

Early Modern Britain, 1450–1750

This introductory textbook provides a wide-ranging survey of the political, social, cultural and economic history of early modern Britain, charting the gradual integration of the four kingdoms, from the Wars of the Roses to the formation of 'Britain', and the aftermath of England's unions with Wales and Scotland. The only textbook at this level to cover Britain and Ireland in depth over three centuries, it offers a fully integrated British perspective, with detailed attention given to social change throughout all chapters. Featuring source textboxes, illustrations, highlighted key terms and accompanying glossary, timelines, students' questions, and annotated further reading suggestions, including key websites and links, this textbook will be an essential resource for undergraduate courses on the history of early modern Britain. A companion website includes additional primary sources and bibliographic resources.

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Early Modern Britain 1450–1750

John Miller
Queen Mary, University of London

 **CAMBRIDGE**
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 8EA, United Kingdom
 One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA
 477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
 314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi – 110025, India
 103 Penang Road, #05–06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

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www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107650138

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First published 2017

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication data

NAMES: Miller, John, 1946 July 5– author.

TITLE: Early modern Britain : 1450–1750 / John Miller (Queen Mary, University of London).

DESCRIPTION: Cambridge, United Kingdom; : Cambridge University Press, 2017. |

SERIES: Cambridge history of Britain; 3

IDENTIFIERS: LCCN 2016041646 | ISBN 9781107015111 (hardback) |

ISBN 9781107650138 (paperback)

SUBJECTS: LCSH: Great Britain – History – House of York, 1461–1485. |

Great Britain – History – Tudors, 1485–1603. | Great Britain – History – Stuarts,

1603–1714. | Great Britain – History – 1714–1837. | bisac: history /

Europe / Great Britain.

CLASSIFICATION: LCC DA300 .M55 2017 | DDC 941.04/4–dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2016041646>

ISBN 978-1-107-01511-1 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-107-65013-8 Paperback

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Preface

The early modern period in Britain and Ireland does not have an immediately recognisable identity. There were substantial differences of language, society and culture between England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales. Whereas the medieval period can be described as ‘feudal’ and the nineteenth century as ‘industrial’, there is no obvious label for the period in between. One can think of a ‘typical’ late medieval English nobleman – say, Warwick the Kingmaker – and a ‘typical’ early eighteenth-century Whig grandee – the Duke of Newcastle – but not a ‘typical’ seventeenth-century peer. Late medieval noblemen mostly lived in fortified castles – the last, Kenilworth, was built early in Elizabeth’s reign; eighteenth-century plutocrats built great unfortified country houses, like William Conolly’s Palladian palace at Castletown. The early modern period was clearly an age of transition; the aim of this book is to analyse the nature and causes of that transition, an aspiration which may tempt the historian to treat the period as one of ‘modernisation’. Modernisation implies ‘progress’; both terms imply a movement from the primitive to the modern and, as such, a ‘good thing’.

The search for the modern and modernity is in many ways a variation on the old theme of the Whig interpretation of history. As the victors in the partisan struggles of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, Whig historians depicted the triumph of Whig values as both desirable and inevitable. The nineteenth-century British constitution was (they said) based on religious liberty, parliamentary monarchy and the rule of law, which allowed for change without the bloodshed and upheaval experienced by less fortunate nations (like the French). God had guided the English to throw off the yoke of the Catholic Church and read and interpret the Bible for themselves. The Tudors tamed the nobility, opening the way for the rise of the gentry and ultimately the middle class. Within Parliament the House of Commons became increasingly assertive, demanding freedom of speech and using its power to grant taxation to extort concessions from the Crown. Charles I’s refusal to recognise this shift of power led inevitably to the civil wars, after which the monarchy was only a shadow of its former self, like the French monarchy, restored in 1815 ‘in the baggage train of the Allies’. The way was open to the glories of the Victorian constitution.

The narrative is a familiar one but it is riddled with problems. First, between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries it changes from an English to a British narrative, implying English dominance over Scotland and Ireland. But the only time the English fully

conquered the other two kingdoms was in the 1650s. Scotland was joined to England in 1707 by a treaty which many, perhaps most, Scots came to see as advantageous. The Irish Parliament became notably more assertive from the 1690s and the Union of 1800 created an intractable problem for the British government for more than a century afterwards. Second, Protestants talked loudly of liberty, by which they meant the liberty to impose their understanding of religious truth not only on Catholics but also on misguided Protestants. Third, far from being generally welcomed, Protestantism had to be forced on the English people, many of whom cherished those elements of the Prayer Book which raised echoes of the Catholic past. Fourth, the Tudors tamed the nobility in the sense of destroying their capacity for autonomous military action, but the nobility (like so many European nobilities) changed from a territorial to a service nobility, dominating the government and the upper ranks of the army under the Georges. Nobility and gentry were never separate classes but formed different strata within a single landed elite. New nobles were recruited (mostly) from among the gentry; the younger sons of the peerage fell back into the gentry. As for the middle class, its most successful members were always rising. Merchants and bankers in the eighteenth century and industrialists in the nineteenth bought land and built country houses. Peers continued to play a major role in county government until the creation of county councils in the 1880s and peers continued to serve as prime ministers into the twentieth century.

This brings us to the relationship of Crown and Parliament. The Commons began to demand free speech under Elizabeth because she tried to prevent its members from discussing the matters that were most important to them: her marriage, the succession and the Church. Both James I and Charles I came to believe that the Commons were being misled by a group of 'popular' MPs who challenged the Crown's lawful authority. But the Commons were driven not by ambition but by fear that the two kings planned to dispense with Parliament and rule as absolute monarchs. The Commons tried to use the power of the purse and failed: when they refused to grant taxes Charles I raised the money in other ways. In the 1630s he extended his use of non-parliamentary taxation, meeting with little serious resistance in England. Very different revolts in Scotland and Ireland led to the English civil war. The burdens of that war and Parliament's authoritarian and intolerant rule led to a formidable Royalist backlash: when Charles II was restored Parliament enhanced his power, to enable him to deal with threats of revolution from below. In the early 1680s Charles established a quasi-absolute monarchy in both England and Scotland, but James II's insistence on promoting Catholicism led to his expulsion in 1688. In all these developments from the 1630s to the 1680s chance and luck, or particular conjunctures of events, played their part, from Charles I's decision to impose an English Prayer Book on Scotland to the 'Protestant wind' that blew William III to Brixham in 1688. Even after the Revolution of 1688–9 the end of the House of Stuart was far from inevitable: it still seemed likely that Anne would produce a Protestant heir.

Historians often warn of the dangers of teleology: to read history backwards from what happened and assume that it was bound to happen, especially if the author assumes that what happened was a good thing. In the words of the splendidly comic description of Mary I's reign in *1066 and all that*, 'Broody Mary ... was a bad thing, because England is bound to be C of E so all the executions were wasted'. One sees a similar approach in the study of intellectual history, in discussions of the 'age of reason'. Scholars devote much attention to challenges to the churches and revealed religion, while ignoring new surges of evangelical enthusiasm. The repeal of the witchcraft laws in 1736 did not mean the end of belief in witches or the supernatural. Christians, including clergymen, reconciled their faith with advances in scientific understanding by seeing them as evidence of God's omnipotence. It is a truism that history tends to be written by the victors, but that is no reason to ignore the losers. A distinguished historian dismissed Jacobites as 'political troglodytes', but they had many supporters (especially in Scotland) and came close to success in both 1715 and 1745. The British government tried to destroy the Highland clans, leaving only the empty husk of a fashion for tartan. In both Wales and Ireland Celtic societies continued to function hidden from the view and understanding of the English-speaking elite.

One of my aims in this book, then, is to consider the losers as well as the winners, to take them seriously, and so rescue them from what E.P. Thompson called 'the massive condescension of posterity'. I have three other major objectives. The first is to produce a work of genuine British (and Irish) or 'three-kingdoms' history: not just a study of England with occasional references to Scotland and Ireland. Second, the approach is predominantly thematic rather than narrative. I am not one of those who belittle narrative history: good narrative history requires a thorough grasp of detail and often an ability to weave together several stories at once. I started my career working on high politics under Charles II and James II, but teaching a course on 'English Society 1580–1720' made me increasingly interested in social history and led to a bottom-up study of government under Charles II and a book on politics and religion in provincial towns. I taught 'English Society' thematically, a process I likened to placing a series of illustrated transparent sheets one on top of the other, building up a fuller and fuller picture. I am using a similar approach in this book, enabling students to understand large changes over a long period.

My third objective is to reassess the significance of the upheavals of the mid seventeenth century. For decades the most important concern of seventeenth-century historians seemed to be to explain the origins of the civil war. Most started with a Whig political narrative based on the early Stuarts' difficulties with the English Parliament and grafted on to it an analysis based on social change, particularly the decline of the nobility and the rise of the gentry. Despite much effort and no little acrimony it proved impossible to demonstrate that these developments actually contributed to the taking of sides or the outbreak of the civil war (or indeed that the nobility and gentry

were different classes). Moreover, this social analysis was confined to England, and a thorough re-examination of the politics of 1637–42 showed that events in Scotland and Ireland were crucial in bringing about civil war. Much less was written about the consequences of civil war and what there was usually rested on the assumption that such major upheavals must have had major consequences and that the regicide must have fatally undermined the monarchy. This reflected another assumption, that the English people must have supported Parliament, which stood for the interests of the people and the godly, not the king and the nobility. I taught courses on the civil war and Republic for many years and became more and more aware, first, of the extent of popular involvement in the civil war and popular awareness of the issues, and, second, that the English people were deeply divided between supporters of the two sides. In other words, there was both a radical (Whig and Nonconformist) legacy of the civil war and a conservative (Tory and Anglican) legacy, whose impact was very familiar to historians of the politics of 1660–1714. Historians were also coming to appreciate popular awareness of politics before 1640, but this awareness was much greater after 1660, reaching a peak under Anne. My final chapter highlights the importance of popular politics and the emergence of an informed and deeply partisan public as a result of the civil wars.

This book is the product of over forty years' experience of teaching students at London and Cambridge universities, ranging from first-year undergraduates to doctoral students. It particularly reflects my experience of teaching first-year and American year-abroad students, who often had little or no prior knowledge of the period but mostly proved quick learners, provided they were given the necessary basic information. Because it covers three centuries the information is often stripped down to a minimum, but supplemented by links to other material. I have tried to make the book user-friendly, divided into small sections which make it easier for students to navigate their way through it and to focus on what is useful for them. At the end of each chapter is a 'summary', a few key points designed to show the bigger picture; these summaries can be used individually or to follow themes further. Terms which may be unfamiliar are explained in the Glossary and printed in bold in the text. The volume contains other illustrative material: text in 'boxes', images, maps and tables. There will also be a website where further material can be accessed.

Acknowledgements

I should like to thank those who have helped in the production of this book, notably Rosemary Crawley and Sarah Turner, for their efficiency and patience. I should also like to thank colleagues who provided information and answered questions, and in particular Professor Jim Bolton and Dr Laura Stewart for their detailed advice on late medieval England and on sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Scotland respectively.

Note on the Text

In the period covered by the book the official name of the Scottish royal house changed from 'Stewart' to 'Stuart', because James VI adopted a 'French' spelling. Also, choosing whether to call Northern Ireland's second city 'Derry' or 'Londonderry' can be seen as evidence of Catholic or Protestant loyalties. I have followed the practice of some Irish historians in using 'Derry' for the city and 'Londonderry' for the county, on the grounds that the county was named 'Londonderry' during the Ulster Plantation, by which time the city had been called 'Derry' for centuries.

Prologue: Kent, 1450

In early 1450 South East England was seething with discontent. English rule over large areas of France, which had endured for centuries, was unravelling at alarming speed, raising the prospect of French coastal raids and even invasion. Henry VI's government seemed to lack the competence or the will to stem the tide. Those around the King seemed more concerned to pursue personal feuds and to extort money, and the King seemed unable to restrain them. These alleged 'traitors' and extortioners were widely known and there were many calls for them to be brought to justice. As the King failed to act, people took matters into their own hands. In January 1450 Adam Moleyns, Bishop of Chichester and lord privy seal, went to Portsmouth to pay some of what was owing to seamen and soldiers. They accused him of trying to cheat them, 'fell on him and there killed him'. In April the most hated of the King's advisers, the Duke of Suffolk, was impeached by the Commons in Parliament, who accused him of extortion, embezzlement and helping the French King to reconquer Normandy. The King declared that on the last charge Suffolk had no case to answer, and that as punishment for his other alleged offences he should be banished for five years. Londoners attacked Suffolk's retinue as he left. He got safely on board a ship, but it was intercepted by another, the *Nicholas of the Tower*, whose crew seized him and brought him into Dover 'and there upon the ship's side struck off his head and after laid the body with the head upon the land and then departed again to the sea'. As a contemporary poet savagely exulted: 'Such a pain pricked him [Suffolk] he asked [for] a confessor./ Nicolas said, "I am ready thy confessor to be."/ He was holden so that he ne[ver] passed that hour.' In June another of the King's close associates, William Ayscough, Bishop of Salisbury, was dragged from the altar of the abbey church at Edington, Wiltshire, where he had been saying Mass. 'And then,' wrote a chronicler, 'they led him up unto a hill there beside, and there they slew him horribly, their father and their bishop, and spoiled him unto the naked skin and rent his bloody shirt into pieces and bore that away with them ... and made boast of their wickedness.' The chronicler added that Moleyns and Ayscough 'were held [to be] wonder[fully] covetous men and evil beloved among the common people'. Together with Suffolk they were suspected of complicity in the death of the King's uncle, the Duke of Gloucester, in 1447.

Discontent was particularly rife in Kent and Sussex. They were vulnerable to French attack and Kent had suffered at the hands of Suffolk's associates, notably Lord Saye