



**Jonathan Scott.** *England's Troubles: Seventeenth Century English Political Instability in European Context.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. 558 pp. \$74.95 (cloth) 0521-41192-0; \$27.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-42334-2.

**Reviewed by** Justin Champion (Department of History Royal Holloway College, University of London)

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## **The trouble with *England's Troubles*: Jonathan Scott, present-centredness, and taking belief seriously**

The trouble with *England's Troubles*: Jonathan Scott, present-centredness, and taking belief seriously

It has been some considerable time since the writings of Leopold Von Ranke have been cited with such approval in a work on seventeenth century history. The driving force of Ranke's historical ambitions was to reconstruct history as it really happened. Careful narrative, supported by detailed and meticulous sources, balanced by judicious argument, were the infrastructure of Ranke's historical writing. The same cannot, unfortunately be said of the work under consideration here. In a large – and at times strangely organised – book, Scott has a lot to say, but the ambition to make a significant contribution to the understanding of seventeenth century history, overleaps itself.

This is a work full of conceit in all possible senses of the word. It is extremely well written (if poorly structured). Its assessment of its own worth is apparent in the repeatedly barbed and unnecessary settling of scores in the footnotes. Projected as a majesterial and revisionist account of the seventeenth century, correcting the insular myopia of previous anglophone histories, Scott advances some powerful and suggestive claims. British history should be contextualised into the broader contours of “European history.”

The charge of present-centredness leveled at many recent practitioners is to be remedied by an approach that (in taking contemporary belief seriously) results in recov-

ering (he claims) the real dimension of religious conviction. One positive consequence of this ambition is to reaffirm the commonplace fact of the permeability of religion and politics throughout the century as a whole: this enduring structure fell a late casualty to the semi-Hegelian “statebuilding” achievements of William III in the 1690s. “Structures” and “processes” trample through the land of seventeenth century Britain untroubled by questions of agency or identity.

It has been Scott's achievement in earlier work to reinforce the persisting problems of historical memory that haunted the seventeenth century. This work extends the treatment to the “whole” century. Mending the broken back of the period, the repeated visitation of memories of the “troubles” of the past, prompted repetition of political crisis. This cycle of trauma was broken by the importation of a European model of government in the form of the fiscal military state of the 1690s. After these “climatic” moments, the elements which had riven the public memory of British culture dribbled away into the stability of the long eighteenth century.

Modeled around the literary trope of destruction, creation and restoration, the narrative sections of the book overlap in three blocs: political instability 1618-1689, radical imagination 1640-1689, and restoration 1660-1702. Contained within these sections are narratives of high politics, mixed in with textual commentary and robust engagement with modern historiography. Alger-

non Sidney and George Downing stalk the pages, while Archbishop Laud and John Locke, barely achieve walk on status: many other significant figures are simply absent [James Ussher, Charles Blount, Richard Simon?]. New perspectives and original insights sit along side eccentric expression and a tendency to “list” positions advanced or engaged. It is quite clear that Scott’s literary style and verve carry the weight of his argument at times: history as an act of literary expression and persuasion at times overpowers the evidence displayed in the footnotes derived from a limited and narrow set of primary and (especially) secondary sources. There is no doubt that Scott’s fecund historical imagination is anchored to a keen intellectual acuity; what is unclear is whether this *ars historica* is dedicated to Rankean ambitions.

There are some startling assertions. Part Two “The English Revolution 1640-89: radical imagination” makes the claim that the revolution was “a single fluid activity” (p. 230) rather than a set of discrete groups. Admittedly one can establish structural continuities between distinct milieux: many engaged with the nature of the government of God, and in the process set out to “re-negotiate the relationship between God’s creatures and their creator” (p. 233). Although unwilling to embrace the radicalism described so powerfully by Christopher Hill in *The World Turned Upside Down* (1972), Scott persists in calling this process a radical one. Levellers, Muggletonians, Baptists, Ranters, Presbyterians *et al.* all have common identity because part of a collective attempt to re-inscribe the relationship between social institutions and God, or between man and conceptions of divinity. The point that the pejorative language of seventeenth century sectarian labeling is not a secure foundation for describing “real” confessional identity has been well made. What is clear, however, is that such labels do perform the act of distinguishing the difference of theological platforms, ecclesiological institutions, and soteriological competences. It seems strange that an historian who so readily embraces the work of Colin Davis and his deconstruction of the sociological or sectarian identity of the “Ranters” should extend the capacity of “radical” to include alongside Ranters the whole variety of religious dissidence of the period. Given the definition of the radical process as one that engaged with re-definitions of the relationship between human institutions and God, it is unclear to this reader why men like Laud, Peter Heylyn, and Henry Hammond might not be included in the communion of the saints too?

A mischaracterisation of the nature of religious belief in the period is one of the fundamental flaws of the

work. While it is quite apparent that Scott has interesting and eloquent ideas to convey about (for example) the intellectual sources and culture of political thinking in the period, it is not so clear that he has grasped the essence of religious meaning. On the positive side, the emphasis upon the moral languages of virtue underpinning republican discourses is an important and imaginative corrective to the commonplace historiographical focus upon the constitutional and institutional prescriptions of commonwealth authors. The persistence of this moral idiom after the 1650s was one of the achievements of the revolution: Scott is correct to underscore this. What is less clear is the “religious” dimension of this republicanism. Sidney and John Milton strut the stage at the expense of James Harrington (whose idiosyncrasy is defined by being at one stage described proleptically as “reminiscent” of Spinoza, p. 334). Leaving aside the rather anachronistic citation of Sidney’s *Discourses* (a text written in the 1680s and only published in 1698, so hardly appropriate to be cited in support of a description of an ideology of the 1650s), the central ecclesiological issue of the relationship between state-religion and commonwealth anticlericalism is marginalised. As Mark Goldie has powerfully shown it was the convergence of an anticlerical discourse against the “priestcraft” of all claims to religious authority (including the radical enthusiasm of radical prophets as well as Presbyterian and Laudian priests) found in Harrington and Hobbes that survived the Restoration.

Scott proclaims in his introductory pages that “we need to take contemporary beliefs seriously” (p. 4). His work is an exploration of “the impact upon fragile institutions of powerful beliefs” (p. 5). Phrases such as “intellectual process,” “phenomenon of belief,” and “process of belief” are deployed to underscore this serious ambition of reclaiming the religious dimensions of public culture. In asserting his intentions to recover the religious centre of seventeenth century discourses it is Scott’s purpose to expose the “present-centredness” of much of current historiography. Searching for answers to modern questions, most historians exploit seventeenth century history to settle an agenda un-thought in the earlier period. Scott is in good company here. Whether it is sensible to use metaphors related to the twentieth century motor car (was the state a Ferrari or a model T Ford?, p. 32) to illuminate the nature of early modern society is a moot point. What such usage does indicate is that even the most aware historian cannot escape the present-centred nature of language and thought.

Despite his claims to recover contemporary belief,

Scott's grasp of the complexity of religious language is seriously deficient. For example, it is not quite clear what he means by "belief": is this intellectual conviction, or a state of theological "faith"? As Hobbes skillfully established much of the crisis in early modern societies was prompted by false belief and false truth claims: to believe something was believe someone. To have a "true" religious belief was to subscribe to a set of values distributed by an institution (the Church, however defined) or by the spirit (where-ever located). Beliefs were not unanchored from social or cultural context. Religion was very rarely discussed without the definitional qualifier of "true" or "false." Scott's confidence that he (almost single handed) has recovered contemporary belief betrays an fundamental philosophical realism at the core of his approach. It appears that some beliefs are "true" (and consequently Scott has skilfully recovered them) and others are "false" (and Scott passionately condemns them).

An example of the flaws of this confidence will perhaps establish the point. Throughout the work there is a singular absence of engagement with the intricacies of contemporary theology. Seventeenth-century religious disputes were driven by a precision of understanding that is difficult and alien to the present-centered historian confident that religious belief was a sort of private intuition. But even at the level of public discourse there is an unsubtle engagement with the religious language. The most obvious mistake is to be found in the understanding of "popery" in the period. As a series of historians have established, "anti-popish" discourses were central to the experience of national and parochial religion in the period. The power of the discourse was repeatedly contested from the 1600s to the 1700s. In Scott's view, however, "popery" is a "real" defined category of religious belief. Examining his use of the notion in the case of Laud and Charles I may be useful. Having outlined Caroline religious reform as a series of nine propositions (including the rather tautological point of "intolerance of anti-popery; relative tolerance of popery" p. 129), Scott answers the rhetorical question "If by 'was this popery?' we mean was it Roman Catholic, then the answer is no (though the 'no' is not resounding)," but then goes on assert that although, theologically, Caroline religion was not doctrinally Roman Catholic, that the "crucial point, however, concerns what contemporaries meant by popery" (p. 130). Despite claiming that other historians have missed the point that (some) contemporaries believed Laud was a crypto-Catholic, Scott seems blind to his own position. In claiming to recover the belief of "contemporaries," surely it is important to at-

tempt to define who we mean by this description. If Laud claimed Protestant identity, and William Prynne denied it to him, it is clear to Scott who was right: whose contemporary belief should we take seriously then?

Defining "popery," or the nature of the "church," or the definition of the "Trinity," or the soteriological competence of "grace" or "faith" were the central points of theological controversy. There is little or nothing written in this book about these matters. The nature of the antichrist, the constitution of the primitive church, the authority of the Church Fathers, even the nature of scripture play no role in the recovery of contemporary belief. Yet it was in these difficult and erudite matters that religious authority was forged. All beliefs were made, authorised, disseminated, and debated. The business of contestation, carried out in the public forum of oral debate and print culture, was the cultural dynamic that drove the successive crises of the seventeenth century. Defining "popery" in the 1620s, in the 1630s in the 1640s and 1650s, in the 1670s in the 1680s and even the 1700s was a different and difficult business, fought out between political interests that had absolute conviction that their definition was orthodox and right.

With time and space it would be possible to pursue Scott's claims about the "European" dimensions of his arguments, and the very unsubtle (almost caricature) account of the processes of "state-building" in the period. Simply claiming that there was an important European dimension to *England's Troubles* is not enough, however forcefully made. Certainly, current historiography has avoided engaging with the issue, but there is little evidence in this work that the account of permeability has been taken further. Simply concentrating upon the impact of William III on British politics is inadequate, given the opportunities for discussing the persisting relationships of Anglo-Dutch political and religious communities. Benjamin Furly, whose house and library in Rotterdam has been identified as the epicentre of the early Enlightenment, merits one mention in the book. Even a cursory examination of his correspondence with men like Sidney, Locke and Shaftesbury, as well as his relationship with figures like Eugene of Savoy, John Toland and Anthony Collins, might have provided useful material for exploring the European context of religious and political cultures in England. The approach to European intellectual culture established by historians like Anne Goldgar (*Impolite Learning: Conduct and Community in the Republic of Letters, 1680-1750*, Yale, 1995) is simply ignored.

This book then makes some very large claims, but delivers on very few. The bold assertion that the work intends to recover the significance of religion is not fulfilled. It is not enough to pay lip-service to power of religion and then avoid engagement with the languages of theology, ecclesiology and scripture. Although passionate in conception, the work is partial in production. Per-

haps the work is testimony to the Rankean counsel that taking sides is not the business of historians, however convinced they are that they know the truth.

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