

## Introduction

Writing in November 1648, the Puritan minister Richard Baxter exclaimed in dismay that ‘*Every ignorant, empty braine (which usually hath the highest esteem of it selfe) hath the liberty of the Presse . . . whereby the number of bookes is grown so great that they begin with many to grow contemptible*’.<sup>1</sup> By 1653, he had come to fear the ‘*Luxuriant Fertility, or Licentiousness of the Press of late*’ as ‘*a design of the Enemy to bury and overwhelm in a croud . . . Judicious, Pious, Excellent Writings*’.<sup>2</sup> Baxter’s disquiet was fuelled by his recent experiences as a chaplain to a regiment of the New Model Army. Like the vast majority of those Presbyterian Puritans who sided with Parliament, he was ‘unfeignedly for King and Parliament’, and was committed to the Civil War aim of bringing the King to a reconciliation with Parliament. When, in 1645, he joined the Army, he was appalled to find the mood of Cromwell’s forces far more extreme. To him it appeared that those he described as ‘hot-headed Sectaries’ intended no less than ‘to subvert both Church and State’: ‘they took the King for a Tyrant and an Enemy, and really intended absolutely to master him, or ruine him’.<sup>3</sup> Baxter’s Puritanism valued order, tradition and authority; the revolutionary and radical wing of the movement, as represented by Levellers, Anabaptists, Ranters and, later, Quakers, disclosed to him a prospect of anarchy. Within the Army itself, these anarchic ideas were spread by word of mouth, through preaching, oral discussion and disputation; but it was the prolific output of the press which spread them through the country at large.

While we may dispute Baxter’s assessment of the dire consequences of this ‘*Luxuriant Fertility*’, there is no disputing either the productivity or the influence of the press during the middle decades of the seventeenth century. Both were unprecedented in our cultural history. In the century and a half since the printing press had first been established in England by William Caxton in 1476 its output had steadily increased, but during the middle of the seventeenth century this strengthening flow of publications became a torrent. An annual output of fewer than 300 titles in 1600 had become 3,000 in 1642.

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A unique record of this output is preserved in the extraordinary collection of broadsides, tracts, pamphlets and books assembled by the bookseller George Thomason, who, between 1640 and 1661, amassed 22,000 publications.<sup>4</sup> Never before had so many people turned to writing, never before had so many seen their thoughts into print, and never before had what they printed generated such extensive interest and public debate.

For this output there were two, related, causes. First, the civil wars which engulfed the kingdoms of Britain in the mid seventeenth century differed from earlier medieval conflicts in one crucial respect.<sup>5</sup> Unlike the fifteenth-century Wars of the Roses, they were not fought over who should be King, nor, unlike the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Scots Wars of Independence, over who owed allegiance to whom: at the outbreak of hostilities, everyone agreed that Charles I should be King and that subjects owed him allegiance. What men fought over was rather what kind of king he should be, over the idea of kingship, over the place, rights and prerogatives of monarchy within the constitution and over the extent of the subject's obligation of obedience to a sovereign. How far the monarch might, or might not, disregard the will of his people voiced in Parliament, and how far the state was, or was not, entitled to coerce individual consciences in matters of religious faith, were the points at issue. It was, that is to say, an ideological conflict, a war of ideas, and, in that sense, the first modern war in our history. When in due course it became apparent that, though defeated, Charles would never modify his conception of divine right kingship by acknowledging obligations to his subjects or by respecting the will of Parliament, Charles' right to rule did become the issue, but at a theoretical, not a personal, level. What, in politics, had been a conflict between notions of unlimited (or despotic) and limited (or constitutional) monarchy became a conflict between monarchy and republicanism; and what, in religion, had been a challenge to episcopalianism from Presbyterianism became the repudiation of a national state church (whatever its complexion) and of state-imposed uniformity of religious practice by Independent advocates of 'liberty of conscience' (that is, toleration of the right of individuals to follow their own beliefs).<sup>6</sup> At every stage of their development, these competing notions required articulation and defence. They required, that is to say, publication. Hence, the many battles of the Civil War included a battle of the books, fought, in Clarendon's phrase, with 'paper skirmishes'.<sup>7</sup>

Secondly, in 1641, just at the outset of hostilities, the apparatus of pre-publication censorship, which had been in place since the time of Henry VIII and by which the state sought to control the dissemination of ideas, collapsed. For the first time since the introduction of printing into England, there was no restriction upon what might be published. Although this

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freedom was neither entirely novel (state censorship had never been efficiently or universally enforced) nor of long duration (the Long Parliament soon re-imposed the old legislation), it was an incentive and encouragement to publication which could not thereafter be restrained. The result was not merely an increase in volume of publication, but a huge extension of the range of published material and a diversification of the social background and opinions of its authors. John Bunyan is only the most famous of a host of marginal and socially disadvantaged people for whom the turmoil of the mid-century for the first time provided both the incentive and the means to express themselves publicly in print.<sup>8</sup> In Bunyan, there is a discernible wariness of the monied and of the social elite – Mr Worldly-Wiseman and most of the dubious characters in *The Pilgrim's Progress* are 'gentlemen', Giant Despair is a great landowner – but the radicalism of these marginal voices could reach much further. It is epitomized in the remarkable democratic conviction of Colonel Thomas Rainsborough that the franchise should be extended far beyond those propertied classes to whom it was then confined, since 'the poorest he that is in England hath a life to live, as the greatest he . . . every man that is to live under a government ought first by his own consent to put himself under that government'.<sup>9</sup> Such ideas were hardly to be voiced again until the nineteenth century, and not to be fully enacted until the twentieth.

Among the voices now heard in numbers for the first time are those of women. The challenge to traditional hierarchies in public affairs was matched by a challenge in domestic and private affairs to received gender roles and to traditional notions of sexual difference. 'Man is made to govern commonwealths, and women their private families' was the traditional view.<sup>10</sup> For almost the first time, that is now challenged by defences of women's right of access to public spheres of activity (including publication) which, though the word was not then available, might be described as feminist. Above all, woman's dignity and potential as God's creature is affirmed in repudiations of the standard inferences drawn from Genesis: that, created after Adam from his rib, woman is secondary and subordinate to man, and that, the occasion of his fall from perfection and of humanity's expulsion from Paradise, she is both prone to, and the vehicle of, temptation. Women, pronounced Bunyan, 'when-ever they would perk it and Lord it over their Husbands, ought to remember, that both by Creation and by Transgression they are made to be in Subjection' and therefore 'to the Worlds end, must wear tokens of her *Underlingship*'.<sup>11</sup> By contrast, women such as the Independent Katherine Chidley allowed a wife's conscience equal authority to her husband's, and the Quaker Margaret Fell (afterwards the wife of the Quaker leader, George Fox) vigorously defended the right of women to a

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public voice like men.<sup>12</sup> There are, of course, far more conservative female voices, and women's publications frequently carry deferential prefaces, but for any woman to appear in print at all was a sufficiently remarkable thing in an age when it could be asserted – with rhetorical and satirical emphasis, certainly, but nevertheless with disturbingly serious intent – that 'whore is scarce a more reproachful name / Than poetess'.<sup>13</sup>

With such searching ideas abroad, those of more conservative temper were put upon explaining and defending their allegiance to traditional modes. That traditionalism focused its commitment on the figure of the executed Charles I and on the banned Book of Common Prayer: these became the potent symbols and badges of loyalism.<sup>14</sup> Theirs was a grievous and all but incomprehensible loss. From having had control of every lever of church and state, they found themselves deprived of all access to power largely by those who, in pre-revolutionary England, had counted for very little. Cromwell's achievement was certainly unprecedented in English history, inconceivable to conservative tempers and inexplicable to traditional patterns of thought. The struggle to come to terms with it marks Royalist literature of the mid century, and not only Royalist literature. It is one of the many fascinations of Marvell's 'Horatian Ode' to watch the figure of Cromwell breaking free from conventional patterns of praise; the poem is both fascinated and appalled, overwhelmed and apprehensive, as it recognizes that Cromwell's career can be contained neither within received constitutional ideas nor within the tropes of panegyric rhetoric. Cromwell all but defeats words, as he defeated his military foes: 'Tis Madness to resist or blame / The force of angry Heavens flame'.<sup>15</sup> Marvell's ode opens with the rival claims of the active and the retired life: for Royalists and episcopalians, withdrawal from public life, and even exile, were their lot during the 1650s. As in 1660, when Charles II was restored to his throne, the Puritans would have to try to understand their defeat,<sup>16</sup> so, during the 1650s, Royalists and episcopalians had to come to terms with the apparent loss of their cause. In the poetry and prose of the period, retirement, retreat and isolation become the contexts for reflection and retrenchment. There is an elegiac note, and an unmistakable regret and longing, in the poetry of a Herrick, of a Vaughan, or a Philips, but there is hardly submissiveness.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, what we might be tempted to think of as fanciful excursions into the remote world of romance on the part of Royalist writers of fiction, and as escapism in their readers, prove to be resilient re-engagements with contemporary political affairs.<sup>18</sup>

The context for this political and religious speculation and debate, and in part the explanation for it, was the uncertainty and unpredictability of the times. Contemporary experience was overwhelmingly of disruption, disorder and disorientation; of, in the frequently cited words of Acts 17:6, a

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‘world turned upside down’.<sup>19</sup> For some, such as Gerrard Winstanley’s Diggers, this overturning was rich with possibilities, possibilities of recovering Eden, or of building the New Jerusalem, perhaps even of welcoming King Jesus for his millennial reign.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, by Milton, the disputatious ferment which so distressed Baxter was construed as vital to continuing Christian commitment: ‘Truth’, he wrote in *Areopagitica* (1644), referring to Psalm 85:11, ‘is compar’d in Scripture to a streaming fountain; if her waters flow not in a perpetuall progression, they sick’n into a muddy pool of conformity and tradition.’<sup>21</sup> Stability and security are deeply suspect to such a cast of mind; radical interrogation of received customs and beliefs – the pursuit, rather than the possession, of truth – is the mark of the true Christian. Such positive notes are resoundingly struck, but perplexity, if not anxiety and apprehension, even despair, are more often to be met with than radical fervour. Cromwell and the power of the Army ruined, in Marvell’s words, ‘the great Work of Time, / And cast the kingdome old / Into another Mold’, but it was far from clear quite what that mould would be or how durable it would prove.<sup>22</sup> The state, as well as Charles I, lost its head on 30 January 1649; there ensued increasingly desperate efforts to heal the body politic. The 1650s are a period of constitutional experimentation, and of attendant uncertainty, as Commonwealth gives way to Protectorate, and its first constitution to its second; as offers of the crown are made to Cromwell; and as, in the eighteen months following his death, constitutions and governments change every few months, if not every few weeks. This was a world without the traditional assurances of security and stability, without readily recognizable emblems of order, a world in which customs, precedents, traditions and authorities could no longer be relied upon.

This uncertainty generated on every side an increasing public desire, and concern, to know what was afoot. Since what was happening in the formerly distant world of politics now bore immediately and directly on everyday lives, current affairs came to matter in a new, and urgent, way. The ‘news’ hence assumed its modern sense and importance. Newsbooks, the forerunners of the newspaper, were first printed in the 1640s, seeking both to inform and to give a partisan gloss to their reporting of events: John Birkenhead’s Royalist *Mercurius Aulicus* was answered by Marchamont Nedham’s *Mercurius Britannicus*.<sup>23</sup> (Subsequent historical, autobiographical and biographical accounts would have a similar eye to justifying party allegiances.)<sup>24</sup> As that implies, public opinion now comes to count as never before. Ordinary people (at least, ordinary literate people) were empowered by the uncertainty of the times and the competing claims to their allegiance of rival factions: what they thought, which side they took, mattered. Readers came to assume a new importance as the warring sides sought to enlist public

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support through the press; reading itself now becomes a critical activity. Attempts to promote one side and to discredit the opposition led to propaganda publications, such as Parliament's publication in *The King's Cabinet Opened* (1645) of the highly damaging correspondence of Charles I, captured at the battle of Naseby. This battle of the books is nicely exemplified by the direct engagement between the presentation of Charles I as a martyr to truth and justice in *Eikon Basilike* (1649) and its direct contradiction in Milton's *Eikonoklastes* (1649).<sup>25</sup>

Whether this disorder was the consequence of deep-seated constitutional and religious causes or of short-term frictions, whether it had the inevitability and radicalism of a revolution or the arbitrary contingency of war, historians debate. The older Whig view was that the century presented a steady march towards constitutional democracy. In the 1960s and 70s, the work of Christopher Hill, drawing out the long-term causes of the conflict and focusing on its radical wing, discerned in it the first European revolution in the Marxist sense of that word. It was, indeed, his books which established the term *English Revolution* to cover the period which had previously been referred to as the Great Rebellion, or the Civil War, and the Interregnum.<sup>26</sup> During the last twenty or thirty years, 'revisionist' historians, attending to the immediate experience of war in provincial lives unremarkable for political action or intellectual daring, have been less impressed by either the idealistic fervour of the participants or the clear-headedness of their aims. While not denying the motivating power of religious fervour or libertarian aspirations, their work registers the confusion and haphazardness of the course of events as strongly as ideological commitment.<sup>27</sup>

Debates about the appropriateness of the term *revolution*, or about its nature, do not, however, affect the sensitivity of the writing of the period to the turmoil of the times. This engagement with current affairs was not confined to such obviously topical genres as newsbooks. Early twentieth-century accounts of the literature of the period were accustomed to making a firm distinction between, on the one hand, ephemeral tracts and pamphlets which were 'merely' political or topical in their interest, and, on the other, works of literature which rise above immediate particularities to engage with universal truths. The contributors to this volume are among those scholars who, since the 1970s, have challenged and finally discredited this distinction. They have done so in two ways. First, by demonstrating that rhetorical skills are not confined to any particular form of writing, they have greatly extended the range of what falls within the purview of the literary scholar. Whereas older critical discussion had admitted to the canon from among the artisan class only Bunyan, and then with some embarrassment at his ignorance of literary decorum, critics now engage with the writing of an Abiezer Coppe,

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of Quaker pamphleteers, and, most signally, of numerous women writers of every religious and political persuasion. This admission of controversial and topical prose is evident, too, in reappraisals of Milton, who is now recognized not merely as an epic poet but as a writer of extraordinary prose.<sup>28</sup>

Secondly, recent historically sensitive critics have demonstrated that no genre, however sophisticated or elitist, is free from the pressure of its time. It is now recognized that the century's disputes, forcefully articulated in controversial prose, and the experience of war, were rhetorically refigured and imaginatively refracted in all genres, however seemingly distant from the conflict. There is no doubting that Marvell's 'Horatian Ode' is inspired by, and engages with, the constitutional crisis of the mid century; but it is there, too, in the pastoral retreat of Herrick and in the devotional exercises of Jeremy Taylor. Similarly, *Paradise Lost* is now read against Milton's times, as well as against Virgil or St Augustine. Far from rising majestically and timelessly above the seventeenth-century fray, Milton's epic is as deeply marked by contemporary experience as by Classical precedent, as implicated in revolutionary politics as in Christian theology. His portrayal of the War in Heaven owes as much to the Civil War, his Satan as much to the Stuarts, as do either to Homer or to the Book of Revelation.<sup>29</sup> It may be Biblical history which is revealed to Adam in Books 11 and 12, but it is seventeenth-century history which has resonated throughout the epic, as throughout all the writing of the period.

The chapters in this Companion are exercises in such historically sensitive reading. They seek to introduce students to the centrality of literary production in the English Revolution, to the generic range of literature's engagement with the revolutionary times, to the extraordinary number and variety of men and women who expressed themselves in print, and to the rhetorical power, imaginative daring and multi-vocal richness of their texts.

## NOTES

- 1 Richard Baxter, *Aphorismes of Justification* (1649), pref. ep., sigs. A1–A1v.
- 2 Richard Baxter, *The Right Method for a Settled Peace of Conscience* (1653), pref. ep., sig. A11. The 'Enemy' is, of course, Satan.
- 3 Richard Baxter, *Reliquiae Baxterianae* (1696), 1.50–1, §§ 73, 74.
- 4 The productivity of the press is discussed more fully in John Morrill's and Sharon Achinstein's chapters below, pp. 21–3, 50–68.
- 5 For the occasion and course of these wars, see John Morrill's chapter below, pp. 13–31.
- 6 These issues are discussed in more detail in Martin Dzelzainis' chapter below, pp. 32–49.
- 7 Clarendon, *HR*, II:13, 206. For Edward Hyde, Earl of Clarendon, and his *History of the Rebellion*, see David Norbrook's chapter below, pp. 241–6.

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- 8 On Bunyan, see Richard L. Greaves' chapter below, pp. 268–85.
- 9 A. S. P. Woodhouse (ed.), *Puritanism and Liberty: Being the Army Debates (1647–49) from the Clarke Manuscripts*, 3rd edn (London: Dent, 1986), p. 53, cited and discussed in Thomas N. Corns' chapter below, pp. 74–5.
- 10 Margaret Cavendish, *The Worlds Olio* (1655), preface, in N. H. Keeble (ed.), *The Cultural Identity of Seventeenth-Century Woman* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 47–8.
- 11 John Bunyan, *An Exposition on the Ten First Chapters of Genesis* (first published in Bunyan's *Works* (1692)), in *MW*, XII:147; Bunyan, *A Case of Conscience Resolved* (1683), in *MW*, IV:325.
- 12 Katherine Chidley, *Justification of the Independent Churches of Christ* (1641) and [Margaret Fell], *Women's Speaking Justified* (1666), excerpted in Keeble (ed.), *Cultural Identity*, pp. 201–3. See further Elaine Hobby's chapter, below, pp. 162–78.
- 13 John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester, 'Artemisa to Chloe', lines 26–7 (written 1674?), in Frank H. Ellis (ed.), *The Complete Works of John Wilmot* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994), p. 49. See further the chapters by Susan Wiseman and by Helen Wilcox and Sheila Ottway, below, pp. 127–61.
- 14 These and their literature are discussed in Isabel Rivers' chapter below, pp. 198–214.
- 15 Andrew Marvell, 'An Horatian Ode upon Cromwel's Return from Ireland', lines 25–6, in *P&L*, 1:92. Marvell's view of Cromwell is discussed in Annabel Patterson's essay below, pp. 107–23.
- 16 This is one of the themes pursued in David Norbrook's chapter below, pp. 233–50.
- 17 See Alan Rudrum's chapter below, pp. 181–97.
- 18 See Paul Salzman's chapter below, pp. 215–30.
- 19 Cf. the title of Christopher Hill's seminal study of radical culture during the 1640s and 1650s, *The World Turned Upside Down* (London: Maurice Temple Smith, 1972).
- 20 For discussion of Winstanley, and of other varieties of radical optimism, see Thomas N. Corns' chapter below, pp. 71–86.
- 21 Milton, *CPW*, II:543. See further David Loewenstein's chapter below, pp. 87–106.
- 22 Marvell, 'Horatian Ode', lines 34–6, in *P&L*, 1:92.
- 23 See Sharon Achinstein below, pp. 58–60.
- 24 See David Norbrook's chapter below, pp. 233–50.
- 25 *Eikon Basilike* is discussed in Isabel Rivers' chapter below, pp. 205–6.
- 26 Cf. such titles as *Puritanism and Revolution* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1958); *The Century of Revolution, 1603–1714* (London: Nelson, 1961); *The Intellectual Origins of the English Revolution* (Oxford University Press, 1965). In the seventeenth century, the word *revolution* signified cyclical movement or rotation, rather than (as in the modern sense) abrupt change; it was hence not used of contemporary events. Contemporaries were more likely to describe as *innovation* what we might call a revolution in politics or religion (as noted by Michael Wilding, *Dragons Teeth: Literature in the English Revolution* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), p. 91). However, in 'The Word "Revolution"', in his *A Nation of Change and Novelty*, rev. edn (London: Bookmarks, 1993), pp.



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100–20, Christopher Hill argues that anticipations of the modern sense can in fact be detected in seventeenth-century usage.

27 For a fine summary account of the differences between this position and Hill's, see John Morrill's chapter 'Christopher Hill's Revolution', in his *The Nature of the English Revolution* (Harlow: Longman, 1993), pp. 274–84. Historians of the 'revisionist' stamp include, besides Morrill himself (see his chapter in this volume, pp. 13–31), Anthony Fletcher, Conrad Russell, Kevin Sharpe and Blair Worden. For a useful introduction to the issues, see Ann Hughes, *The Causes of the English Civil War*, 2nd edn (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998); William Lamont, *Puritanism and Historical Controversy* (London: UCL Press, 1996); R. C. Richardson, *The Debate on the English Revolution*, 3rd edn (Manchester University Press, 1998).

28 See David Loewenstein's chapter below, pp. 87–106.

29 See the discussion in Nigel Smith's chapter below, pp. 251–67.

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