study. Before the tentative answers that will be proposed in this book can be achieved, some daunting problems of evidence have to be overcome. Even if we restrict ourselves to the original questions about
civil war allegiance (which we shall find it impossible to do) we immedi­ately encounter formidable difficulties. Surviving seventeenth-century sources make it relatively easy to study the lives of the élite, the literate minority who left estate papers, correspondence, and in a few cases diaries or memoirs; who read and occasionally wrote books, sermons, and pamphlets; whose careers can be traced in the records of kingdom and shire, diocese, university, and Inn of Court. But the further down the social scale we penetrate the more often our subjects appear only as a faceless, depersonalized mass, as mere names in a parish register, in lists of communicants or of subscribers to an oath of loyalty; as tenants in a manorial survey or rent-roll; as taxpayers in a rating list or (if we are looking at the poorest levels of society) as people exempt from taxation because of poverty.

The records of local courts, both civil and ecclesiastical, form the one great exception to this general silence of the sources on the personal lives (and not merely the criminal behaviour) of the lower orders. Obviously the people who appear in them are not a representative sample of the entire population, but they are the best we can do, and they have been used extensively in this work. Without them, unless we are fortunate enough to encounter such a village as Myddle, Shropshire, of which Richard Gough wrote a marvellously personal anecdotal account, we are left with only an occasional will or inventory to break the silence.

The military events of the civil war, one might suppose, are better documented. It is true that sources such as memoirs and correspondence give some clues to popular behaviour during the fighting, but they raise almost as many problems as they solve. Accounts written long afterwards, like those of the royalist Earl of Clarendon and the parliamentarian Edmund Ludlow, often tell us more about the presuppositions of their authors than about the events they describe. The correspondence of military commanders is little more useful, usually betraying no interest in the civilian population except as a source of money, men, and supplies, or as an obstructive nuisance. Accounts of campaigns in printed pamphlets and newsbooks sometimes provide clues about popular involvement, but are inevitably coloured by propagandist purposes; both sides always tried to demonstrate that they had popular support, their enemies that of only a few factious or immoral individuals. Petitions, regularly proclaimed as evidence of popular feeling by their organizers, often prove no such thing and have always to be viewed with the gravest suspicion. Statements about their neighbours by frightened constables to the authorities of one side or the other are more likely to reflect the instinct for self-preservation than an assessment of real opinion. And finally, to compound the historian’s frustration, in the confusion of civil war many kinds of records simply disappeared or were kept even more imperfectly than in peacetime.
The wisest course for the historian confronted by such problems might well be to abandon the enterprise and consign questions about popular allegiance to the extensive category of the interesting but unanswerable. Happily, the situation is not quite as bleak as it might seem, and in fact the historian equipped with the conventional tools of the craft—among them common sense and a critical approach to the sources—can obtain some general impressions of group behaviour in the civil war, and of the complex social and cultural forces which helped to shape it. The apparent silence of the sources can sometimes be penetrated by reading between the lines; the biases of memoirs, letters, and newsbook accounts compared and allowed for. When we find a given area described as royalist or parliamentarian in sources stemming from opposite sides of the political divide we are entitled to conclude that such was indeed its general outlook. And a few sources exist which provide evidence about the allegiance of quite large numbers of people—lists of suspected royalist sympathizers in 1656, of former soldiers who received pensions after the Restoration. These sources too are not without their problems, but they will enable us in a later chapter to analyse the distribution of support for the two sides in some areas. The problems of evidence in the end prove less fearsome than at first sight.

In a perfect world, in which historians had unlimited time, unlimited funds, and armies of research assistants at their disposal, it might be possible to investigate the patterns of civil war allegiance throughout the whole of England. In a necessarily imperfect world in which these requirements are lacking, a more modest approach, concentrating on one region, has to be adopted. The region which is the primary focus of this study—the three-county area of Dorset, Somerset, and Wiltshire—has been chosen for a number of reasons. First, it contains a wide selection of topographical and agricultural zones, economies, and settlement types. Secondly, it offers a variety of different local responses to the civil war. The region was a fiercely contested one, experiencing several periods of intense fighting in which choices had to be made, even by the reluctant. An area such as East Anglia, which remained firmly in Parliament’s grasp throughout the war, offers fewer opportunities for such a study. Finally, it produced in the risings of Clubmen in 1645 the most extensive popular movement of the entire civil war period.

This does not mean, however, that our study of popular allegiance, or of the social and cultural forces which help to explain it, can be absolutely confined to the three western counties. Large urban centres, particularly London, have been, to be sure, for the most part avoided. Their economic and social structures, the sheer scale of their existence, and the nature of their political experience were all so totally different from those of small towns and villages in which the overwhelming majority of the English
Preface

people lived, that their history demands separate attention. Even Bristol, on the edge of the three-county region, and with a population of only some 15,000, but nevertheless the nearest thing to a metropolitan centre in the region, presents problems of such complexity and with so little similarity to those of its rural hinterland, that it has to be excluded, except peripherally, from this study. However, events in London, Bristol, and in a wide variety of towns and regions outside the western counties will occasionally be discussed when they are necessary to illuminate particular points, or when they provide useful comparative perspectives. To do this may appear to involve an element of inconsistency, but may perhaps have the value of showing that the social and political forces affecting the western counties did not exist in a vacuum. Cross-regional comparison, in turn, may also have the value of suggesting how the experience of the western counties was typical of, or different from, that of the kingdom at large.

A great deal of this book—indeed, almost half of it—will deal not with the civil war, but with developments during the half-century or so that preceded it. There are two reasons for this. One is probably fairly obvious: that in order to answer Dr Morrill's question about regional cultures and their impact on the war, we need to observe English social and cultural development over a longer period of time than the twenty years of the revolution. The second is perhaps less obvious but equally important. I do not regard the English Revolution as a fortuitous accident, unrelated to fundamental political and social processes—as having been caused by the ineptitude of Charles I, the personal ambition of John Pym and other opposition leaders, or accidents like the untimely death of the fourth Earl of Bedford. The civil war occurred at the end of a long period of social, political, and religious instability. That it occurred when it did may have been a coincidence, but this strikes me as unlikely. I believe that if we are to understand the revolution, we must first try to uncover its causes by paying some attention to the history of the preceding period. That, as well as answering Dr Morrill's question, is what this book attempts to do, focusing primarily upon the popular dimension of that history. Having obtained some understanding of the social, cultural, and political experience of the English people in the years before the revolution, we shall be in a better position to analyse their divided allegiance in the civil war itself.
Research for this book was greatly assisted by the award of fellowships by the American Council of Learned Societies and the National Endowment for the Humanities; I am happy to acknowledge the generosity of both the Council and the Endowment. Parts of several chapters have previously appeared in my essays ‘The Chalk and the Cheese: Contrasts among the English Clubmen’, ‘The Problem of Popular Allegiance in the English Civil War’, and ‘The Taming of the Scold: The Enforcement of Patriarchal Authority in Early Modern England’. I am grateful to the Editor of Past and Present, the Council of the Royal Historical Society, and Cambridge University Press respectively for permission to reprint these pages. Even more than most scholars at the end of their researches, I am deeply conscious of the courtesy and helpfulness of the staffs of the libraries and archives which I have used: the British Library; the libraries of Brown, London, and Yale Universities; the Bodleian Library; the Institute of Historical Research; the Public Record Office; and the Record Offices of Dorset, Gloucestershire, Somerset, and Wiltshire.

In writing this book I have been influenced by a large number of friends and colleagues, not always, I suspect, in ways that they will recognize. Among the many from whose understanding of the seventeenth century I have benefited, both through their publications and through numerous discussions with them, Anthony Fletcher, Christopher Hill, Clive Holmes, William Hunt, Martin Ingram, Joyce Malcolm, Conrad Russell, Lawrence Stone, and Keith Wrightson should be particularly mentioned. I also wish to thank my colleagues and students (both graduate and undergraduate) at Brown for so patiently enduring many long digressions on the culture of the English fields and forests. Earlier versions of parts of the book were read at the seminar on popular culture at the Institute of Historical Research led by Robert Scribner and Michael Hunter, at the Cambridge Seminar in Early Modern History at Harvard, the Yale Concilium on International and Area Studies, the Western Societies Program at Cornell University, the Pembroke Center for Teaching and Research on Women (Brown University), and the Shelby Cullom Davis Center for Historical Studies (Princeton University). I am grateful to all who participated in those discussions and helped me to clarify my arguments. The kindness of other scholars who allowed me to consult theses and other unpublished work is acknowledged in many of the footnotes below; I especially wish to thank Patricia Croft, Richard Cust, Martin Ingram, and Margaret Stieg. Richard Wall of the Cambridge Group on the History of Population and Social Structure helpfully supplied parish register tabulations, and Geoffrey Quaife provided other useful references. William Hunt, Joan Scott, Donald Spaeth, and Jack Thomas read parts of the book in manuscript and made many valuable suggestions. Cynthia Boutin was an unfailingly prompt, efficient, and uncomplaining typist.

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Throughout the book spelling and punctuation in quotations have been modernized. Dates in the text follow the 'old style' usage, except that the year is regarded as beginning on 1 January; in footnote citations both the old and new style year are given when appropriate.

Providence, Rhode Island
February 1985
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Abbreviations

BIHR  Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research
BL    British Library
CCC   Calendar of the Proceedings of the Committee for Compounding, ed. M. A. E. Green, 1889–92
CJ    Journals of the House of Commons
CSPD  Calendar of State Papers, Domestic
DNB   Dictionary of National Biography
DNHP  Dorset Natural History and Archaeological Society Proceedings (under various titles)
DRO   Dorset Record Office
Ec. H.R. Economic History Review
Eng. H.R. English Historical Review
GRO   Glouceshershire Record Office
HJ    Historical Journal
HMC   Historical Manuscripts Commission
JBS   Journal of British Studies
JSH   Journal of Social History
JL    Journals of the House of Lords
N & Q Notes and Queries
NRO   Norfolk Record Office
P & P  Past and Present
PRO   Public Record Office
QS    Quarter Sessions
RO    Record Office
RS    Record Society, or Records Society
SDNQ  Somerset and Dorset Notes and Queries
SQSR  Quarter Sessions Records for the County of Somerset (1603–60), ed. E. H. Bates [Harbin], SRS xxiii, xxiv, xxviii, 1907–12
SRO   Somerset Record Office
SRS   Somerset Record Society
TRHS  Transactions of the Royal Historical Society
TT    Thomason Tracts
VCH   Victoria County History
WAM   Wiltshire Archaeological Magazine (under various titles)
WRO   Wiltshire Record Office

Place of publication is London, unless otherwise stated.
1
Theories of Allegiance

Several different hypotheses about popular behaviour in the civil war have been advanced by previous students of the conflict. Perhaps the most familiar one is that the English common people had no real allegiance to either side—that they were mere cannon-fodder, targets for plunder, at best deferential pawns who did as they were told. This belief has a long and respectable ancestry.1 Many of the combatants themselves believed it, regularly noting the automatic changes in local attitudes when news arrived of distant victories or defeats. In post-war political disputes the people were often regarded as no more independent: ‘they know it is safest to be in favour with the strongest side’, a newsbook commented.2 When they fought, in this view, it was because they had no alternative. How often, Anthony Ascham lamented, ‘ambitious or angry men form subtleties and pretences, and afterwards the poor people (who understand them not) are taken out of their houses . . . to fight and maintain them at the perils of one another’s lives’.3 Looking back after 1660, men as various as Thomas Hobbes and Richard Baxter took the same line. ‘There were very few of the common people that cared much for either of the causes, but would have taken any side for pay or plunder’, Hobbes tells us. Baxter has been often quoted: ‘The poor ploughmen understood but little of these matters; but a little would stir up their discontent when money was demanded’.4

Hobbes and Baxter might well appear to be supported by the massive illiteracy of the English population. Male illiteracy averaged about 70 per cent in the rural areas; women were even less likely to be literate. People who could not read, it might be supposed, could have had no real interest in the great issues dividing King and Parliament.5 A logical deduction is

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3 Anthony Ascham, Of the Confusion and Revolutions of Government, 1649 edn., p. 144.
that the armies of both sides must have been composed largely of mer-
 cenaries hired for ‘pay or plunder’, or of levies who went to war with
 varying degrees of reluctance, either because they were the tenants or
 dependents of men who had power over them, or because they were
 simply conscripted. If this was indeed the case, patterns of military
 recruitment will tell us nothing about the actual sympathies of either the
 men involved or the communities from which they came. If we accept this
 ‘deference hypothesis’ we can understand the civil war by analysing the
 politics of the gentry, and need look no further.

 A second, and recently popular view of the civil war may be labelled the
 ‘neutralist’ hypothesis. The first priority of the lower orders, it is argued,
 was to protect their homes, families, and communities from the armies of
 both sides: the wider issues of the civil war did not touch them. Recent
 scholars have done much to illuminate the strength of neutralism and
 localism at all levels of English society during the civil wars, and it would
 be a rash historian who neglected them.6 Even the gentry, with their
 broader horizons and closer involvement in a national political culture,
 often tried to stay out of the conflict. Both sides had sworn to uphold the
 Protestant religion, the Shropshire gentleman Jonathan Langley re-
 marked, ‘what reason have I therefore to fall out with either?’7 If the
 gentry regarded disputed national issues as less pressing than the preser-
 vation of good order and community, it would be absurd to expect their
 inferiors to view the situation differently. A Wiltshire countryman earlier
 in the century neatly expressed the hopeless detachment from great
 public issues felt by many of the rural population: ‘It were no matter if the
 King and Queen and all were hanged unless the price of corn do fall’. The
 1640s abound with similar outbursts of popular agnosticism.8

 Besides the ‘deference’ and ‘neutralist’ hypotheses there is a third,
 equally familiar theory about popular allegiance. This rests on a very
 different set of assumptions: that many of the common people did take an
 active part in the civil war, did have real preferences for one side or the
 other, and that the side they overwhelmingly preferred was that of
 Parliament. Like the others, this interpretation has a venerable ancestry.
 Born in the war itself, it echoes constantly through the pages of
 Clarendon’s History of the Rebellion. The people, Clarendon notes, were
 solidly parliamentarian, largely through envy of the rich and, in the towns

 6 The pioneering work in a genre that includes many other important county studies is Alan
 Everitt, The Community of Kent and the Great Rebellion, Leicester, 1966. See also J. S. Morrill, The
 Recall of the Provinces, 1976. For a critical discussion of the localist interpretation, see Clive Holmes,
 7 ‘The Ottley Papers relating to the Civil War’, ed. W. Phillips, Shropshire Archaeological and
 Natural History Society Transactions, 2nd Ser. vii (1895), 264.
 8 ‘Extracts from the Records of the Wiltshire Quarter Sessions: Reign of King James the First’, ed.
 R. W. Merriman, WAM xxii (1885), 33.
especially, out of a ‘natural malignity’ born of hatred of authority: ‘the fury and license of the common people’, inflamed by demagogic preachers, burst forth in ‘barbarity and rage against the nobility and gentry’.

It is important to note that neither Clarendon nor many of the other writers previously quoted were always very precise about what they meant by ‘the people’. The ambiguities of the term, then as always, were limitless, but at the cost of some over-simplification two broadly contrasting positions can be distinguished. On the one hand was the view that ‘the people’ consisted of all adult males (the universal acceptance of patriarchal authority excluded women by definition); on the other was the application of the term only to propertied heads of households—to freeholders, masters, independent craftsmen, the ‘middling sort’ as the common phrase went—with the rest of the population unceremoniously relegated to the categories of ‘the poor’ or ‘the rabble’. For our purposes both groups, as well as the vast numbers who occupied indeterminate positions between the middling sort and the poor, must be included within the undifferentiated term, ‘the people’. But the distinction between them must always be kept in mind.

Competing civil war propagandists might differ on the motives underlying popular support for Parliament, but most agreed that it existed among ‘the people’ of all social levels. Royalists pointed to their enemies’ dependence on the poorer element, the mutinous rabble intent only on lining their pockets at the expense of the rich. Parliamentarians naturally emphasized their support among the respectable and propertied. Again Baxter provides a typical example: a civil war which ranges the sober, godly ‘middling sort’ against the corrupt gentry and the godless mercenary poor. The theme is echoed by countless parliamentarian propagandists. The underlying assumption is that Parliament’s cause is that of reason and religion, and that its typical supporters (yeomen, freeholders, and independent craftsmen) are literate, rational, and religious. The modern expression of this equation between Parliament and people is the ‘class’ interpretation of the civil war. The ‘middling sort’, it is suggested, had reached the degree of consciousness of common identity necessary to define them as a class. The labouring poor had not, and therefore had no independent role to play. They provided, however, a

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constant reservoir from which both sides could draw recruits either by material inducements or by conscription.\textsuperscript{12}

We have, then, three alternative hypotheses which deserve to be tested against the evidence: that allegiance was primarily determined by deference, localism, or class. At first sight none of the three is entirely convincing. The first two—deference and localism—require us to believe that both sides in the war relied on impressed men, half-hearted militia forces, and the reluctant dependents of peers and gentlemen, supplemented in Parliament's case by a few zealous Puritans, mainly from London and the eastern counties, and in the King's by levies from Ireland, Wales, and the 'dark corners of the land'. The third—middling-sort parliamentarianism—at least explains how Parliament got an army and the degree of popular support necessary to sustain it, but not how the King managed to do so.\textsuperscript{13} Yet the fact is that the Royalists controlled large areas of the country for considerable periods of time—the Welsh border counties, much of the north, and more pertinently for the present study, at various times the counties of Dorset, Somerset, and Wiltshire. It seems unlikely that a unanimously hostile population over such wide areas could have been held down for long periods solely by force, especially during a civil war in which there often were friendly forces nearby to assist them. On the other side of the conflict some nominally parliamentarian counties showed a conspicuous lack of enthusiasm for their cause: Kent is a well-known example.\textsuperscript{14} Some parts of England were obviously more parliamentarian, some more royalist, than others, and as the case of Somerset reminds us, these differences did not always coincide with the loyalties of the local élites. It appears, therefore, that there was such a thing as 'popular royalism' as well as neutralism and 'popular parliamentarianism'. While paying due attention to the deference, neutralism, and class hypotheses (all of which, as we shall see, have some explanatory validity at certain times and places), we can, therefore, propose a fourth hypothesis: that contrasts in popular allegiance had a regional basis, and were related to local differences in social structure, economic development and culture.

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The most useful analytical tool for exploring regional differences in early modern England is the typology of rural communities and economies

\textsuperscript{12} The most uncompromising recent advocate of this argument is Brian Manning, \textit{The English People and the English Revolution}, 1976.


\textsuperscript{14} Everitt, \textit{Community of Kent}. A similar lack of enthusiasm has been observed in other 'parliamentarian' counties: Clive Holmes, \textit{The Eastern Association in the English Civil War}, Cambridge, 1974, chs. 1–4.