Introduction: experience other than our own

Once more I come before the public with a work on the history of a nation which is not mine by birth.


As a foreigner, coming to the history of ... Spain [from] ... that of other West European societies, I was frequently struck by the extent to which ... phenomena ... assumed ... to be ... Spanish ... could be found [elsewhere].


*All history rests upon analytical assumptions, whether or not they are made explicit*

That the seventeenth-century English political experience was spectacular and remarkable may not require emphasis, either to historians or to general readers. A recent account begins accordingly by listing some of its extraordinary features. It then concludes: ‘No history can account for such dazzling achievements. It is perhaps as well to gaze upon so bright a firmament rather than to try to measure the gaseous compounds of each star.’ Thus did Lord Brooke write in *The Nature of Truth* (1640) of ‘leaving the search for causes to those who are content, with Icarus, to burn their wings at a fire too hot for them’.

There are few historians, particularly of the seventeenth century, who will

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not respect the prudence of this stance. We cannot account for everything, or anything with finality. Explanation presupposes an informed understanding of what it is we are attempting to explain. Moreover, explanation isn’t everything. One of the most important features of history is its capacity to tell a story. History is a story, indeed, not because that is how it occurred, but because that is what historians make of it. History is not the record of past experience, but the imaginative reconstruction of that experience as a story.5

One of the most effective ways of telling this is by narrative. Yet still the narrative story is made: it owes its existence to the analytical assumptions which have governed particular selection (of ‘events’) and therefore general shape. Readers could be forgiven for not always realising this, or its implications, since historians sometimes write as if it were not the case. It is not always necessary, particularly for an introductory audience, for a historian to expose these analytical assumptions. It is necessary, however, that they be capable of exposing and if necessary defending them; that we take this level of responsibility for our imaginative creations. ‘The deepest instinct of the human mind’, explained F. M. Cornford, ‘is to shape the chaotic world and the illimitable stream of events into some intelligible form which it can hold before itself and take in at one survey.’6 The apparent contrary belief that narrative is capable of constructing itself prior to analysis is a curious feature of recent historiography to which we will return.7

This book tells its story by a combination of analysis and narrative, in that order. One purpose of this is to expose its governing assumptions for critical examination. In particular this account makes explicit what are taken to be the central processes at work and the shape they give the story as a whole. The other purpose of this structure is, however, to give priority to the task of explanation. In the old-fashioned words of Samuel Gardiner: ‘It seemed to me that it was the duty of a serious inquirer to search into the original cause of great events.’8

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Until recently it was a consequence of revisionism that there were few accounts of the century as a whole. Now what remain relatively rare are such accounts which are explanatory and analytical. This is partly because so much modern ‘explanation’ has been exposed as teleology. Yet the explanatory analysis pre-dates modernity as the characteristic response of seventeenth-century people themselves to their troubles. When, towards the end of the century, Richard Baxter composed a *Narrative of the most Memorable Passages of his Life and Times*, he explained:

> it is my purpose here, not to write a full History of the Calamities and Wars of those Times, but only to remember such Generals with the Reasons and Connexion of Things, as may best make the state of those Times understood by them that knew it not personally themselves.

This study shares Baxter’s focus upon ‘Generals with the Reasons and Connexion of Things’. The author is correspondingly conscious of what has been left out. In addition, the more general the argument, the greater the scope for particular exception. This book has been written not in the belief that these difficulties may be transcended, but that they are a price well worth paying for a return to the business of large-scale explanatory analysis. Every advance in our specific knowledge makes general analysis more difficult. Yet at the same time it makes it more necessary, for the accumulation of specific ‘evidence’ is no more important, or interesting, than the questions upon which it is being brought to bear.

A second feature of this book shared with Baxter’s is its focus upon contemporary perceptions. This follows from two other presently unfashionable assumptions: that by and large contemporaries understood their situation and knew what they were talking about; and that such perceptions are themselves historical phenomena requiring explanation. Nothing is more ubiquitous in modern histories of the century than the use of the

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11 Other recent proponents of this view include David Cannadine, ‘British History: Past, Present – and Future?’, *Past and Present* 116 (August 1987); Elliott, *National and Comparative History*. 
word ‘hysteria’ to describe contemporary beliefs that were enduringly and widely held. This is not only the case in relation to those religious fears which were the most important motors of the troubles. When Charles I expressed the view from the outset of his reign that there was a conspiracy against the government of monarchy in England, most historians have ascribed this to royal ‘paranoia’ rather than to the circumstances of his time. This condescension readily communicates itself to students, who explain that the troubles followed from failures both of communication and of understanding. However, that civil war is a tragedy does not necessarily make it an accident.

This book begins from the proposition that we need to take contemporary beliefs seriously. We need to identify them, and then to recover the contexts necessary to explain them. To do this is to discover that it is not contemporaries who have failed to understand their situation but ourselves. This has been partly a result of modern imaginative displacement. It has more specifically reflected our failure to recover the contexts of contemporary perceptions, in time and space. That fear of popery which increased over the seventeenth century is understandable only within the European context of contemporary perceptions: it is modern historians who have been imprisoned by the anachronistic parameters of national historiography. The perception that there was a conspiracy against monarchical government in England was held by every seventeenth-century English monarch, not one. Even the unique utterances of Abiezer Coppe have an explanatory context that transcends centuries, and national boundaries. All of these contexts were understood by contemporaries.

Our starting point is, therefore, in a recognition of the ‘otherness’ of seventeenth-century England. They did things differently there. Attention will be drawn secondly to the need to understand the century as a whole, and so the restoration period, for instance, not as the beginning of a ‘long eighteenth century’, but as the second half of the seventeenth century, and a second half peculiarly in the grip of the first. Finally, emphasis will be placed upon the need to understand this subject in its European context, both as

The particular English experience of wider European processes, and in terms of England’s relationship to other European states.13

The outline analysis that follows is developed in the next chapter and furnishes the structure of the rest of the book. In it the political and intellectual history of seventeenth-century England is considered as the interaction of three processes. All had European contexts and all connected the first and second halves of the century. The first of these was destructive, the second innovatory or creative, and the third reconstructive.

In the first we are examining the impact upon fragile institutions of powerful beliefs. The three phases of the troubles were those three crises which historians have disparately called the causes of the English civil war, the exclusion crisis and the glorious revolution. In fact all three had similar causes and together they formed a connected sequence of instability. This had a series of contexts, connected to both European processes and events. Early Stuart English political and religious institutions were relatively unreformed and undifferentiated. The polarising pressures to which they were subjected were those associated with the European processes of statebuilding, reformation and counter-reformation. In their most destabilising form these arrived in Stuart England through central Europe in 1618. The troubles by which Charles I’s monarchy would be overwhelmed were given their immediate force by the Thirty Years War.

Caroline statebuilding was a response to this context. It was a politically coherent, ideologically focused counter-reformation phenomenon. It was most specifically an attempt to counter the damage done to obedience to monarchy in England by (recently animated, supra-national) reformation religion. It entailed what was the first-attempted seventeenth-century governmental reformation of manners, to which the better-known second, an aspect of the radical reformation of mid-century, was in part a reaction. Those of Charles’ opponents who believed that they were engaged in a struggle for the survival of protestantism, not only in Scotland, England

and Ireland but therefore ultimately in western Europe, may in their own terms have been correct.

The English revolution was an intellectual process, or phenomenon of belief, though with a crucial practical context and some spectacular constitutional as well as literary consequences. Once again it had three phases, each with its European intellectual context: that of civil war radicalism the radical reformation; that of English republicanism predominantly the renaissance; and that of restoration radicalism the refraction of both towards ‘the’ Enlightenment. Unities within the variety of civil war radicalism allow us to understand it as a single process rather than as a series of discrete groups. Comparable unities are evident within the variety of English republicanism. These hinged upon a moral philosophy of self-government rather than a preoccupation with particular constitutional forms. Finally, since the revolution was not a constitutional phenomenon, but a process of belief, the constitutional restoration of monarchy did not end it. Our examination of restoration radicalism will explain how it responded, and adapted, to institutional reconstruction.

The last, reconstructive process was that of restoration. This again occurred in three phases (1660–5, 1681–5 and 1689–94). It entailed a process of grieving, and of struggle between forgetting and memory. As Robert Fisk observed recently of Beirut, one can, after a brutal civil upheaval, rebuild the capital city. The healing of the mind takes longer. That is why, beneath the shallow surface of restoration institutional history perhaps the most fundamental process at work was a generational one. This erased the troubles only with the passing of that generation too damaged to let them go.

Thus restoration was not a fait accompli but an aspiration, quickly inaugurated but tardily and bloodily achieved. The things to which it directed itself included not only institutional reconstruction but the recontainment within those institutions of the ideas, and fears, by which they had previously been destroyed. It aspired, in short, to end both troubles and revolution. The history of the second half of the seventeenth century is that of the struggle between these three processes, in memory and in the present.

14 Jonathan Scott, ‘Restoration Process: Or, If This Isn’t a Party We’re Not Having a Good Time’, *Albion* 25, 4 (Winter 1993).
The context of time: continuity and change

Our first context for the reconstruction of contemporary experience and perceptions is that of time. The crucial historiographical concepts at issue are those of continuity and change. Because seventeenth-century English people lived in a traditional, pre-modern society they were a good deal more mindful, and approving, of continuity than of change. This is the reverse of the modern situation, the historiographical prejudices of which are summed up by Lawrence Stone’s dictum: ‘if history is not concerned with change, it is nothing’.15

To the extent that we impose this perspective upon an alien society we will fail to locate that society. The historiographical landscape of the seventeenth century is famously disfigured by the mining damage caused by modern prospectors for change. This does not mean, on the other hand, that there was neither change nor perception of change. On the contrary, spectators of the troubles lived through an astonishing series of experiences that cumulatively left the country much altered. We will be concerned with the limits as well as the extent of that change, for enormous contemporary effort was devoted to such limitation.

Seventeenth-century attitudes to change spanned the range between two extremes. On the one hand there was that hostility to ‘innovation’ which stood at the heart of the troubles and also informed the restoration process. On the other was that radical demand for change which was the English revolution. Between the two came the perspective of statebuilders like Sir George Downing who understood that fiscal and military modernisation was necessary to maintain the political status quo.16 These perspectives are to be distinguished from the contemporary experience of change, to which they did not necessarily correspond. That those opposed to change in the seventeenth century sometimes introduced it we are reminded by the record both of the Caroline government (1625–40) and of its parliamentary opponents (1640–59). Together the troubles, revolution and restoration processes constituted a brutal and accelerated course of national instruction. Its ultimate consequence was transformation of the national state from European laughing stock to global great power. Over the seventeenth century there transpired a perceived threat, a radical demand and an eventual important experience of change.

change within a traditional society anchored by precedent. The resulting strain partly accounts for the political role played in this century by public memory. Each episode of the troubles was crucially informed by public memory. The initial reaction of this society to the mid-century upheaval was to seek refuge in reconstruction and reaction. It was the eventual conclusion of the seventeenth-century learning process that restoration could be made to work only by embracing the limited innovation of statebuilding.

Thus one objective of this study will be to understand seventeenth-century change in the context of continuity. The best way, for instance, of assessing actual differences between the three crises of popery and arbitrary government is within the properly historical context furnished by contemporary perception of their similarities. There will be reason to subject to particular scrutiny in this respect two sorts of modern historiographical claims. One insists that contemporaries thought in one way, and therefore not in another. The second suggests that they were beginning to think in this way in anticipation of ourselves. It will frequently be necessary on the contrary to seek to recover the unity-in-multiplicity of our subject from the modern impulse to categorise and subdivide. This is to rescue from premature subjection to the rules of party politics an age still struggling against this outcome. In the seventeenth century the predominant ambition remained not distinction, but unity-in-variety: harmony in accordance with the government of reason.

THE CONTEXT OF SPACE: NATIONALITY AND MODERNITY

Most modern European historiography has been national historiography. This been not only a consequence, but an arm, of the nation-state. In relation to this, a historian of pre-modern seventeenth-century England needs to consider two questions. One is the appropriate context, or contexts, within which to understand the political experience of the kingdom. The other is the extent to which this story is best understood as focusing upon the development of the nation-state.

18 See in particular chs. 10 (pp. 229–46), 13 (pp. 290–316) and 15 (pp. 342–64) below. See also Scott, Restoration Crisis, pp. 351–9; Scott, ‘Classical Republicanism in Seventeenth-Century England and the Netherlands’, in Quentin Skinner and Martin van Gelderen (eds.), Republicanism and Constitutionalism in Early Modern Europe (Cambridge, forthcoming).
All historians would accept that the seventeenth century yielded other experiences, and other stories. Most would acknowledge the potential for teleological distortion inherent in the state-evolution approach. The way forward adopted here is, on the one hand, to acknowledge the importance of statebuilding as a seventeenth-century political theme. It is, on the other, to question national assumptions concerning its course, and in particular to challenge the assumption that our understanding of the seventeenth-century political experience needs to be organised around it.

During most of the seventeenth century the English (and, thereafter, British) state had not yet been constructed in its modern form. English contemporaries saw their world, and themselves, in sub- and supra-national as well as national terms. The internationality of contemporary perceptions has been significantly appreciated by historians of ideas.19 It is histories of events that continue to be rendered almost exclusively in national terms (whether English or British). Yet the major events of the seventeenth century were largely the consequence of contemporary ideas. In no area have the restoration imperatives of statebuilding and forgetting been enforced so completely. It is this pre-modern world of both perception and action which needs to be recovered from a national historiography that has attempted to obliterate it.

One recent study dates the political attempt to inculcate a sense of English national distinctness, complete with ‘erroneous national memory’, from the Henrician break with Rome.20 However, the decisive context of British national historiography lies in the long age of military and imperial

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20 Edwin Jones, The English Nation: The Great Myth (Stroud 1998). Until then, Jones explains, England had been ‘increasingly and consciously part of continental Europe . . . primarily as part of the Catholic church’ (pp. ix, 1). It is not to dispute the reality of this attempt to suggest, as this study does, that Tudor and Stuart governments lacked the capacity to control the minds of their citizens effectively. During the seventeenth century, for instance, when the concept of Christendom remained alive and well, that anti-papery which had, during the later Elizabethan period, served as a unifying political force came to unite English and Scots with ‘foreign’ protestant subjects against their own rulers.
greatness. It was by these hard means that Britain won its insularity. In pre-modern Europe, where transport was efficient only upon water, the Channel was (as it were) a bridge, not a moat. Two aspects of England’s troubles were frequent military incursions, unsuccessful and successful, and a deep and justified accompanying contemporary insecurity. Between the early modern and modern periods these circumstances were reversed. It was only as heir of the subsequent military and political security that Winston Churchill could speak, in a new moment of danger (1940), of ‘our long island history . . . and the long continuity of our institutions and our empire’:

we shall prove ourselves once again able to defend our island home, to ride out the storm of war, and to outlive the menace of tyranny . . . we shall defend our island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds.21

A few years earlier G. M. Trevelyan had argued that during Elizabeth’s reign the ‘national or patriotic genius’ emancipated itself from ‘that obedience to cosmopolitan orders and corporations which had been inculcated by the Catholic church and the feudal obligation’. The Tudors ‘abolished or depreciated’ everything standing between the individual and the state. Thus, ‘In the heat of that struggle English civilization was fused into its modern form, at once insular and oceanic, distinct from the continental civilization of which the Norman Conquest had once made it part.’22 In fact, during the seventeenth century England’s ‘beaches’ and ‘landing grounds’ belonged to its invaders, none of whom was effectively opposed. To this extent this national mythology inverted the historical reality.

A few historians of seventeenth-century England have successfully transcended this national historiography. What made David Hume’s History of England (2 vols., 1754–7) the analytical as well as literary masterpiece it remains was that it found not only its contexts but its subject. That subject was contemporary belief, and destructive religious belief in particular. This was considered across the seventeenth century as a whole and within a European framework. These foci were shared over a century later by Leopold von Ranke. Contemporaneously with Ranke the English historian Samuel