**Russelling Things Up -- Unrevolutionary England, 1603-1642**

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In 1976, Conrad Russell published a, now famous, article which exploded a bomb under the edifice of the English past. Seventeenth century parliaments were not, he argued, seeking more power at the expense of the Crown, the Civil War was not the inevitable outcome of a long constitutional struggle, and the story of English history is not that of the inexorable development of parliamentary sovereignty. Unrevolutionary England is a collection worth buying for that classic alone, but it is a rich album of other, and more recent, hits. Indeed it signals the shift to new explanations which receive their full articulation and documentation in The Fall of the British Monarchies and its epitome, The Causes of the English Civil War.

To clear the way Russell responds to those critics who have sought, usually ineffectually, to revive the golden oldies of constitutionalism and Whiggery. The Royalists, he demonstrates beyond doubt, 'were not one whit less attached to the principle of the rule of law than their parliamentarian opponents': Sir Roger Twysden who protested loudly against arbitrary taxation became a Royalist. Far from a war of Court versus Country, Russell shows the king's own Council split in allegiance and his recruitment of support from old 'Country' men. As for the leaders of the parliamentary opposition, rather than pursuing sovereignty they sought a properly funded monarchy (Pym: 'the richest king in Christendom') and a Council of great officers. The sides that lined up to fight in 1642 had not long been forming: as late as 1638 Oliver Cromwell was appointed a JP. It was the course of events and contingencies after 1637, still more after November 1640, that transformed tensions and disagreements into parties and armed conflict.

Russell's detailed account of these years is a brilliant demonstration of the old revisionist claim that close narrative is the key to explaining that conflict. For as Russell's masterly narrative unfolds, we are struck at several points how easily things might have turned out otherwise: had the plague of '41 lasted longer, there may have been no Civil War. Only this close chronology clarifies how the execution of Strafford and Charles' attempted coup to save him, the Army Plot, impeded settlement; how the outbreak of the Irish rebellion closed the option of dissolving Parliament; how the mounting fears of violence silenced negotiation; and why, even after the flickering prospect of settlement had been snuffed, it took so long to come to blows.

Though the plot is complex and demanding, the narrator leads us, in and out of the Commons and Lords, in and out of Whitehall, north of the border and across the Irish sea with enviable analytical clarity and in a prose that is lucid and often witty. And whilst devoted to the crucial importance of moments, willing (usually) to consider alternative interpretations, and fascinated by the significant detail (how did the blobs of candle grease get on the Attainder act?) Russell, replying to the charge that revisionism is mere historical negativism, sets out a new set of causes of the English Civil War.

Religion is central to the new story. Charles and Laud by their theological and liturgical innovations disrupted the harmony of the church, fuelled fear of popery and so fostered, especially among the godly, a distrust of their government and a determination to reform Church and State. What gave the godly their opportunity, however, was not events in England, but Charles' endeavours to extend his concern for religious uniformity throughout his kingdoms. The Scots' rebellion against the new Prayer Book and the king's failure to suppress it necessitated the recalling of Parliament.

From 1637 English and Scottish affairs were interwoven. Increasingly a faction in England began to conspire with the Covenanters to fulfil their hopes for godly reformation and perhaps high office. And for their part the Covenanters saw influence in English affairs as their only guarantee of domestic security. As much of the agenda of the Long Parliament was shaped by the Scots, so the Commons and Lords began to divide into pro-and anti-Scottish factions. Scottish interests complicated political settlement, but the presence of their army in Northumberland alone guaranteed the survival of Parliament. Charles I therefore had to negotiate not only with MPs at Westminster, but also the Covenanter rebels--or to separate them by settling with one. If his largely successful journey to Scotland in August 1641 held some promise of that, the 'window of opportunity' was slammed shut by the outbreak of the Irish rebellion in October. Thereafter the interrelated but often divergent interests of Scottish Presbyterians, Protestant and Catholic Irish, and the leaders of the Long Parliament made up a British crisis and conflict which plunged all three kingdoms into war. No wonder, Russell concludes, historians of England have found the Civil War so hard to explain, when its causes lay beyond, in the difficulties of ruling multiple kingdoms with divergent religions--difficulties compounded by an inept monarch who sought to treat them as one.

'The British Problem' has already joined 'the war of religion' in the new litany of explanation. Do we then have at last a new 'Authorised Version' of the causes of Civil War? For all its rich suggestiveness, there are problems with the argument. First, behind the bald assertions about the religious explanation lies some defensive hedging of bets and contradiction. So in places we read of a Calvinist dominance, in others the 'custody battle between two rival claimants for control of the church' appears more open: in 1640 Pym doubted he could secure a majority for religious reform. Similarly the Laud who is characterised as a dangerous innovator could also in many ways claim Bancroft as his 'spiritual father'. And the harmony that (it is argued) he and Charles disrupted is elsewhere acknowledged as only 'cosmetic' under James. Most problematic is the fact that, as Russell shows, there were no attacks on the liturgy of the Church in the Long Parliament. Indeed the religious agenda of 1641 seems removed from the issues of the 1630s and the assault on the episcopacy no more spared Laud's Calvinist critics than his supporters.

Whilst religious matters were of undoubted importance in the advent of Civil War, their precise role does not emerge clearly or convincingly here. Certainly there is more to say about anticlericalism and the revolutionary potential always implicit (and sometimes explicit) in Puritanism.

As for the British problem, the argument that the Scots and the Irish triggered and exacerbated the English troubles is in general compelling. The questions remain how far these were essentially religious problems and how far Charles I was himself responsible for the crisis in all his kingdoms. Russell praises James I for his preparedness to leave well alone in Scotland, for his political skill and good sense in not striving for uniformity; he even doubts whether James 'had a British policy at all'. This surely misrepresents James' struggles to achieve an episcopal Kirk and to push through the articles of Perth in the face of opposition. His plans for a full union of the kingdoms implied closer religious conformity, and Calderwood for one thought that meant the conformity of the Kirk to the Church of England. Indeed it was James' failure to secure closer union that bequeathed a near insurmountable problem to his son.

Even without religious differences, the experience of governing multiple kingdoms in an age when the personal presence of the monarch was crucial was, as the Iberian peninsula evidences, an unhappy one. As one astute commentator put it, the Scots quarrel with the king 'is that which they have to the sun; he doth not warm and visit them as much as others'. It may be too that Russell underplays the importance of the Scots war itself for the British crisis. For in 1639, the king assembled and paid an army which several (on both sides) believed could defeat the Covenanters. Even in the autumn of 1640 there was some optimism (and much anti-Scottish jingoism) in the camp. Simple failure in war (especially with no major battle fought after so much effort raising men) may have been more important than sympathy for the Scots in weakening the king's position in 1640.

Certainly defeat brought the Scots not only onto English soil, but on the political and parliamentary stage. But did the Scots determine the development of Parliament and parties? For those with clear political agendas--Charles on the one hand, Pym and co. on the other--high politics were necessarily British politics. But it is doubtful whether among the backbenchers there was much detailed knowledge of the manoeuvrings between Westminster and Edinburgh, or much interest in high politics--even English, let alone British. Though raising the money to remove the armies was, as perennially, difficult, most MPs were probably desirous of evicting the Scots, and anxious to pursue local grievances and concerns. Russell's narrative reads at times too much as a Pym's-eye view of the Long Parliament, in which the perceptions of those who drifted away in the summer of '41 find little representation. As he acknowledges, there was far less sense of urgency or crisis in the counties than the Commons. We still need to know more about how the heat at the centre was radiated to the localities.

Thirdly, while his emphasis on the British dimension eschews provincialism, Russell does not transcend insularity. Yet Charles' problems in all his kingdoms cannot be divorced from the European situation or his foreign policy: not for nothing did the French ambassador call the king's Scottish friends a Spanish faction. Indeed along with the Prayer Book rebellion it was the failure of Charles' treaty with France that caused trouble. Where a French alliance and war against the Habsburgs would have enabled Charles to appear a champion of the Protestant cause in Europe, the drift back to Spain after 1638 reinforced fears of popery had turned Henrietta Maria's Puritan friends into frondeurs. If only for his constant sensitivity to the European dimension we must not shun Gardiner but read him alongside Russell.

Whilst then some of the older questions now seem to be answered, the thesis of a 'British problem' now needs to be, like parliamentary history has been, placed 'in perspective'.

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