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Edited by Howard Erskine-Hill and Graham Storey

Excerpt

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Introduction

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The English Civil War period – twenty years of violent political turmoil in the history of what was then a marginal and second-rate European power – has proved a seminal event in an English-speaking civilisation that has subsequently become world-wide. Crucial episodes of this kind are soon transformed into myth. The image of the martyr-king falling before the malign forces of faction and destructive rebellion held sway for a century or more, before yielding to an evolutionary myth according to which the forces of progress among the Puritans broke open the archaic forms of the State to march confidently off in the direction of John Locke, the American Constitution and the quasi-scientific propositions of Marxist theories of history. In our time the more recent myth perpetuates itself through the potent word ‘revolution’, used here in its modern sense of a violent creative outbreak of the new and progressive, a sense unknown to the people who lived through those events.

The historian must be ready to test the myth, and to demythologise where necessary. With events of such importance we want to know what really happened, and what the men who shaped the history thought they were doing at the time. The captivating term ‘revolution’ has to be defined, for in the older sense of a sudden reversal in government the word is certainly one which participants in the Civil War used to describe what was going on around them.¹ In this sense there were four revolutions between 1640 and 1660: the Civil War which culminated with the defeat and execution of the King; the curtailment of Parliamentary power to establish the quasi-monarchical Cromwellian protectorate; the final republican bid for mastery which brought down Richard Cromwell and briefly defied a rising demand for a restoration of the Stuart monarchy; and that restoration itself in 1660.

This distinction is important because within these revolutions something else was happening, or trying to happen, a revolution in

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a more modern sense: a bid to move from the extraordinary events of the First Civil War to a society in which power no longer derived primarily from property but from the people.² The proposals put forward by the Levellers^a in the Army Debates, and in tracts by men such as Lilburne, Walwyn and Overton, can seem so close to the ideals of modern representative democracy that it is hard not to succumb to some form of evolutionary myth. As S. R. Gardiner said in 1893, ‘the modern reader finds himself in the midst of ideas with which he is perfectly familiar’.³ The Levellers and the Diggers,^b however, received short shrift from the leaders of the victorious Parliament and Army. The small and vulnerable Digger community on St George’s Hill, Cobham, was easily scattered. The Levellers, stronger and more tenacious, survived longer, and when last we hear of them it is of their negotiations with exiled Royalists in 1658–9. They may have had more to hope for from the King than from Cromwell or the briefly reinstated Rump Parliament.

The causes of the Civil War are classic territory for the battles of modern historians. The evolutionary myth (if myth it be) entails a long retrospection and the principle of something like historical inevitability. In this view the causes of the Civil War are to be sought in the sixteenth century, and explanations in terms of long social and economic change have frequently been propounded: most famously concerning the rise or decline of the gentry. Such hypotheses may be vulnerable to the charge that they attempt ‘to explain events which did not happen in terms of a social change for which the evidence remains uncertain’ (Conrad Russell on Lawrence Stone’s version of the rise of the gentry),⁴ though any expansion of the gentry class may be thought to have created a more volatile political public. Certainly it is hard to show how ‘deep causes’ such as ‘the rise of the gentry’, the development of ideas concerning resistance to rulers, or even the narrow economic basis of the Tudor and Stuart monarchy, are true causes in the sense that they specifically determined the outbreak of the Civil War. They

^a The Levellers was the name given by their opponents, particularly the Army leaders, to the radical movement which supported the *Agreement of the People*, Nov. 1647 (given here as an appendix); but not accepted by them. ‘We profess therefore that we never had it in our thoughts to Level mens estates’, but rather to enable all men ‘with as much security as may be to enjoy their propriety’ (*A Manifestation*, 14 April 1649, signed by the four Leveller leaders, prisoners in the Tower, Lilburne, Walwyn, Prince and Overton). ‘Commonly (though unjustly) styled LEVELLERS’ Overton describes those to whom he addressed *The Baiting of the Great Bull of Bashan* (p. 145, below).

^b The Diggers was the name given by Gerrard Winstanley to the small community of labourers he set up on 1 April 1649, who were to subsist by digging and cultivating the common land on St George’s Hill, Cobham. It was adopted by other similar colonies. They also called themselves ‘True Levellers’.

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are, rather, among the circumstances of the Civil War, contributing to an outcome which was not inevitable, but was prompted by more specific and more recent events. We are on surer ground if we look at the nature of Charles I's reign to see whether there were not there sufficient causes of the Civil War, whatever long-term factors may then have contributed to the trend of events.

It was not a time of general discontent: 'the most serene, quiet and halcion days that could possibly be imagined' were the words of Lord Falkland, one of the King's Parliamentary opponents, who rallied to him on the eve of the Civil War.⁵ Clarendon,^a another opponent who came over, attested to the 'balm' and 'felicity' of the time, as also to its latent 'mutiny, and discontent'; in addition the continuing move to enclose and 'improve' common land caused considerable social unrest.⁶ The peace and prosperity, then, though real enough, rested on a precarious foundation. The feel of the times with their celebration of peace and intimations of war is well conveyed from the courtier's point of view by that most accomplished of Caroline poets, Thomas Carew, especially in 'To my Friend G. N. from *Wrest*' and in 'To Aurelian Townshend. In answer of an Elegiacall Letter upon the Death of the King of *Sweden*':

Then let the Germans feare if *Cæsar* shall,
Or the United Princes, rise, and fall,
But let us that in myrtle bowers sit
Under secure shades, use the benefit
Of peace and plenty, which the blessed hand
Of our good King gives this obdurate Land,
Let us of Revels sing, and let thy breath
(Which fill'd Fames trumpet with *Gustavus* death . . .

These harmelesse pastimes let my *Townsend* sing
To rurall tunes; not that thy Muse wants wing
To soare a loftier pitch, for she hath made
A noble flight, and plac'd th'Heroique shade
Above the reach of our faint flagging ryme;
But these are subjects proper to our clyme.
Tourneyes, Masques, Theaters, better become
Our *Halcyon* dayes; what though the German Drum
Bellow for freedome and revenge, the noyse
Concernes not us, nor should divert our joyes;
Nor ought the thunder of their Carabins

^a Edward Hyde (1609–74), first Earl of Clarendon, Parliamentarian, royal adviser and statesman, managed Charles II's affairs in exile. He was elevated to the peerage and made Lord Chancellor on the King's return in 1660 and helped shape the Restoration Settlement. In 1667 he fell from favour and returned to exile. There he completed his famous *History of the Rebellion and Civil Wars* (published in 1702–4) and also wrote his autobiography.

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Drowne the sweet Ayres of our tun'd Violins;
 Beleeve me friend, if their prevailing powers
 Gaine them a calme securitie like ours,
 They'le hang their Armes up on the Olive bough,
 And dance, and revell then, as we doe now.

(lines 43–50, 89–104)

There was indeed ground for gratitude, if England had so far kept clear of the Thirty Years War on the continent.

But the King's government lacked the resources to do what was expected of it. It lacked the bureaucracy (though that might itself have provoked opposition); above all it lacked the money. If there is one long-term factor which approaches to being a cause of the Civil War, it is the narrowing financial base of the Tudor and Stuart monarchy in a century of severe inflation. Many of the complaints against Charles's government, for example those concerning monopolies, had been complaints against Elizabeth in her last years: monopolies were inevitably unpopular, but they were one of the few ways of raising revenue and controlling trade.

The crown was therefore more dependent on Parliament for funds as time went on. Not only in the event of a foreign war, but even to protect fishing and guard the coast of England from pirates, the Government had either to rely on a vote of supply from Parliament, or levy taxes without Parliamentary consent. In the Ship Money case, seven out of twelve judges decided the tax was legal, but this did not prevent an effective tax strike on the part of some of the gentry. Tax strikes and the threat of tax strikes were to be common during the Interregnum. For the King thus to be forced into the arms of Parliament might have been well enough if his policies had been likely to please Parliament. 'That unwieldy club of landlords'⁷ might then have borne some of the unpopularity of the necessary increase in taxes. Charles, however, was unwilling to relinquish the freedoms and responsibilities of his predecessors, 'Our Just, Ancient, Regall power'. It would be wrong to pretend that his policies were entirely sustained and coherent but in so far as they were they did not please Parliament. Parliament wanted an active Protestant foreign policy; Charles, while desirous of helping his exiled Protestant nephew the Elector Palatine, was more interested in alliance with the Catholic powers. Parliament was a predominantly Calvinist body; Charles and Archbishop Laud favoured the newest form of Protestantism, propounded by the Dutchman Arminius, which moved away from predestinarian views of salvation towards an emphasis on individual choice and action,

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and led to a renewal of concern with ceremony and the sacraments. Parliament did not wish to see the Church of England materially strengthened at the expense of landowners; Charles and Laud did. Parliament did not wish to see itself relegated to a subordinate part of the constitution, as had come to be the case with the French Estates General and *parlements*, and with the Cortes in Spain. Charles was willing to rule for long periods without calling Parliament, if he thought Parliament would not enter into his measures. He called no parliament between 1629 and 1640.

Each side insisted, truly enough, that it was only exercising and defending its traditional rôle in the ancestral constitution. To act within law and historical precedent did not automatically produce co-operation: the parameters of the constitution, enshrined in both Common Law and historical precedent, were too wide. Within these parameters, it is fair to say, a crisis in government was being brought nearer, not because Parliament originally wished to introduce innovations, but because the King did. In so far as this crisis was a clash between old and new, the royal government, anticipating the absolute continental monarchies of the coming century, was the new. Parliament was the old.

Yet the crisis might have been long deferred, and perhaps thereby transformed to a less dangerous kind, had not the forward policy of Charles I and Laud made a major and fatal miscalculation: the twice deferred attempt to impose their ecclesiastical policy on Scotland, a predominantly Presbyterian and deeply Calvinist nation. The Scots rose in arms against the royal revolution. The financial balancing act of rule without Parliament was now at an end, for to put down the Scots required an army, and to raise an army it was necessary to call Parliament to vote supply. Thus the King was at the mercy of a Parliament filled with anger and alarm at the innovations of the last ten years. The King's situation now steadily worsened. The Short Parliament was hostile and was soon dissolved, but another, the Long Parliament, had to be called within months; Laud was imprisoned, and Strafford, the King's most loyal and effective minister, was attainted. While the court made spasmodic attempts to prepare for war, Charles's overt policy was now to concede more or less everything the English Parliament and the Scots Estates demanded. These concessions are recalled by the first tract in the present volume, Parker's extremely influential *Observations* (1642), which well expresses the opinions and mood of the Long Parliament in the last years before the war:

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the first phase of the crisis. It is not a position which demands revolution in the modern sense, certainly not civil war, certainly not trial and execution of the King.

Nevertheless by the end of 1641 John Pym's Parliamentary campaign against Charles revealed itself to be disturbingly ambitious. Charles had now conceded everything necessary to put the clock back to James I, perhaps to Elizabeth. Yet Pym still mounted his Grand Remonstrance against the King's government, with what could only now be propagandist motives, aiming at further concessions. More defiant still, he proposed Parliamentary control over the King's appointment of councillors. This was a Parliamentary innovation. It marked the point where Falkland and Clarendon deserted Pym and rallied to the court. Somewhat uncertainly each side allowed itself some aggressive moves: early in January in 1642 the King attempted to arrest in Parliament by force of arms five of his Parliamentary opponents. This was illegal, ill-judged and had disastrous consequences for his cause. Soon after, Parliament put its own man, Sir John Hotham, in charge of the important port and magazine of Hull. Government had now virtually broken down. The King withdrew to the north and when he demanded entry into Hull, Hotham (acting on carefully drafted instructions) refused to admit him. This too was an aggressive and perhaps illegal move. What had never been intended, and foreseen only as something to be feared, had now come about: the nation, as Bulstrode Whitlocke said of Parliament, had now 'insensibly slipped into this beginning of civil war by one unexpected accident after another, as waves of the sea which have brought us thus far, and we scarce know how; but from paper combats by declarations, notes, messages and replies we are now come to the question of raising forces'.⁸

If each side had miscalculated, Parliament had perhaps miscalculated more, for how could it have been predicted that the King, with no army and so little of a party behind him, would attempt to defy them in the field? Parliament's aim had not been to effect a revolution but to compel the Crown to restrict its rôle along the lines to be indicated by Parker in his *Observations*. But Charles, though an unskilful politician, was a determined man who may have believed in his own cause all the more firmly when he considered how little he had gained by making concessions. His raising of his standard at Nottingham on 22 August 1642 slowly brought in support. Parliament too raised its forces. Yet it would be wrong to suppose that Crown and Parliament now polarised the nation, either by region, class or even capital and country. Study of the

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provinces in the Civil War reveals an irregular and fluid pattern in which one notable feature seems to have been the desire of various areas to avoid real (as opposed to nominal) commitment to either side.⁹

For a time the tide of military success seemed to be flowing in the royalist direction. On 11 November 1642 the King's army engaged with the Parliamentarians at Brentford, eight miles from London. It had the advantage; only heroic efforts by the Leveller John Lilburne enabled the Parliamentary troops to withdraw in good order.¹⁰ The Royalists advanced to Turnham Green, the occasion of Milton's sonnet 'When the assault was intended upon the City', before retiring to Oxford. In 1643, when the advantage may have appeared roughly equal between the two sides, there was published *Queres and Conjectures, Concerning the present state of this Kingdome* (see below), an appeal for peace couched in studiously neutral terms. But in July 1645 the royal armies were decisively defeated and the King was taken prisoner.

This is the situation in which the remarkable Army Debates at Putney (represented here) took place. The question that dominated the period between the capture of the King and the passing of the ordinance for his trial on 28 December 1648, was that of a settlement. 'If we beat the king ninety and nine times, yet he is king still, and so will his posterity be after him; but if the king beat us once we shall all be hanged': so the Earl of Manchester, Commander-in-Chief of the Eastern Association, is reported to have said in 1644.¹¹ This sentiment records the continuing importance of the King, and explains why politically speaking a settlement – or his death – had to be secured. Not only did the King and Parliament distrust each other, both Parliament and Army distrusted each other and themselves. The Army Debates were part of an effort by Cromwell to heal a dangerous split in the Parliamentary forces. The sense of crisis at these discussions is extraordinary. It is rare in English history to find military and political leaders of such importance engaged in so deep and urgent a debate. While the formal basis of discussion might be said to be the Leveller document, *An Agreement of the People* (see Appendix) together with Ireton's *Heads of the Proposals* as models for a settlement, and the theoretical conflict that between Natural and Human Law, what comes over most powerfully is the soldier's sense that they themselves who had helped to defeat the Royalists were going to be betrayed by the gentry attitudes of their own commanders in negotiations with the King. The feeling that those whose efforts

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had won the war had, whether landowners or not, a right to a say in the future strongly contributed to Leveller arguments for a franchise based on something close to manhood suffrage.¹²

This is important because here we have the nearest thing to a revolution in the modern sense that is to be found in the Civil War period. In their documents, *The Case of the Army* and *An Agreement of the People* the Levellers recommended a paramount law establishing biennial single-chamber parliaments, with supreme right to legislate and control public officials. The proposals were backed by an affirmation that power lay in the people, government deriving from their original consent. These ideas, while obviously related to those by which Parker had sought to justify the early actions of the Long Parliament, go far beyond the measures of 'King Pym'. Parker fully accepted the representativeness of Parliament, and although in the Army Debates Ireton favoured a partial extension of the franchise, it may be thought that the principles which fortified that formidable antagonist of the Levellers in these discussions were those of Parker.¹³ While it is possible to trace the intellectual origins of the Leveller proposals back to the ancient world, it may well seem that the civil crisis and war had themselves virtually generated the Leveller position. Lilburne, the one Leveller we hear of before the outbreak of hostilities, had not been arrested, interrogated in the Star Chamber and flogged at the cart-tail from the Fleet to Westminster on 18 April 1638 for advocating manhood suffrage and biennial parliaments, but for distributing forbidden pamphlets against episcopacy.¹⁴

In the end a committee including Cromwell, Ireton, Sexby and Rainborough adopted a scheme closer to *The Heads of the Proposals* than to *An Agreement of the People*. It proposed biennial parliaments, a Council of State which mentioned the King, redistribution of seats in proportion to population, and voting rights for those who had served Parliament in the late war. The question of a wider franchise was referred to the existing Parliament. The whole scheme was to be established by agreement with the captive King and the House of Lords. At this stage Cromwell genuinely wanted an agreement with the King, but Charles believed he could gain more by holding out. He had now made a remarkably favourable agreement with the Scots to invade England on his behalf; there were royalist risings in Kent, Essex and South Wales; and a considerable part of the fleet repudiated their Leveller Vice-Admiral Rainborough and declared for the King. So the Second Civil War was fought. At its height, after Cromwell's victory over the Scots at

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Preston and before the surrender of the Royalists at Colchester, was published Walwyn's pamphlet *The Bloody Project* (included in this volume). The quest for a settlement continued after the King's supporters were beaten a second time, and foundered in the end through Charles's refusal to give up the King's veto, or 'negative voice'. The eventual trial and execution of the King were of course illegal: 'first the king can be tried by no court; secondly, no man can be tried by this court', commented the young Republican Algernon Sidney.¹⁵ They were also unpopular. Even the death warrant had to be doctored and some signatures erased.¹⁶ Thus was accomplished the most striking reversal in government of the century. Yet its very violence helped generate its defeat. The King's arguments and bearing at the trial strengthened the cause of the monarchy, as did the publication, the day after the funeral, of John Gauden's *Eikon Basiliké*, perhaps the most successful piece of propaganda of the Civil War period, which used the literary conventions of soliloquy and prayer to dramatise the dead King as a sacred monarch and faulty though penitent man.

Through the several drastic political changes between the death of Charles I and the restoration of Charles II the great question was how to establish a convincing basis for political obligation. Since the monarchy, however defied and circumscribed, was a part of the ancestral constitution, the question of allegiance was more acute than ever after the King's death. The House of Commons, legally summoned by Charles I, had on 6 December 1648 been 'purged' of some forty of its members by the armed force of Colonel Pride. In the end Pride's Purge expelled a hundred and forty members. In addition this House of Commons had already been reduced in numbers by the withdrawal of loyalists early in the Civil War to join the King's Parliament in Oxford – the London Parliament was not the only parliament in this period. Recruiter elections between 1645 and 1648 raised its membership, however; and the Rump of the House of Commons that remained at Westminster retained, in the opinion of many, more legitimacy than any other institution in the nation. Shortly before the execution of the King, this House of Commons declared that 'the people are, under God, the original of all just power' and that the Commons itself comprised Parliament which held 'supreme power in this nation'. In March 1649 monarchy and House of Lords were formally abolished and in May the Commons affirmed that the people of England should be ruled as 'a Commonwealth and free state by the supreme authority of this nation, the representatives of the people in parliament'.¹⁷ Despite

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these ringing declarations the Rump was a doubtfully representative body which dared not face a general election. Cromwell was to expel it in 1653. Four tracts in the present collection appeared during the first year of the Commonwealth thus established. The first, Milton's *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* (?13 February 1649), premises that Charles I was a tyrant and his trial sanctioned by the will of the people. The premise granted, the argument is not unconvincing. The second, *Englands New Chains Discovered* (26 February) by John Lilburne, who opposed Charles's execution, is a bitter accusation of betrayal:

Behold! in the close of all, we hear and see what gives us fresh and pregnant cause to believe . . . that all those specious pretenses, and high Notions of Liberty, with those extraordinary courses that have of late bin taken (as if of necessity for liberty, and which indeed can never be justified, but deserve the greatest punishments, unless they end in just liberty, and an equal Government) appear to us to have bin done and directed by some secret powerful influences, the more securely and unsuspectedly to attain to an absolute domination over the Common-wealth . . . (p. 106, below)

and backed up its protest by specific criticisms and proposals. For this and the second part of the pamphlet, Lilburne, Walwyn, Overton and Prince were imprisoned on a charge of treason on 28 March 1649. The third tract, Overton's *The Baiting of the Great Bull of Bashan* (July), is more remarkable for its style than its political content. It celebrates with impudent *badinage* and wit the very act of defying, by publication from prison, Cromwell and the Rump. This example of literary action, not argument, is itself politically significant. The fourth pamphlet, Gerrard Winstanley's *A New-Years Gift Sent to the Parliament and Armie* (December 1649), gives the view of the tiny and vulnerable Digger community whose significance is no doubt greater from a modern view than it can have been at that time. By comparison with the other writings in this volume, *A New-Years Gift* stands out as a sermon. Its language is imaginative, religious and hortatory, and by an easy and bold metaphor it extends the meaning of 'Kingly power which you have made an act to cast out' into most government and all property. The Diggers were closest of all the political sects to the sporadic but repeated outbreaks of the rural poor against enclosures that had occurred through the reigns of Elizabeth, James and Charles. Winstanley presents the most powerful and radical challenge that can be found to the principles of a Charles I, a Parker, an Ireton, a Cromwell, a Harrington or a Milton. In the modern sense of the word 'revolutionary'¹⁸ Winstanley's sermon is without doubt the most revolutionary tract in this collection.