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Andy Wood

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The 1549 Rebellions and the Making of Early Modern England

This is a major new study of the 1549 rebellions, the largest and most important risings in Tudor England. Based upon extensive new archival evidence, the book sheds fresh light on the causes, course and long-term consequences of the insurrections. Andy Wood focuses on key themes in the new social history of politics, concerning the end of medieval popular rebellion; the Reformation and popular politics; popular political language; early modern state formation; speech, silence and social relations; and social memory and the historical representation of the rebellions. He examines the long-term significance of the rebellions for the development of English society, arguing that they represent an important moment of discontinuity between the late medieval and the early modern periods. This compelling new history of Tudor politics from the bottom up will be essential reading for late medieval and early modern historians as well as early modern literary critics.

ANDY WOOD is Professor of Social History at the School of History, University of East Anglia. His first book, *The Politics of Social Conflict: The Peak Country, 1520–1770* (1999), was declared *Proxime Accessit* in 1999 for the Royal Historical Society's Whitfield Prize.

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THE 1549 REBELLIONS AND THE MAKING OF EARLY MODERN ENGLAND

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For Max and Rosa

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In 1938, Norwich gained a new City Hall. The entrance to the building is graced by impressive brass doors, decorated with eighteen plaques depicting the working lives of the people of the interwar city. Shoe production is represented, as is the then-new industry of aircraft manufacture; engineering is present, alongside the much older textile industry. The apparent intention was to project an image of industrial, urban modernity, suitable to an ancient city that looked to the future. Appropriately enough, Norwich's past also featured in some of the plaques. One of these depicted a tortured image of a man, dressed in mid-sixteenth-century clothing, twisting on a noose. Meaningless to most outsiders, the image was likely to be recognisable to most local people. It alluded to the most famous event in the history of the city: Kett's rebellion of 1549. In the course of this rising, three battles had been fought within Norwich, climaxing in a bloody encounter between the rebels and a royal army. Following his defeat, Robert Kett had been hanged in chains from the walls of Norwich Castle. It was the execution of this rebel leader that the plaque on the doors of Norwich City Hall commemorated. The image presents Kett's rebellion as a notable event in the history of Norwich. But the 1549 insurrections have a larger significance. The risings of that year reflect important changes both in popular politics and in the fabric of society, while the rebellions also represent a key moment in English history: the end of the tradition of late medieval popular protest.

This book seeks to recapture something of the causes, course, horrors, excitements, consequences and meanings of the 1549 rebellions. In writing the book, I have incurred a great many debts. First of all, it is a particular pleasure to be able to thank all three of the original editors of the series in which this book appears – John Morrill, John Guy and Anthony Fletcher – for providing encouragement at different stages of the book's production. I am also enormously grateful to Ethan Shagan for some characteristically perceptive and intelligent criticisms. Many other individuals have provided references, proposed lines of inquiry or suggested interpretive avenues. I would like to thank the following for suggestions, references, support and

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It seems a long time ago since I first came to Norfolk and heard the story of Robert Kett's rising. Way back in 1986, Sarah Bracking, appalled to learn that I didn't know the story, introduced me to the subject. I can only plead, as a Mancunian, that she hadn't heard of Peterloo either. One of the many wonderful things about my adopted county is the long-established tradition of local history writing, from which I have learnt so much. I hope that this book repays that community with some new knowledge.

The years during which this book was written were not always the easiest. There have been times when I have leaned perhaps too heavily on friends and family. I am therefore especially grateful to my parents, Jim and Joyce Wood, and to my friends for being there for me: John Arnold, Cathie Carmichael, John Morrill, Deb Riozzie, Dave Rollison, Lucy Simpson, Garthine Walker and Keith Wrightson.

Like many historians, I spend too much time in the past. As to the present and the future, I am immensely proud to be able to dedicate this book to my children, Max and Rosa. They have enriched my life in ways that, before they came into it, I could never have imagined.

ABBREVIATIONS

APC	J. R. Dasent <i>et al.</i> (eds.), <i>Acts of the Privy Council, 1542–1631</i> , new ser., 46 vols. (London, 1890–1964)
BL	British Library
Blomefield	F. Blomefield, <i>An essay towards a topographical history of the county of Norfolk</i> (1739–75; 2nd edn, London, 1805–10, 11 vols.)
CCCC	Parker Library, Corpus Christi College, Cambridge
CLRO	Corporation of London Records Office
CPR	<i>Calendar of Patent Rolls</i>
Crowley, <i>Select works</i>	J. Meadows Cowper (ed.), <i>The select works of Robert Crowley</i> (Early English Text Society, extra ser., 15, London, 1872)
CSP, <i>Span</i>	M. A. S. Hume (ed.), <i>Calendar of letters and state papers relating to English affairs, preserved principally in the Archives of Simancas</i> , 4 vols. (London, 1892–9)
ERO	Essex Record Office
HMC	Historical Manuscripts Commission
Holinshed	R. Holinshed, <i>Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland</i> , 6 vols. (1577 & 1586; new edn, London, 1808), III
Hooker	W. J. Harte, J. W. Schopp and H. Tapley-Soker (eds.), <i>The description of the citie of Excester by John Vowell alias Hoker</i> , 3 vols. (Exeter, 1919), II
L&P	<i>Letters and papers, foreign and domestic, of the reign of Henry VIII: preserved in the Public Record Office, the British Museum and elsewhere in England</i> , 21 vols. (London, 1880–91)

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Latimer, <i>Sermons</i>	G. E. Corrie (ed.), <i>Sermons of Hugh Latimer, sometime Bishop of Worcester, Martyr, 1555</i> , Parker Society, 22 (Cambridge, 1844)
More/Robynson	T. More, <i>Utopia</i> (Eng. trans., 1551; London, 1910 edn)
Neville/Woods	R. Woods, <i>Norfolke furies and their foyle</i> (London, 1615)
NRO	Norfolk Record Office
<i>P&P</i>	<i>Past and Present</i>
PRO	National Archives, Public Record Office
Sotherton	B. L. Beer (ed.), ‘The commosyon in Norfolk, 1549’, <i>Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies</i> , 6, 1 (1976), 73–99
TRP	P. L. Hughes and J. F. Larkin (eds.), <i>Tudor Royal Proclamations</i> , 3 vols. (New Haven, CT, 1964–9)
VCH	Victoria County History

All dates have been modernised.
All place names are from Norfolk, unless otherwise indicated.

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PREFACE

This book tells the story of the 1549 rebellions. It does so for three reasons: it is a story that is worth telling; the story illuminates key themes in late medieval and early modern history; and the story highlights fundamental changes in mid-sixteenth-century society and popular politics. Perhaps most of all, this book aims to dispel the notion that the ‘masses of the Tudor period’ were ‘inarticulate’. In place of the characterisation of the rebels of 1549 as ‘simple men and boys’, it is here argued that popular political culture in Tudor England was rich, sophisticated and vibrant and that it deserves to occupy an important place in the historical interpretation of the period.¹ It is my intention, then, not only to add to the stock of knowledge about 1549, but also to suggest new ways in which a fuller appreciation of the lives of early modern labouring people might change historical interpretations of the period as a whole.

This book straddles two genres of historical writing: that of political history and social history. Its claim to occupy this interpretive high ground is based upon, firstly, the emergence of a post-revisionist history of politics and religion in sixteenth-century England; secondly, the development of new approaches to popular politics in late medieval England; and lastly, the emergence of a new social history of politics. Moreover, the book aims to break down some key historiographical boundaries: that which divides the late medieval from the early modern; and that which separates political history from social, cultural and economic history.

Over the past decade, the political history of Tudor England has gone through some significant changes. Just over ten years ago, the editor of an important collection of essays raised the possibility that a study might be written of the ‘symbols, rituals and mentalities of popular political culture’; yet the essays that comprised that collection remained resolutely focused

¹ Quoting B. L. Beer, *Rebellion and riot: popular disorder in England during the reign of Edward VI* (Kent, OH, 1982), 63, 82.

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upon high political culture.² Nowadays, it would be unthinkable too that such a volume did not deal with popular politics.³ Just as recent work in social history has emphasised the ways in which early modern working people negotiated an otherwise unequal social order, so Ethan Shagan has argued that ‘the English Reformation was not done *to* people, it was done *with* them’.⁴ Shagan ends with the proposition that it is only ‘by exploring popular politics that we can begin to understand the English Reformation’.⁵ Elsewhere, a similarly nuanced picture of the relationship between Crown and people is beginning to emerge. In John Cooper’s recent monograph, the parish church is presented as a key site in the organisation of political allegiance, persuasion and propaganda. In this account, the authority of the Tudors is shown to depend not only upon powerful magnates but also upon village and town elites.⁶ After a long period in which Tudor political historians were almost ostentatiously uninterested in the political beliefs of the commons, popular politics seems suddenly to be everywhere.⁷

In a brilliant essay, Shagan has deployed the correspondence between Protector Somerset and the rebellious commons of 1549 as a way of exploring the ‘relationship between Tudor court politics and “politics out-of-doors”’. For Shagan, this correspondence suggests the possibility of writing ‘a post-revisionist interpretation of mid-Tudor politics’ which ‘might usefully spend less time examining the minutiae of government administration and more time analysing the government attempts at self-representation and the “feedback networks” that existed between government policy and public response’. Writing in 1999, it seemed to Shagan that this new history of the mid-Tudor polity should focus upon ‘the period’s unusually dynamic interplay between rulers and ruled’. At the heart of this analysis is Protector Somerset, whose populism appealed ‘downward for support from those outside the political establishment, creating a power-base independent of either the court or local affinities’. Addressing the creative interplay between

² D. Hoak (ed.), *Tudor political culture* (Cambridge, 1995), xix.

³ For a survey of recent developments, see S. Alford, ‘Politics and political history in the Tudor century’, *Historical Journal*, 42, 2 (1999), 535–48; on the recent literature in urban political history, see P. Withington, ‘Two renaissances: urban political culture in post-Reformation England reconsidered’, *Historical Journal*, 44, 1 (2001), 239–67.

⁴ E. Shagan, *Popular politics and the English Reformation* (Cambridge, 2003), 25; M. J. Braddick and J. Walter (eds.), *Negotiating power in early modern society: order, hierarchy and subordination in Britain and Ireland* (Cambridge, 2001).

⁵ Shagan, *Popular politics*, 310.

⁶ J. P. D. Cooper, *Propaganda and the Tudor state: political culture in the Westcountry* (Oxford, 2003), 3, 8, 14, 26.

⁷ See, for instance, Richard Hoyle’s observation that petitions reveal ‘the existence of popular political movements and a much richer political culture in the early sixteenth century than [historians] have hitherto assumed’. R. Hoyle, ‘Petitioning as popular politics in early sixteenth-century England’, *Historical Research*, 75, 190 (2002), 389.

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the rebels and the Protector, Shagan argues that ‘the Somerset regime announced to the nation its support for the rebels’ programme and its willingness to accept the commons as contributors in the formation of policy’. All this amounted to ‘an elaborate courting of public opinion’ and a willingness ‘to commit the regime to fundamental changes in policy at the initiation of the commons.’ This illustrates, in Shagan’s terms, ‘the extraordinarily promiscuous relationship between “popular” and “elite” politics. Thus, the summer of 1549 witnessed a remarkable convergence of rhetoric between government and commons’. We are left with clear evidence that in the mid-Tudor period, ‘the politics of the court was inseparable from the politics of village greens and provincial protest; each fed off the other’s rhetoric, constantly interpreting the other’s position to their own advantage’.⁸

A similarly dynamic picture of late medieval popular politics has started to emerge over the past few years. R. B. Goheen has argued that ‘English peasants participated in the Crown’s provincial politics partly at least on their own terms and for their own ends, and in the process they influenced both the form and contents of these politics’. In particular, Goheen emphasises ‘the effectiveness of peasant politics’. Goheen’s work leaves the strong impression that office-holding villagers were able to ‘speak unmistakably of clearly perceived political interests’ articulating a ‘political will’ which enabled them to maintain ‘an active political discourse with the Crown that influenced the politics of the countryside’. I. M. W. Harvey has gone further, claiming that ‘popular politics not only existed but grew in importance in the fifteenth century ... common people ... began to act as if they thought they mattered in politics, as if they were part of the political commonweal’. Harvey observes that, even if their rebellions were ‘temporarily crushed ... [the commons] were never permanently deterred from talking and behaving as if they had a stake in the country’s political life’.⁹ Very similar to Shagan’s notion of ‘feedback’, John Watts has discussed the dynamic interplay between elite and popular politics in the crisis of 1450–2.¹⁰ Most recently, David Rollison has made a case for the existence

⁸ E. Shagan, ‘Protector Somerset and the 1549 rebellions: new sources and new perspectives’, *English Historical Review*, 114, 455 (1999), 36, 37, 41, 46, 47, 50, 51.

⁹ R. B. Goheen, ‘Peasant politics? Village community and the Crown in fifteenth-century England’, *American Historical Review* 96, 1 (1991), 42–3, 56; I. M. W. Harvey, ‘Was there popular politics in fifteenth-century England?’, in R. H. Britnell and A. J. Pollard (eds.), *The McFarlane legacy: studies in late medieval politics and society* (Stroud, 1995), 156, 164. See also two recent essays: C. Dyer, ‘The political life of the fifteenth-century English village’, in L. Clark and C. Carpenter (eds.), *The fifteenth century, IV: Political culture in late medieval Britain* (Woodbridge, 2004), 135–58; J. Watts, ‘The pressure of the public on later medieval politics’, in Clark and Carpenter (eds.), *The fifteenth century*, 159–80.

¹⁰ J. Watts, *Henry VI and the politics of kingship* (Cambridge, 1996), 266–82.

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of a popular political culture that spanned the period 1381–1649.¹¹ These historiographical developments may well mark a lasting change in approaches to the political history of late medieval and Tudor England.

In reconceptualising politics, however, it is not enough to note that the commons occasionally intervened in the world of their governors. As Heide Wunder has observed, it is too often the case that ‘peasants . . . only turn up in political history when they attempt rebellions or peasant wars’.¹² Instead, a fuller appreciation of the subject requires a close focus upon the micro-politics of small communities, coupled with the radical redefinition of what is meant by ‘politics’. In 1996, Keith Wrightson published an influential essay which laid the basis for the rewriting of popular politics. In this piece, Wrightson argued that early modern plebeian political life comprised five dimensions. In his analysis, these comprised the politics of patriarchy; of neighbourhood; of custom; of reformation and state formation; and of subordination and meaning.¹³ Wrightson’s insights, combined with Patrick Collinson’s call for ‘a new political history, which is social history with the politics put back in, or an account of political processes which is also social’, has inspired recent attempts to reconnect social and political history.¹⁴ Over the past few years, there has emerged what Steve Hindle has called the ‘new social history of politics’, a history of power relations built not only upon a new dialogue between social and political history, but also upon a broad definition of politics. Thus, for Hindle, politics comprises ‘the pursuit, maintenance and control of power’. The renewed interest amongst early modern social historians in the material basis of politics – oddly, at the same time that historians of the modern epoch are retreating from materialist analyses – has entailed a close study of the micro-politics of local communities: as Hindle puts it, ‘the most ubiquitous and therefore perhaps the most significant politics in early modern England were the politics of the parish’.¹⁵ In his investigation of state formation, Mike Braddick has likewise been drawn to micro-politics, arguing that ‘by concentrating on the everyday use of political power through the whole network of . . . agents [of the state] a larger range of

¹¹ D. Rollison, ‘Conceits and capacities of the vulgar sort: the social history of English as a language of politics’, *Cultural and Social History*, 2, 2 (2005), 141–64; D. Rollison, ‘The specter of the commonalty: class struggle and the commonweal in England before the Atlantic World’, *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 63, 2 (2006), 221–52.

¹² R. W. Scribner and G. Benecke (eds.), *The German Peasant War of 1525, new viewpoints* (London, 1979), 144.

¹³ K. E. Wrightson, ‘The politics of the parish in early modern England’, in P. Griffiths, A. Fox and S. Hindle (eds.), *The experience of authority in early modern England* (Basingstoke, 1996), 10–46.

¹⁴ P. Collinson, *Elizabethan essays* (London, 1994), 11.

¹⁵ S. Hindle, *The state and social change in early modern England, c. 1550–1640* (Basingstoke, 2000), 205, 237.

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functional uses emerges. This [approach] tends ... to give ... prominence ... to problems of social order and the importance of vested social interests.' Hence, Braddick emphasises 'the ways in which ... [the state] impinged on ordinary lives'.¹⁶ Throughout, the organising assumption of this new social history of politics is that early modern political life comprised more than the affairs of the central state, internal debates within ruling circles or the deeds of great men (or, rather less often, of great women). Instead, this rather gritty historical work has been preoccupied with conflicts over the distribution of power and resources.¹⁷

This book aims to link together these historiographical shifts. It is divided into three parts, each containing two chapters. Chapter One begins by defining the mid-Tudor crisis as a crisis of legitimation which affected both politics and social relations. The mid-sixteenth-century crisis is shown to stem both from the short-term context of the Duke of Somerset's protectorship and from longer-term, deeper-rooted social conflicts. This crisis climaxed in the rebellions of the spring and summer of 1549 and in the Earl of Warwick's subsequent coup against the Duke of Somerset in the autumn of that year. Much of Chapter One is dedicated to exploring the course of the 'commotion time' of 1549. Chapter Two looks at the bloody aftermath of the insurrections, at later attempts to organise popular rebellion and at plebeian involvement in state politics during the latter part of the reign of Edward VI. The central purpose of Part I is to lay out a narrative of the 1549 rebellions and of their immediate aftermath. The intention is to provide a context within which the more interpretive Parts II and III are to be set.

Part II, comprising Chapters Three and Four, is concerned with the politics of language. In this, it owes something to the 'linguistic turn' which preoccupied social historians of modern Britain during the 1980s and 1990s. Materialist historians have tended to dismiss the historical focus upon language as a 'retreat' from the analysis of class conflict. But as James Epstein has suggested, 'the turn to language cannot be viewed simply as a retreat; new openings and possibilities have emerged'.¹⁸ In Part II, we therefore concentrate upon struggles over speech and meaning. One way in which an appreciation of language might enrich the social history of early modern England concerns the meanings given to speech and silence. It is significant, for instance, that the early modern gentry and nobility conceived of popular politics in auditory terms, as a 'commotion' or a 'hurly-burly'. This was

¹⁶ M. J. Braddick, *State formation in early modern England, c. 1550–1700* (Cambridge, 2000), 94, 97.

¹⁷ For my attempt to survey this literature, see A. Wood, *Riot, rebellion and popular politics in early modern England* (Basingstoke, 2002).

¹⁸ J. Epstein, *In practice: studies in the language and culture of popular politics in modern Britain* (Stanford, CA, 2003), 3.

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because speech represented a highly sensitive point in both everyday social relations and in political practice. Labouring people were meant to keep silent in the presence of the gentry and nobility; where they did not, and in particular where they discussed political matters, they were often felt to have trespassed upon the territory of their rulers.

Chapter Three deals with how labouring people achieved the right to speak, with the ways in which the state monitored and regulated plebeian political speech, and with how the gentry and nobility attempted to impose silence upon their subordinates. Chapter Four is concerned with *what* labouring people had to say about politics. In 1997, John Guy recognised that language represented an important element of political life in Tudor England.¹⁹ Chapter Four extends this perspective further down the social scale, looking at popular political language. This chapter is especially concerned with struggles over the meanings of political keywords. It also looks at the ways in which the commons understood the Reformation; at the significance of ideas of order and disorder within rebel politics; and at how plebeians interpreted power relations in the period. Throughout Part II, we are concerned with the politics of rumour. As Shagan has recognised, ‘What made rumours so important was that they were *unofficial*, spreading and changing along channels that were not only independent of the royal government but were uncontrolled and uncontrollable. It was exactly this freedom of movement that made rumours “political”, since every person spreading them was implicated in the creation of their meaning.’²⁰

Part III focuses on the long-term significance of 1549. Chapter Five looks at the causes of the decline of the late medieval tradition of popular rebellion. It is especially concerned with the relationship between state formation and social change and argues that in the later Tudor and early Stuart period, the wealthier villagers and townspeople who had hitherto led popular rebellion were increasingly drawn into state structures. The result was a broader, more stable polity which, while inclusive of the ‘better sort of people’, excluded poorer social groups. Chapter Six is concerned with the memory and historical representation of the 1549 rebellions. It looks at immediate popular recollections of the commotion time; at the politics that underlay later sixteenth-century historical accounts of 1549; at the role played by polemical accounts of the rebellions in sustaining the social order; and at the ways in which the commotion time became embedded within popular memory. Finally, the book concludes by looking at how the meanings given to Kett’s

¹⁹ J. Guy, *The Tudor monarchy* (London, 1997), 1–8.

²⁰ E. Shagan, ‘Rumours and popular politics in the reign of Henry VIII’, in T. Harris (ed.), *The politics of the excluded, c. 1500–1850* (Basingstoke, 2001), 32.

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rebellion underwent fundamental change in the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The book privileges the story of the Norfolk rebellion led by Robert Kett. The intention is not to downplay the significance of the insurrections elsewhere in England. There was, of course, large-scale rebellion in other parts of East Anglia, in the East Riding of Yorkshire, in south-eastern and southern England, in the Midlands and in the western counties. The book pays attention to those insurrections. In Chapter One, we map out the broad geography of the commotion time. Similarly, in Chapter Two, we look at attempted rebellion across England after 1549. Chapters Three and Four draw on a wide array of evidence, concerning both the 1549 rebellions and earlier insurrections, together with a bulk of evidence taken from the 1530s. Nonetheless, in all the chapters, and in Chapters Five and Six in particular, special attention is given to Kett's rebellion. There are good reasons for this. Most obviously, and most importantly, the archival evidence for Kett's rebellion is much richer than that for the other insurrections. Moreover, in the later sixteenth century Kett's rebellion became the subject of a number of important narrative accounts. Empirically, therefore, it is possible to describe Kett's rebellion in much greater detail than is the case for the other insurrections. But there is another reason for this focus upon Norfolk. This county was one of the most socially divided and economically precocious of all those in mid-Tudor England. The intensity of the violence within Norfolk in 1549 contrasted with the relative restraint exercised by rebels in many other parts of England in that year. The reason for this, it is argued, is to be found in the particular sharpness of social relations in Norfolk which in 1549, in a clash of arms and ideas, pitted the 'poor commons' against the gentry.

This book, then, takes a set of events that have traditionally been regarded as the territory of political history and subjects them to social-historical analysis. All through the book, we seek to contextualise the events of 1549 within the inherent politics of everyday life. We go on to look at the 1549 insurrections as a key moment in longer-term processes of social and economic change. Throughout, the intention is to do more than merely insert the commons into a predetermined, elite-centred, high-political narrative, but instead to look at the Tudor polity from the bottom up.