

# England's troubles

*Seventeenth-century English political  
instability in European context*

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CAMBRIDGE  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE  
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK <http://www.cup.cam.ac.uk>  
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011–4211, USA <http://www.cup.org>  
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia  
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain

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First published 2000

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

*Typeface* 10.5/13.5pt Adobe Minion *System* QuarkXPress™ [SE]

*A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data*

Scott, Jonathan, 1958–

England's troubles : seventeenth-century English political instability  
in European context / Jonathan Scott.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0 521 41192 0 (hb). – ISBN 0 521 42334 1 (pb)

1. Great Britain – Politics and government – 1603–1714. 2. Great Britain – Politics and government – 1642–1660. 3. England – Civilisation – European influences. 4. Great Britain – Foreign relations – Europe. 5. Europe – Foreign relations – Great Britain.
6. England – Civilisation – 17th century. I. Title.

DA375.S39 2000

941.06 – dc21 99-38436 CIP

ISBN 0 521 41192 0 hardback

ISBN 0 521 42334 1 paperback

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## The shape of the seventeenth century

For of Meridians and Parallels  
 Man hath weav'd out a net  
 and this net throwne Upon the Heavens  
 and now they are his owne.  
 Loth to goe up the hill, or labour thus  
 To goe to heaven  
 we make heaven come to us.

John Donne, 'The First Anniversarie' (1611)<sup>1</sup>

The Channel is no national boundary.

Leopold von Ranke, *History of England* (1875)<sup>2</sup>

### INTRODUCTION

How should one structure a large-scale analysis of the seventeenth-century English political experience? Should one do so? Such histories have long been out of fashion. To attempt one is necessarily to step outside one's area of expertise. This is the most complex, the most important and the most violent century of English history. It is equally the most formidable and savage historiographical terrain. Entire historians have disappeared, leaving only a rent garment and the colour of blood in the water to show us where they had been.

One point from which to begin is the identification of those features by which our subject is distinguished, in time and place. In this respect it might be suggested that two things above all make seventeenth-century English

An earlier version of this chapter was published as Scott, 'England's Troubles 1603–1702', in R. Malcolm Smuts (ed.), *The Stuart Court and Europe* (Cambridge 1996), pp. 20–38.

1 In *John Donne: The Complete English Poems*, ed. A. J. Smith (London 1986), p. 278.

2 Ranke, *History of England*, vol. I, p. 5.

history unique. The first is the length and depth of its experience of political instability. The second is its astonishing intellectual fertility. These two features were of course connected. It is this combination which distinguishes the seventeenth century within English history, and the experience of seventeenth-century England within Europe.

This experience of instability I have called, following contemporary usage, England's troubles: 'the late troubles'; 'our lamentable troubles'. It is one aspect of its spectacular intellectual consequence that I will call 'the English revolution'. Despite their uniqueness, these characteristics of English history, both political and intellectual, were a part of, and cannot be understood apart from, the historical experience of Europe. Before we can understand, however, how this body politic came to be torn apart, with such dramatic consequences, we must ourselves put it together again.

#### THE BROKEN MIRROR

For if we ask what are the most important *historiographical* obstacles to a general account of the seventeenth century in England, we find two: present-centredness and fragmentation. These are intertwined. Together they present us with two problems. One is that our picture of the seventeenth century is broken in pieces, smashed in its frame; how are we to put it together again? The other is that perhaps what is broken is not a picture of the seventeenth century at all. Perhaps it is a mirror, in which we have become accustomed to seeking – and arguing over – an image of ourselves.

By present-centredness I refer to an inability to distinguish imaginatively between the present and the past, between our subject and ourselves. So far as it sets the agenda this prevents us from making contact with the seventeenth century at all. It is one aspect of our modernity impeding the recovery of pre-modernity. It is also an occupational hazard of our discipline. Yet we should also remember that it was present-centredness that provided the basis, in the works of G. M. Trevelyan and Christopher Hill, for the last powerful explanatory analyses of the century as a whole.<sup>3</sup> Anyone who still believes, in these post-revisionist days, that such analyses are possible, indeed essential, will need to show that they can be achieved without the present-centred teleology that these entailed.

3 G. M. Trevelyan, *England Under the Stuarts* (London 1904); Christopher Hill, *The Century of Revolution 1603–1714* (London 1969).

Meanwhile the reaction against such teleology has achieved much, but at a price. It has accelerated the tendency already under way, through professional specialisation, towards historiographical fragmentation. Every book now covers less territory, in more pages, than the last. At its worst revisionism has resulted in a fastidious worship of particularity that is arid, self-indulgent and parochial, and that has left us wandering like pilgrims through an explanatory desert. In place of the general explanatory analysis we now have the textbook, which takes its shape passively from chronology, and actively from current historiographical debate. This latter is present-centredness of a different kind.

The problem of fragmentation is as old as the seventeenth century itself, where it took the form of partisanship. It was Richard Baxter who said in the 1670s: 'If other Historians be like some of these Times, their Assertions, whenever they speak of such as they distaste, are to be read as *Hebrew*, backward, and are so far from signifying Truth, that many of them . . . are downright lies.'<sup>4</sup> Such partisanship is still with us, and indeed is taken for granted. It was T. S. Eliot who gave classic status to the cliché that the English civil war has never ended. It has thus for some time been the case that seventeenth-century scholarship is as remarkable for its military as for its historical qualities.<sup>5</sup> 'We are all parties in the same struggle', wrote one veteran recently, 'hoisting and submerging one another in the same turbid stream.'<sup>6</sup>

Yet was the seventeenth-century struggle 'the same' as our own? It is customary to point to these historiographical battles as evidence of the continued vitality of our subject, and so they would be if they were leading us anywhere. In fact, however, under questionable generalship, and through the heat, noise and smoke, the battlefields of the seventeenth century itself are becoming increasingly hard to see under the great piles of bleached bones left by historians murdered by their colleagues. This landscape has become a problem for students, who cannot be expected to bring to it the capacities for separation and reconstruction that it requires. Perhaps we should not, however, confuse this struggle for power with the struggle for knowledge in which we would rather be engaged.

4 Richard Baxter, *Reliquiae Baxterianae*, pt III, p. 187.

5 I do not dissociate myself from this situation: I have been described as the Prince Rupert of the field – a commander no less noted for atrocities committed against civilians than for ending up on the losing side.

6 H. R. Trevor-Roper, Lord Dacre, 'The Continuity of the English Revolution', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 6th ser., 1 (1991), p. 121.

It was John Milton who, during the actual civil war, spoke of Truth as a single (female) form hewed in pieces by a professional (clerical) ‘race of wicked deceivers’. This made the task of the revolution ‘the closing up of truth to truth’.<sup>7</sup> In the same decade the Leveller William Walwyn lambasted the clergy as

swarmes of locusts . . . making Marchandize of the blessed Word of Truth . . . [who] dress it up in what shape their Art or Rhetorick can devise; and upon pretense of Exposition, raise thousands of doubts and disputes, write millions of books, and preach innumerable sermons, whereby people are divided, and subdivided into Factions, Sects and parties, and whereby the end of the Gospel, which directs [us] only to love, is [lost].<sup>8</sup>

Gerrard Winstanley described this professional triumph of power over knowledge, of form over substance, as ‘the husk without the kernall . . . the cloud without rain’.<sup>9</sup> In fact, while we think we are studying the seventeenth century, it may be governing us. We remain in its power and cannot break free. We cannot even tell the difference between it and ourselves for of course its struggle and our own were not, and are not, the same at all.

It is making this *separation* that is our starting point: re-establishing the actual distance between that pre-modern experience and our own. This is a precondition for its imaginative recovery. This means giving the seventeenth century back to itself; it means letting go. Then we may see that we have been watching a pre-national experience from within a national one; that we have been truncating its context in time, as well as space; that what we continue to call ‘the causes of the English civil war’ relate not only to a series of wars within Britain that were part of a series of wars within Europe, but to the first of three similar crises spanning the century as a whole. Until we re-establish these contexts our answers will be unsatisfactory because our questions are misposed.

One result of this process might be the undomestication of the English revolution. We have made that revolution comfortable by making it familiar, by making it an anticipation of ourselves. But it was not like that at all. It

7 *Areopagitica; a Speech of Mr John Milton for the Liberty of Unlicenc'd Printing* (1644), ed. J. C. Suffolk (London 1968), pp. 96, 130.

8 William Walwyn, *The Vanitie of the Present Churches* (1649), in *The Writings of William Walwyn*, ed. J. R. McMichael and B. Taft (Athens, Ga. 1989), p. 270.

9 In Winstanley, *The Works, with an Appendix of Documents Relating to the Digger Movement*, ed. G. H. Sabine (Ithaca 1951), pp. 242, 569.

was pre-modern, frightening and strange. There is brilliance at the heart of it – lightning from a cloud; but it is because we are products of its failure rather than success that its imaginative recovery is not as straightforward as it might seem. If we stopped trying to appropriate it, and allowed it to be what it was again, what was terrifying for contemporaries might recover the power to unsettle us too.

How do we exchange the broken mirror for a preliminary picture? The remainder of this chapter suggests three initial ways forward. The first two concern the contexts of this experience in time and space. The third concerns what we might call the *substance* of this history – what it was made of – and specifically the relationship between events, structures and ideas. This was a period when institutions were fragile, and ideas powerful (the opposite of the present situation). Between 1603 and 1702 England saw its religious and political institutions destroyed by, then reconstructed through, the (European) ideas they were intended to contain. This was terrifying partly because it was unprecedented: let us see what it involved.

#### TIME: THE UNITY OF THE SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY EXPERIENCE

England's experience of instability has a connected backbone in the three crises of popery and arbitrary government that occurred in 1618–48, 1678–83 and 1688–9. These were the troubles: those 'tragedies and distractions' that had, wrote one contemporary in 1659, '(from the most glorious Nation of Europe) rendred England the most ridiculous nation of the whole world, and made her Natives, once so highly respected in foreign parts, now ashamed to own her'.<sup>10</sup> 'Our Tragedies', wrote another in 1692 (after the third such visitation), 'will scarce find Credit with Posterity, whilst the Ages to come, mistrusting the reports of such enormous villanies, will look upon our unheard-of Vicissitudes, but as the Fancies of Poetry and the Decoration of the Theatres.'<sup>11</sup>

Both the continuity and European context of these observations will have been noted. These three crises were described by contemporaries as being both similar, in their causes, contexts and course, and connected and inter-

10 Thomas Dancer, *Metamorphosis Anglorum* [London 1659], pp. 100–1.

11 Sir Roger Manley, *The History of the Rebellions in England, Scotland and Ireland* (1691), quoted in R. MacGillivray, *Restoration Historians and the English Civil War* (The Hague 1974), p. 232.

twined. Yet they have been described by historians, few of whom work upon all three, as if they were different and discrete. They are ‘the causes of the English civil war’; ‘the exclusion crisis’; and ‘the glorious revolution’. These analyses reflect the fragmentation of seventeenth-century historiography, rather than the continuity of seventeenth-century history.<sup>12</sup>

The single most important historiographical dividing line obscuring this continuity has been at the year 1660. What established this were the two greatest quests that have shaped the modern study of the century. It is a condition of modernity that we are crazy about revolution. The restoration period has long been examined for the origins of its so-called (whig) revolution of 1688–9, and of the altered political world it created. This is what established the future-centred agenda of restoration historiography. This has been less concerned with understanding the period in its own terms than with finding the origins of the ‘long eighteenth century’ in it. The early Stuart period, in turn, has long lain under the shadow of its (mid-century) revolution, and the civil wars from which that emerged. The modern (post-Marxist) assumption both of mid-century revolution, and of revolution as implying discontinuity, has reinforced this division of the century into two halves.

This terminology of revolution also carries with it the assumption of human agency. Another aspect of our modernity is the belief that we make our history. Contemporaries did not, in general, describe their troubles in this way. We hear more about natural phenomena: storm, flood, earthquake and inundation. The sea is high, the air is moving, the ground is shaking:

And when I came, in the Lord’s mighty power, with the word of life into the world, the world swelled and made a noise like the great raging waves of the sea. Priests and professors, magistrates and people, were all like a sea, when I came to proclaim the day of the Lord amongst them, and to preach repentance to them.<sup>13</sup>

Seventeenth-century people felt, it may help us to be reminded, that their history lay in the grip of destructive forces larger than themselves and substantially outside their control. This was the mentality of an age more sensible of what Baxter called ‘the inexpressable weight of things Eternal’.<sup>14</sup>

The result of the historiographical division at 1660 – a restoration period artificially wedded to its future, and severed from its past – has

12 Scott, *Restoration Crisis*, ch. 1.

13 George Fox, *Journal*, in *George Fox and the Children of Light*, ed. Jonathan Fryer (London 1991), p. 21.      14 Richard Baxter, *Reliquiae Baxterianae*, pt I, p. 3.

been a precise inversion of the historical reality. Restoration people could not predict the future, but they could, and did, remember. It was in vain that one 'wished that the years between 1640 and 60 could be raz'd out of the Book of Time, and the memory of this Age'.<sup>15</sup> For the historical reality was of a period uniquely under the shadow of its past. Like a road accident victim, this generation remained susceptible to both nostalgia on the one hand, and nightmares on the other. The restoration settlement was an act of nostalgia. With the restoration crisis, the second of the three Stuart crises of popery and arbitrary government, the nightmare had come.

After 1660 then, for good and ill, the nation remained a prisoner of memory. That is why these crises were intertwined. For this reason there are *two* seventeenth-century sequences of repetition. One was destructive: the three-phase process of England's troubles. But the other was reconstructive: the three-phase attempt at settlement which followed each: in 1660–5 (the restoration settlement); 1681–5 (the 'loyalist reaction'); and 1689–94 (the 'revolution settlement'). This last was not a revolution at all in the modern sense, but was glorious precisely because it was the successful restoration at last. As the culmination of this restoration process it released the nation from the tyranny of memory, from the need to keep repeating its own past.

Contemporary consciousness of these processes, and of the interrelationship of present events with public memory, is one of their most distinctive features. 'This was the Preludium to the late Rebellion', noted one contemporary, 'loud clamours against popery and arbitrary government.' 'It would be somewhat strange', observed another, 'and without all example in story, that a nation should be twice ruined, twice undone, by the self-same ways and means.' 'I believe it has hardly ever been known', added a third, 'that any one Humor in one and the same country, has come twice upon the stage by the same Methods in the space of forty years.'<sup>16</sup> What spared the nation from another civil war on this occasion was less any

15 *The Character of a Rebellion, and What England May Expect From One* (London 1681); *The Loyal Protestant's Vindication . . . By a Queen Elizabeth Protestant* (London 1681), p. 1.

16 *Fair Warning, or the Burnt Child Dreads the Fire* [London 1680], p. 1; Edward Cooke, *Memorabilia; Or the Most Remarkable Passages and Counsels Collected out of the Several Declarations and Speeches . . . Made by the King* (London 1681), p. 101; *An Essay upon the Change of Manners. Being a second Part of the true Protestant's Appeal to the City and Country* (London 1681), p. 1.

difference between the situations themselves than this contemporary recognition of their similarities. It was certainly to this which the king appealed in his decisive *Declaration* of 1681:

And so we assure Ourselves That we shall be Assisted by the Loyalty . . . of all those who consider the Rise and Progress of the late Troubles . . . and desire to protect their Country from a Relapse. And we cannot but remember, that Religion, Liberty and property were all lost and gone when Monarchy was shaken off, and could never be reviv'd till that was restor'd.<sup>17</sup>

But what were popery and arbitrary government? To move from the fact of these sequences of repetition to their causes we must turn from the context of time to that of space.

#### SPACE: THE EUROPEAN CONTEXT

As observed in the introduction, there is currently a revival of interest in the 'British context' of the English civil wars. What 'British context' principally means is that the territories which later became Britain are being taken to provide an explanatory context for (one part of) the history of seventeenth-century England.

That the events surrounding the crisis and breakdown of Charles I's government involved not only England, but Scotland and Ireland too, has not escaped the attention of any major historian since the seventeenth century itself. Yet the three rebellions of 1637–42 do not constitute a British 'context', but a British crisis, involving three kingdoms, united dynastically, disunited in other ways. The context for this crisis was European. It was the Earl of Clarendon who made the point about contemporary perceptions that events in Edinburgh in 1637–8 took by surprise an English political nation long accustomed to focus its attention upon the continent.<sup>18</sup> Ann Hughes, in her excellent *Causes of the English Civil War*, has remarked that what distinguishes the British rebellions

17 Charles II, *His Majesties Declaration to all his Loving Subjects touching the Causes and Reasons that Moved Him to Dissolve the Last Two Parliaments* (London 1681), pp. 4–5.

18 Edward Hyde, Earl of Clarendon, *The History of the Rebellion and Civil Wars in England*, ed. W. D. Macray (6 vols., Oxford 1888), vol. I, pp. 145–6: 'when the whole nation was solicitous to know what passed weekly in Germany and Poland and all other parts of Europe no man ever inquired what was doing in Scotland, nor had that kingdom a place or mention in . . . any gazette'.

from their European counterparts in Portugal, for instance, or Catalonia (both 1640) is their religious character. Yet there is a peculiar chronological literal-mindedness here: as if there can only be a European context if it was precisely contemporaneous.<sup>19</sup>

The immediate context for the collapse of Charles I's monarchy was that broader European upheaval that we call the Thirty Years War. That is why its first major historian, John Rushworth, began his *Historical Collections* chronicling the process not (as he had intended) in 1640, or in 1625, but in 1618.<sup>20</sup> In this year the peace of Europe was shattered by a calvinist rebellion in Bohemia not entirely unlike that twenty years later in Scotland. This occurred within a religiously mixed and unstable multiple monarchy (the Habsburg) not entirely unlike that of Charles I. During the later sixteenth century under Maximilian this had tolerated a politic lack of religious definition not unreminiscent of that of Elizabethan England.<sup>21</sup> But by the early seventeenth century the winds of religious polarisation, and of counter-reformation in particular, were blowing hard. The crisis of 1618–48 threw not only the whole of religiously mixed, half-reformed central and western Europe into conflict, but Britain too, because Britain was part of religiously mixed, half-reformed central and western Europe. It is commonly asserted by students of European history that the thirty-year crisis of the first half of the seventeenth century followed from the unfinished business – in particular religious business – of the sixteenth. This is no less evidently true in England.

The Bohemian rebellion was not the first of its kind. A longer-term view of the impact upon the British kingdoms of this mode of religious politics would begin with that of the Dutch revolt. Meanwhile it is not only the case that from 1618 to 1648/9 developments in England, Scotland and Ireland had this European context, but that they were a part of this single European conflict. When Ferdinand II received the Spanish assistance he asked for against Bohemia he was victorious; when Charles I did not against Scotland he was not. Note that he asked for it, having already added to other provoca-

19 See Ann Hughes, *The Causes of the English Civil War* (2nd edn, London 1998), pp. 52–4.

20 John Rushworth, *Historical Collections . . . beginning the Sixteenth Year of King James, Anno 1618. And ending the Fifth Year of King Charls, Anno 1629* (3 vols., London 1659–82), vol. I, preface. Rushworth had intended to begin with the convening of the Long Parliament on 3 November 1640.

21 R. J. W. Evans, *The Making of the Habsburg Monarchy 1550–1700* (Oxford 1979), p. 39, and ch. 1 in general.

tions in Scotland a policy of resumption of church lands at one with its German counter-reformation context. Laudianism was counter-reformation protestantism: it is hardly surprising if the distinction between this and popery appeared too subtle for many of its subjects to grasp. Some of the Scots troops Charles faced in consequence were themselves veterans of the German wars; many English protestants sympathised with them. The last act of the Thirty Years War was not the Peace of Westphalia, or that of Münster, but the execution of Charles I. For what distinguished the *English* experience of this conflict was not its causes – by which we have been so pre-occupied – but its consequences. These were not, as in the Habsburg case, a victory for monarchical statebuilding and counter-reformation. In England they were the destruction of monarchy; a first experience of statebuilding (and military strength) under a republic; and that radical reformation we call the English revolution.

Let us remind ourselves now that this was but the first stage of a century-long process through which the principal institutions of English religious and political life were first destroyed, then gradually reconstructed. At every stage of this experience the European context was crucial, and it culminated in a European invasion in 1688–9. Modern British politicians who claim to be defending the state against Europe appear not to understand that the British state was itself a European creation. It was an effect of this intervention, over the years 1689–1714, of which the British kingdoms had been incapable on their own. Every decisive moment in the history of this country has resulted from its participation in, rather than independence of, European history. As Ranke put it, ‘the Channel is no national boundary’.<sup>22</sup>

These points are amplified when we turn to the questions of what popery and arbitrary government were.

What one notices first about the seventeenth-century English fear of popery are its range and power: it spanned the century; it crossed all social boundaries; as a solvent of political loyalties it had no rivals. What one should notice next is that it is inexplicable in a purely national context.<sup>23</sup> Within England in the seventeenth century catholics made up a tiny and declining proportion of the population: protestantism was secure, and was becoming more so. It was in Europe that the opposite was the case. Between 1590 and 1690 the geographical reach of protestantism shrank from

<sup>22</sup> See n. 2.

<sup>23</sup> These themes were explored more fully in my ‘Popish Plot’; Bosher, ‘Franco-Catholic Danger’.

one-half to one-fifth of the land area of the continent. The seventeenth century in Europe was the century of the victories of the counter-reformation, spearheaded by Spain in the first half of the century and France in the second. It was the century in which protestantism had to fight for its survival. This was the context for fear of popery in England, which found itself thrust into the front line against the European counter-reformation advance.<sup>24</sup>

It was equally the context for domestic political fears. '[Our] liberties have been so invaded', said William Strode in 1628, 'that we are exposed to foreign destruction.' 'These things', echoed Sir Robert Phelips, 'have made God a counsellor to our enemies and a general to their forces. Now fall these things at a time when our religion is almost extirpate in Christendom.'<sup>25</sup> Half a century later in the House of Commons the same perception remained unvanquished: '[We are the last] bulwark of liberty, protestantism, and Christian faith in general, throughout the world . . . the main bank, that hinders the see of Rome from overwhelming all Christian nations with an universal inundation of tyranny and superstition.'<sup>26</sup> '[Everybody knows] that hath the least observed the former times', explained a parliamentarian in 1680,

how . . . ever since the Reformation there hath been a design carried on by priests and Jesuits that came from beyond the seas . . . to subvert the government, and destroy the protestant religion established here in England . . . [There is] An universal design against the protestant party. We see France has fallen upon the protestant party there. The emperor has martyred them in Hungary, and what has been done in Bohemia they say, broke the Prince Elector's heart . . . every session of parliament we are still troubled with popery. In the descent of four kings . . . still the parliaments have been troubled with popery.<sup>27</sup>

The European problem was the counter-reformation advance. One aspect of the domestic problem was English military weakness in the face of it. Thus every episode of the troubles focused upon Stuart governments that had not only done nothing to stem this process but had apparently actually

24 Scott, 'Popish Plot'.

25 L. J. Reeve, *Charles I and the Road to Personal Rule* (Cambridge 1989), pp. 25–6.

26 William Bedloe, *A Narrative and Impartial Discovery of the Horrid Popish Plot* (London 1679), p. 2.

27 A. Grey, *Debates of the House of Commons, from the Year 1667 to the Year 1694* (10 vols., London 1763), vol. VIII, p. 328.

allied themselves to it. In each the targets for public rage were not primarily catholic English neighbours but papists at court, foreigners in general and infiltrating Jesuits in particular. To be 'proved' a Jesuit between 1678 and 1680 was fatal.<sup>28</sup>

This brings us to our second rhetorical indicator: arbitrary government. The time scale mentioned above – 'in the descent of four kings' – helps us to date its Elizabethan genesis. Elizabeth had attempted to subordinate religious to political allegiance. In the 1580s, however, under the pressure of European events, a confessional state had developed, defined and defended by European war. At the same time, everywhere in Europe rulers were being forced to respond to a variety of pressures – population increase, price inflation, military revolution – with that complex of measures that we call state centralisation. Elizabeth had woefully neglected this need, and she bequeathed to the Stuarts a motley, contradictory church (catholic in government, more or less calvinist in doctrine) presided over by a weak and declining crown, incapable of defending it abroad. It was the Caroline attempt to repair these defects, executed badly, and late – Charles I was, in James Harrington's memorable words, a king 'as stiff in disputes as the nerve of the monarchy was grown slack' – that contemporaries identified as 'arbitrary government'.<sup>29</sup> It is crucial that they did so within the context of humiliating military failure.

The fundamental function of monarchy was the making of war: this was the bottom line. Its independent basis wrecked by inflation, the Stuart crown was incapable of performing this task. Within the circumstances I have described this had alarming religious as well as political implications. Until 1618 this secret could be kept in the closet like a mad aunt; but throughout the 1620s the whole of Europe could hear Mildred pounding on the door. It was the military ineffectuality and humiliation of the 1620s that established the quite disparate analyses by Charles I and his opponents of what was wrong with British government. For Charles his military dishonour resulted from a fundamental problem of religious and political ungovernability which he associated both with calvinism and with hostility to monarchy. (Since these were the same infections which had apparently sparked the Dutch and Bohemian rebellions it is hardly surprising that he ended up echoing his father's alliance with Spain.) For his opponents these

28 Scott, 'Popish Plot', pp. 119–20.

29 Harrington's analysis of the problem as military at heart is particularly penetrating. See *The Political Works of James Harrington*, ed. J. G. A. Pocock (Cambridge 1977), p. 198.

same humiliations resulted from a government as incompetent as it was popishly affected and arbitrary, and a consequent abandonment of England by God. In short the revisionist view of early Stuart religious and political problems as short-term and relatively superficial is contradicted both by the situation itself and by the contemporary analyses made of it on all hands. Although much to blame, sitting in the front seat of government, for driving like a Ferrari what was actually a Model-T Ford, Charles I and Laud do not constitute an adequate historical explanation for its disintegration on a bend. We need to look not only at the British car (Tudor registration) but also at the European road down which it was being chased. The immediate result of this military incapacity was disaster for Europe and fear for English protestantism. Since Charles proved incapable of warfare not only in Europe but against his own Scots and English subjects as well, the eventual result was destruction of the monarchy.

With the subsequent restoration of this institution in 1660 came that of Stuart military weakness, and, in time, of England's troubles. That is why all the turning points of Stuart history hinge upon foreign intervention: the importation of kings in 1603, 1660 and 1688–9; their export and indeed re-export in 1648 and 1688; foreign invasion or other humiliation in 1640, 1659, 1667, 1685 and 1688. It is a remarkable thought that the only seventeenth-century English monarch not shunted across the border in either direction was Charles I, executed by his subjects in front of his own banqueting house. It is characteristic of the national historiography – always dressed in black tie even when the history is sleeping rough – that an unsuccessful invasion attempt in 1588 is a famous English victory; a successful one in 1688 is exactly the same thing.

By bridging national boundaries, the Dutch enterprise of 1688–9 made possible the creation of a militarily competent British nation-state. For while the Channel did not wall England off from Europe, or its troubles, it may have from a solution to them. Early modern history shows that state-building only ever succeeded through the urgency of war. The state was created to fund war. In conservative aristocratic societies it took a life-and-death struggle for religious, political or territorial existence to provide the cutting edge necessary for change. In general this meant a land border in common with your enemy. Charles I's withdrawal from the European conflict, a luxury the Channel appeared to allow, may have been his crucial error: there could be no emulation thereafter of Richelieu's achievement. Some progress was made in 1642–59 but was subsequently undone. It was

in the 1690s, through integration with the Dutch continental struggle, that Britain acquired a land border at last. The Dutch invasion of 1688, unlike the Scots in 1640, occupied London rather than Newcastle and so proved capable of imposing a settlement.<sup>30</sup> It was thereafter, behind the confidence generated by its European military capabilities, that England's domestic troubles began, though only gradually, to subside.

#### EVENTS AND IDEAS: THE ENGLISH REVOLUTION

Let us come, finally, to our third explanatory context. This I have called the *substance* of our subject: the relationship between events, structures and ideas. I have already mentioned the fragility of this society's institutional structures, and the power of its ideas. And after the length and depth of its experience of political instability, I have mentioned what I take to be the second defining feature of seventeenth-century English history: its extraordinary intellectual fertility. This embraced science, literature, philosophy and political thought, but here I wish to focus upon those ideas that were a specific consequence of England's troubles; that lay at the vortex of that storm; that followed from the collapse of the country's religious and political institutions. These were English radicalism, and this *was* the English revolution.

Let me repeat: English radicalism, the profoundest intellectual consequence of seventeenth-century instability, *was* the English revolution. This is our last imaginative hurdle: to understand a revolution that was not – although it had spectacular institutional *consequences* – an institutional occurrence at all. This is harder than it might seem, when one aspect of our modernity is to live within the most densely structured and governed social matrix the world has ever seen. It is precisely our modern disposition to look for revolution as a constitutional event that is substantially to blame for the historiographical confusion on this subject. Reputable positions held at the moment include the following:

- (1) That there was no English revolution.
- (2) That there was, but we don't know when: significant contenders include 1640, 1641, 1649, 1688–9.

30 Jonathan Israel (ed.), *The Anglo-Dutch Moment: Essays on the Glorious Revolution and Its World Impact* (Cambridge 1991).

- (3) That there was more than one: two, or three, or any other number comprising both major earthquakes and, it may be, small pre- or aftershocks.
- (4) That there was an entire century of revolution – one way of getting around the problem of dating.

We are at sea here, because we have been looking in the wrong place. Let me add a fifth position of my own: that there was a revolution, but it is not to when, but what it was that we need to pay prior attention. *What* the English revolution was was belief – radical belief; and this made its mark on time not as an event, but, again, as a process. This was molten, fluid and dangerous, and after the initial eruption of the 1640s it flowed down the blackened and broken mountainside of English political history for some time.

Our modern imagination of revolutions is deeply influenced by Marx. In Russia and China ‘revolutionaries’ succeeded by taking control of the awesome apparatus of the modern nation-state and using it to transform those societies. When seventeenth-century radicals – Ireton, Cromwell and others – came at last to take such control, the situation could not have been more different. There was no such apparatus. Their attitude to what there was was: what do we do with it? The manipulation of public institutions lay outside the field of radical ambition. Its relationship to them was hostile and negative: transcend and sweep them away as an obstacle to the closer union of man with God; keep them out of the hands of your enemies. In the words of Joshua Sprigge at Whitehall in 1648: ‘God will bringe forth a New Heaven and a New Earth. In the meane time you’re work is to restraine, indeed to restraine the Magistrate from such a power.’<sup>31</sup> That is why *constitutionally* the revolution manifested itself as chaos; an absence; a void. As one royalist poet put it after the regicide:

This crime hath widdowed our whole Nation  
voided all Forms, left but privation in  
Church and State.<sup>32</sup>

31 Charles H. Firth (ed.), *The Clarke Papers* (4 vols., London 1899–1965), vol. II, p. 87, quoted in J. C. Davis, ‘Religion and the Struggle for Freedom in the English Revolution’, *Historical Journal* 35, 3 (1992), p. 520.

32 *An Elegie upon King Charles the First, Murthered publikely by His Subjects*, quoted in Peter Malekin, *Liberty and Love: English Literature and Society 1640–1688* (London 1981).

It was of course the inability of the revolution to successfully define itself institutionally during the interregnum that accounted for its *constitutional* failure. Yet since it was not primarily a constitutional occurrence, we should not confuse this history of failure with the history of the revolution itself. How can we turn from these accidental manifestations of the revolution to its substance?

The answer is by turning from so-called political and constitutional history – as if the two were self-evidently equivalent – to the history of radical belief. To see this in its practical and intellectual contexts is to understand both the revolution and its power. In a conservative pre-industrial society the emergence of radical belief on a large scale was a consequence of institutional meltdown. The disappearance of effective religious magistracy from 1640 inaugurated the first phase. The disappearance of monarchy ushered in the second. But radicalism as a process outlived these beginnings and developed its own momentum and history. The radicals themselves were a small minority, yet this phenomenon affected English society as a whole. That this minority were armed and took over the country may help to explain this fact. It is in this sense that the English revolution stands at the heart of the seventeenth-century experience, and held the rest of that experience in its grip.

Understanding the revolution above all means coming to terms with the scale and achievement of the English radical imagination. How could these people have reconfigured themselves so dazzlingly and ambitiously in place and time? How could this process have moved so quickly, and so variously? How could it so often have re-invented the very languages through which it was expressed? One thinks not only of Milton, but of Coppe, Winstanley and others to be reminded that this was a time when history aspired successfully to the condition of poetry. For some, like George Fox, language itself became a form to be transcended: ‘I saw that which was without end, and things which cannot be uttered, and of the greatness and infinitude of the love of God, which cannot be expressed by words.’<sup>33</sup> From another perspective William Sancroft spoke after the regicide of ‘these enormous crimes, which no words yet in use can reach’.<sup>34</sup>

It is one short step from understanding the fragility of the institutions of

33 Fox, *Journal*, p. 15.

34 Quoted in John Spurr, *The Restoration Church of England 1646–1689* (New Haven 1991), pp. 20–1.

this society to seeing the relative freedom and power of the contemporary imagination in relation to them. God's church was eternal, but the seventeenth-century church was recent, peculiar and, as it turned out, not particularly resilient. Here is John Donne, no radical, talking about the arbitrary human mapping of the sky:

For of Meridians and Parallels  
 Man hath weav'd out a net  
 and this net throwne Upon the Heavens  
 and now they are his owne.  
 Loth to goe up the hill, or labour thus  
 To goe to heaven  
 we make heaven come to us.<sup>35</sup>

Here is the radical Gerrard Winstanley talking about the arbitrary human mapping of the *earth*, by way of imagining away the primary economic institution of his society:

[It is] selfish imagination, arbitrary invention, to enclose parcels of the earth into several divisions and call those enclosures proper or peculiar to oneself . . . [But God is] coming on amain; to break down all your pinfolds and lay all open to the common; the rough ways he will make smooth, and crooked ways straight; and level mountains and valleys.<sup>36</sup>

What these perceptions share is their view of the arbitrariness and triviality of human contrivance in the greatness of God's world. We see the astonishing extent of radical ambition if we follow this imaginative process through the annihilation of inherited institutions to their reconstruction. This culminated in the work of James Harrington who, faced with God's power, couldn't resist plugging himself into the grid. *Oceana* would be immortal, for it had successfully copied the only immortal thing. This was the universe, the perfect handiwork of God. The orbs, galaxies and other astronomical bodies of which Harrington's work is full are actually the heavens. Its author believed he was the first man to scientifically understand, in order to imitate, the creation. Accordingly at the end of *Oceana* the lawgiver Olphaeus Megelator

35 See n. 2.

36 Quoted in Michael McKeon, 'Politics of Discourses and the Rise of the Aesthetic', in K. Sharpe and S. Zwicker (eds.), *Politics of Discourse* (Los Angeles 1987), p. 43.

conceived such a delight within him, as God is [said] to have done, when he finished the creation of the world, and saw his orbs move below him. For in the art of man, being the imitation of nature which is the art of God, there is nothing so like the first call of beautiful order out of chaos . . . as the architecture of a well-ordered commonwealth.<sup>37</sup>

We have seen England's troubles as a shaking of the earth and sky, leading to the collapse of some familiar buildings. We now find its imaginative consequence, the English revolution, spanning the earth and sky. This radical process too had three phases, spanning a much longer period than has usually been understood. While all three connected and overlapped, each had an identifiable English practical and European intellectual context.

The first, civil war radicalism, was a product of the 1640s. This followed from the collapse of religious magistracy and was distinguished by its religious character. Its European context was the radical (non-magisterial) reformation. With the earlier manifestations of this in central and western Europe it shared much, including its millennialism, and its social doctrines of practical christianity.<sup>38</sup> In England, however, the radical reformation outstripped its predecessors, for in England in the 1640s, unlike Germany in the 1520s, the radical army was on the winning side. This was the initial and devastating impulse of the English revolution, and it carried not only English but European history into uncharted waters.

The second phase of radicalism, English republicanism, was a product of the 1650s. This followed most obviously the abolition of monarchy. To it fell the task of attempting to fill this void. The European context to which it turned was the republican thought of the renaissance, and through it that of the ancient world; in the words of Sidney, 'Aristotle . . . Plato, Plutarch, Thucydides, Xenophon, Polybius, and all the ancient Grecians, Italians, and others who asserted the natural freedom of mankind'.<sup>39</sup> For, said Milton, 'the sun, which we want, ripens wits as well as fruits; and as wine and oil are imported to us from abroad, so must ripe understanding and many civil

37 Harrington, *Oceana*, in *Political Works*, pp. 229, 341; see Jonathan Scott, 'The Rapture of Motion: James Harrington's Republicanism', in N. Phillipson and Q. Skinner (eds.), *Political Discourse in Early Modern Britain* (Cambridge 1993).

38 See Michael Baylor (ed.), *The Radical Reformation* (Cambridge 1991).

39 Algernon Sidney, *Discourses Concerning Government*, in *Sydney on Government: The Works of Algernon Sydney*, ed. J. Robertson (London 1772), p. 11.

virtues be . . . from foreign writings and examples of best ages; we shall else miscarry'.<sup>40</sup> The result, if it did not secure republicanism in England, became, in several hands, one of the revolution's most significant intellectual and literary legacies.

The final phase of this process was restoration radicalism. This blossomed particularly during the restoration crisis of 1678–83. It drew upon both its religious and classical predecessors; and from this process of historical revisitation, within the broader context of political repetition already described, there emerged in the work of Locke, Sidney and others some of the most influential radical writing of the century.<sup>41</sup> This depicted the revolution itself through the lens of restoration memory. The result became a prism, receiving light from the renaissance and reformation and refracting it towards the Enlightenment.

#### CONCLUSION

Let us return to the question with which we began: how might we structure a political history of seventeenth-century England? We have the three crises which constitute the troubles. We have the three phases of radicalism that are the revolution that resulted. And we have the three-stage restoration process by which contemporaries struggled to deliver themselves from this situation. One broke the peace and, eventually, the structures of church and state. The second cascaded from this ruptured fabric before it could be repaired. The third saw the painful restitching of a rent garment. I hope we have arrived at this framework by restoring the contemporary experience to its own contexts in time and space. I believe not only that this brings us closer, imaginatively, to seventeenth-century English history. It also enables us better to understand its historical significance. It is by restoring English history to its European context that we can come to see what was actually unique about it. Through its openness, and vulnerability, to both the practical and intellectual forces shaping early modern Europe, the English experience would become a European shaping force in its own right.

40 Quoted in Blair Worden, 'Milton and the Tyranny of Heaven', in Gisela Bock, Quentin Skinner and Maurizio Viroli (eds.), *Machiavelli and Republicanism* (Cambridge 1990), pp. 233–4.

41 Scott, *Restoration Crisis*; Scott, 'The Law of War: Grotius, Sidney, Locke and the Political Theory of Rebellion', *History of Political Thought* 13, 4 (Winter 1992).

The principal direct legacy of this experience was intellectual. This would bear fruit not only in Europe but in the United States of America as well. It is hardly surprising that the intellectual impact of the English revolution should ultimately be clearer outside that country than in it. The English reaction to the pain and chaos that brought it into being was, as soon as it safely could be done, to bolt the door against it. From a distance it is this restoration impulse – the impulse of forgetting – that is impressive; we still live in restoration times.