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978-0-521-28042-6 - *Destiny His Choice: The Loyalism of Andrew Marvell*

J. M. Wallace

Excerpt

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Introduction

Strange as it may seem to suggest a comparison between Andrew Marvell and Edward Hyde, the best model for a book on seventeenth-century loyalism that tries to alter some of the preconceptions about a particular man is Mr B. H. G. Wormald's classic study, *Clarendon*. At the heart of his thesis, which is developed and documented with extraordinary finesse, is the simple observation that when Hyde sat down to write the original *History of the Rebellion* in 1646 his attitude toward the past was already coloured by defeat. By that time he had acquired a deep insight into the King's difficulties and a willingness to excuse his mistakes; he was prepared to say that evil motives had guided the actions of the violent party from the start, and his loyalty to the crown led him to explain the King's actions so well that readers have been misled regarding Hyde's own activities during the period he described. In spite of the royalist cast thus given to the *History*, above all by his understanding of Charles and his unsympathetic treatment of the parliamentary leaders, the facts were otherwise, and Hyde's actions during those years were consistently directed at negotiation, bridge-building, and a settlement that would incorporate the results of the constitutional revolution of 1640–41. Defeat did not change these aims, although it altered the means whereby he thought they might be achieved, and the years to the Restoration saw him devising and managing a royal policy of patience that would not compromise the crown in the affections of the English people. He did his best to thwart the Scots alliance, he set his hand against all the schemes to invade England with a foreign army, and at the Restoration the wisdom with which he had waited on providence was rewarded. It is a moving and convincing story as Mr Wormald tells it, which destroys the old myth that Hyde changed from a parliamentarian into a royalist, or even into a constitutional

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royalist, in so far as the phrase implies a compromise with his parliamentary principles. Under such an analysis, Hyde draws nearer to the centre, further away from the true royalist extreme represented by the Queen and George Digby, and his ends and his methods are seen to be nearer to the desires of the majority of men concerned in the struggle. One of Wormald's conclusions is indeed that 'the true bridge between the non-resistance of the epoch of the Tudor rulers and the eighteenth-century constitution was the non-violent, the bridge-building parliamentarism of Hyde'.¹

Loyalism, whether of Clarendon's or Marvell's variety, is intimately connected with this centre and may be said to arise from it. Politically both men were concerned with constitutional government, and both shared the conviction that a deep process was at work in history with which it was necessary for men to combine if providence were to bring good out of evil. The divergence of their paths after 1649 is to be explained not by supposing that Marvell apostatized from his royalism, any more than Hyde ceased to hold his parliamentary views during the long exile, but by recognizing that as each man sought to discern what God's part demanded of him, one decided that his only rôle was to be more patient, the other that he was called to an active participation in the reconstruction of public order. In January 1649 the country as a whole, Marvell and Hyde included, were appalled at the catastrophe which had occurred, and all moderate men were united in their grief and shame; at no other time in the century did the central position between political extremes hold so many men of a single mind. The crucial differences between the loyalism of Hyde and Marvell emerge later, and Marvell first defined his new stance in the Horatian ode. What Marvell argued for in that poem was the very thing that Hyde most feared—the legitimization of Cromwell's power—but Hyde feared it because he understood it to be the one alternative to the restoration of the Stuarts that the

¹ *Clarendon* (Cambridge, 1951), p. 153.

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people might accept. His pondering over history had assured him early that the factions could be left to destroy themselves, and he thought he perceived that the people would never tolerate permanently an illegal rule by the generals. On this faith his waiting policy was based, but he watched anxiously the growing demand for a new dynasty of kings. If his original *History* reflects a difference between his new historical awareness, which dictated patience, and his earlier attitude, which was more actively political, so does Marvell's ode reflect a similar difference between his past and present attitudes. No adherent of the King could have regarded the execution with the poise Marvell achieves in the ode. His feelings would have been more shocked, probably more angry. But Marvell, like Clarendon, had been considering the historical process, and was persuaded that the Stuarts had gone for good. Defeat altered Clarendon's account of the revolution; Cromwell's victory altered Marvell's, as we can see by comparing the ode with the earlier poems. Wormald's simple observation that the past gets changed in the telling when men perceive its issue is as essential to a reading of the ode as it is to *The History of the Rebellion*.

By our contemporary standards, both Marvell and Hyde, with their whole generation, were whig historians, regarding and retelling the past with one eye on the present, and tending to see in the outcome of history a moral judgment passed by the Almighty. The whig historians of the nineteenth century, viewing seventeenth-century conflicts in the light of their own constitution, saw the revolutionaries of the 1640s and the whigs of the 1680s carrying the torch of progress, and consequently they dissolved many of the complexities of the period.¹ All books now concerned with seventeenth-century history are explicitly or implicitly devoted to recapturing the complexity

¹ The thesis is explored in the book which provided a programme for re-investigation, Herbert Butterfield's *The Whig Interpretation of History* (London, 1931).

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of it all, and restoring to visibility the elements that vanished in the old versions of party politics. One of the most significant results of the new work has been to undermine the confidence with which historians once spoke of 'presbyterians', 'independents', 'royalists', 'whigs' and 'tories'; the terms are retained as indispensable for discourse but with the common understanding that they do not describe hard and fast categories of opinion, or parties with clearly defined limits. In other words, the fluidity of thought has been recognized, and the existence of a large area of common ground shared occasionally by people of every stripe has become more prominent at the same time that generalizations become more difficult to make. The Long Parliament will not divide along economic lines, as was once thought; Hobbes is being brought into relation with contemporary political thought instead of standing outside it; belief in the immemorial constitution or fundamental rights has been shown to cut across all party boundaries, and in a disputing age the occasions for conflict would appear to be outnumbered only by the common assumptions of the antagonists.

The movement against the whig interpretation of history, however, has not yet produced a book on the loyalists—thousands and thousands of them—who turned their coats with the times and followed with a clear conscience the changes of regime between 1649 and 1688. The dictionaries barely acknowledge their existence, the O.E.D. granting not so much as a paragraph, let alone examples, to the subsidiary definition of a loyalist as 'one who supports the existing form of government'. To Dr Johnson a loyalist was still 'one who professes uncommon adherence to the king', and the establishment to this day would appear not to sanction any definition of loyalty that implies a right to change one's allegiance if a usurper overturns the state. Common parlance, however, if I am not mistaken, grants a measure of loyalty to a man who defers the transference of his allegiance until after the death of his former

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sovereign; he may be loyal 'to the existing form of government' provided the old government is extinct. The word 'loyalist' is needed in this sense, because 'turn-coat', 'collaborator', and their synonyms are grotesque distortions for the kind of changing allegiance that Marvell typifies, and had they been thrown about by anybody except splenetic old cavaliers after the Restoration, orderly government would have been at an end. Buckingham, Shaftesbury, Carlisle, Hale, Downing, Hobbes, Locke, Waller, Dryden, Cowley: a long list could be compiled of men who had made a formal submission to the Commonwealth but who quickly obtained either office or recognition under Charles II. The Act of Oblivion does not explain the phenomenon, for it merely granted a formal status to the fact that most men neither judged nor felt that service under the Commonwealth was necessarily a stumbling-block to perfect loyalty to the restored monarchy. The Restoration as a whole admitted loyalism, in its second sense, as a genuine alternative to the more distinguished allegiance of the exiles. Why this was so, Marvell's example should demonstrate, but the nearest approach to a definition of loyalism during the Interregnum supplies one good reason why side-changing was so readily excused. Writing in 1656 to persuade England to elect Cromwell king, John Hall concluded: 'So then we may see the way to be a constant Royalist, is to be a constant Loyalist; not to respect the power or place for the persons sake, but the person for the place and power[s] sake.'¹ To Hall there was little difference between royalism and loyalism if properly understood, because both presupposed subjection to a single person as the head of state; but whereas the obedience of the royalist was to the king's person, the loyalist's was to his office and authority. Hall's remark is the logical outcome of the distinction between office and person which had served its purpose splendidly in justifying the rebellion, and which was to become the hallmark of whig constitutionalism at the revolution of 1688. In

¹ *The True Cavalier Examined by his Principles* (London, 1656), p. 109.

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between lies the effort of the Cromwellians to establish another mixed monarchy in which loyalism and royalism would have been as indistinguishable as they eventually became to Dr Johnson. Already by 1656 the difference was harder to maintain, or easier to break down, than it had been in 1649.

It is hard to understand why loyalism has not attracted the attention it deserves, although easy to guess why the earlier historians ignored it. The similarities in theory between revolutionaries and whigs were sufficiently plain to facilitate drawing a straight line from the democratic aspects of puritan politics to the more stable constitutionalism under William and Mary, and the timeservers in the middle appeared tangential. As Marchamont Nedham was their best-known representative, they doubtless seemed highly unpleasant also. Miss Robbins in her pioneering dissertation on Marvell's politics forty years ago called attention to the Cromwellian rather than republican background of whiggery, but her comments have never been followed up. Instead there has been what could be called a disproportionate emphasis on Milton's thought, had not the concentration produced some of the very best studies of seventeenth-century politics and religion. Milton, at any rate, has diverted literary critics from the loyalists because Milton's reaction to the execution was so different from theirs. Even the excellent new surveys by the editors of the Yale edition of Milton's prose pay only passing attention to Ascham, Dury, and Rous, whose opinions nevertheless were for a brief while more representative of popular sentiment than Milton's. The omission is more the fault of the Marvellians than the Miltonists, because the former have not produced an account of their poet that is clear enough to offer the basis for a comparison. Its general features would show the same striking similarities and important differences that mark the comparison with Hyde, but whereas Hyde and Marvell were most alike in January 1649, Marvell and Milton were most dissimilar. The evidence for their later friendship during the Interregnum is slight but indisputable,

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and the obvious grounds for it would be the depth of their religious feelings, their ecclesiastical prejudices and millenarian hopes, and the aristocratic bias of their minds. Marvell's unreserved support for Cromwell, however, suggests that in politics there must always have remained differences of opinion between them, and the course of their careers points to the basically different pattern followed by the loyalist and the revolutionary. Marvell's epic (as I attempt to show) was written in a retirement from which he emerged to join Milton in office, but while Milton retired to write his epic at the Restoration, Marvell continued in the House of Commons. The loyalism of one carried him over into an effective political career after 1660, while what may loosely be called Milton's republicanism forced him into political silence. In this pattern we find once again what we expect to find—that Marvell's political attitude overlaps with Milton's as it does with Hyde's, without ever becoming quite the same.

Hyde, Marvell, and Milton were all dead before the final settlement was made—final, that is, relative to the changes which had preceded it—but each stood for ideas that were embodied in the working solution that was eventually found to the constitutional difficulties. To pronounce which of them was more important is unnecessary and perhaps impossible, but as Milton's defences of liberty have been praised so often and his influence traced into later generations, and as Mr Wormald has not hesitated to say that Clarendon's parliamentarism is the bridge between two epochs, I hope I may be permitted to add that Marvell's loyalism embraces much that was best in each of them. He kept faith with the existing government until it disappeared, he worked like Hyde for peace and moderation, he defended toleration and even Milton himself. The central political experience and wisdom of the age that found expression after 1688 was also his wisdom, and the profound constitutionalism of Clarendon and the reforming spirit of Milton found a champion in his own life and works.

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To substantiate fully the claims I should like to make for the importance of the loyalist spirit as an expression of the centre of moderation in seventeenth-century politics is beyond my capacities. The book that needs to be written would have to begin with the Wars of the Roses or with the upheavals that preceded the accession of Elizabeth to the throne. From that period the Vicar of Bray was resurrected at the Restoration as the prototype of the loyalist whose instinct for survival could be attributed by cavaliers to an easy cynicism. The history of a more scrupulous timeserving than the vicar's would also require the detailed biographies of many loyalists, and a study of the legal and other public office-holders who retained their posts from one cataclysm to the next. It would demand a considerable knowledge of English law and perhaps a talent for mind-reading, since loyalism is an ethical as well as a constitutional problem, and the motives of people who changed allegiances is a question one cannot escape. My own limited aim has been to clarify for other literary critics the political implications of some of Marvell's poems and prose tracts, but with the hope that they will thus become more available to historians as documents in a fascinating history that could be written. The first chapter is an attempt to sketch a background for the first change of allegiance that Marvell undoubtedly made within a year and a half of the King's execution.

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I

‘The Spirits of all that were moderate’:
The civil war debates and the
Engagement controversy

The Civil War Debates

The narrative of the hostility between King and Parliament has frequently been retold as a struggle for sovereignty. Each side occupied an opposite corner, with Parliament defending common and statute law, and the King claiming that a more fundamental law of necessity enabled him to exercise his prerogatives in time of national danger. After a few rounds, these positions tended to be reversed until Charles was championing English law against Parliament's invocation of natural law and popular sovereignty. Concluding the most instructive of recent analyses of these changes, Professor Sirluck has employed a different metaphor: ‘It would be easy enough to represent the whole complex debate-at-law...as a kind of comic ballet, a series of formalized movements, each purporting to be full of meaning, but when the sequence is completed seen to be only a dance.’¹ Sirluck is anxious, however, that the ballet be taken seriously, and we can so take it more easily if we insist that it is in the nature of casuistry, political and otherwise, to appear like a dance, and to end in the place where it began. As the science and the art of applying general principles to difficult cases, casuistry was committed to discussing the particular instance rather than the theory which both sides held in common. Ferne with his *Wounded Conscience*, and *Conscience Satisfied*, and *The Resolving of Conscience*, William Bridge with his *Conscience Cured*, Burroughes, Ball, Maxwell, Herle, and

¹ *Complete Prose Works of John Milton* (New Haven, 1953-), II, p. 51, from which the summary above also derives.

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the other disputants for the two parties were perfectly aware of the rules of their method: the civil war presented itself to them as the most colossal case of conscience with which they had ever had to contend, and their assumption was that the solution could be found if men kept their tempers and honed their arguments to ever finer distinctions. Until the levellers came to dominate the Press and casuistical manners became impaired, casuistry provided the main support for the remonstrances, declarations, ordinances, and answers in which the parties' practical measures were put forward. Casuistry was peculiarly fitted for this task because the systematic treatment of cases had been developed in order to define, especially, the limits of Christian obedience in crucial instances, and to determine the guilt or excusability of particular actions. To all casuists, circumstances altered cases profoundly, so that two cases which looked alike might admit of very different solutions. Much of the confusion that one feels on first reading the constitutional debates may therefore be attributed to the air of relativity which casuistry casts over its subjects. Necessary as it is to ethical science, it may be said to have trained men in the seventeenth century to base their moral decisions on distinctions which are not always visible to the modern eye; it induced by its very nature an atmosphere in which the loyalists' choice in 1649 was easier to make, just as it had underpinned every possible allegiance during its vintage years with a wealth of argument and allusion. Arguments which had proved interchangeable during the war would be likely to effect similar substitutions later; casuistry was a system that could digest anything, and account for every circumstance. As one critic has said, 'means come to throw ends into the shade. In a word, the more self-conscious casuistry grows, the more its dangerous qualities tend to assert themselves.'¹

¹ R. M. Wenley, 'Casuistry' in *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. James Hastings (Edinburgh, 1910), III, p. 242. My remarks on casuistry are indebted to this article and to Timothy Brosnahan's in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York, 1908).