H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Alison Wall. *Power and Protest in England, 1525-1640.* London: Edward Arnold Publishers, 2000. xi + 217 pp. $74.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-340-61022-0.

Reviewed by Roger Manning (Department of History, Cleveland State University)

Published on H-Albion (October, 2001)

A Culture of Obedience?

A Culture of Obedience?

When the English write their history they like to think of themselves as being civilized, sensible, and law-abiding. Unlike the contentious and undisciplined French with their bloody revolutions, the English do not have Revolutions; they have crises with a lower-case "c." According to Alison Wall, even when they have rebellions and riots, they remain focused, relatively nonviolent, and they adhere to a "culture of obedience" (p. 162). Dr. Wall's study is a synthesis of recent writings on county government and society, including her own very valuable articles on Elizabethan and early-Stuart Wiltshire, and studies of aristocratic and popular protests and disturbances between the rebellion against the Amicable Grant of 1525 and the coming of the civil wars. Wall rejects the notion that the English were "an ungovernable people" who held all authority in contempt.

Power and Protest is a very serviceable study of the political and social dynamics of the county communities of England. It is divided into two main parts: the first looks at the nature and exercise of power in the public sphere with chapters devoted to the crown, the nobility and gentry, and the towns. This is followed by a very useful chapter on patriarchal authority within the family and household. The last part of the book is devoted to chapters on obedience, dissent, riot, and rebellion. Unfortunately, the first chapter, on the monarchy, is the weakest of the lot. It discusses how the Tudor and early-Stuart monarchs attempted to project an image of authority by invoking divine authority, issuing proclamations, ordering the reading of homilies, commissioning portraits, minting coins, going on royal progresses, and the like. The author lets the cat out of the bag when she admits that, except for the circulation of coins bearing the royal image, much of this was never seen by the people. This does little to demonstrate how monarchs wielded authority to maintain order and obedience. Much more effective at this point would have been a discussion of how royal justice operated, and was seen by the people to work. Instead, this kind of discussion is put off until chapter 6 on "The Practice of Authority."

The chapter on "The Nobility," makes the very salient point that Henry VIII's destruction of the power of the Howards in Norfolk and Suffolk and that of the Courte-

nays in Devon and Cornwall resulted in the removal of two magnates whose regional power might have restrained the rebellions of 1549 in East Anglia and the Southwest. Somerset's failure to cultivate the support of the peers in more peaceful times meant that they were not prepared to offer him the kind of support which he needed during the riots and rebellions of 1549. Somerset never learned the lesson which every successful ruler must know instinctively–that one must always keep an eye on one's power base. For her part, Elizabeth also sought to reduce the power of regional magnates and to construct a court-based nobility. Wall might have added that this may have reduced the potential of such great nobles to lead rebellions at home, but such courtier creatures were ill-suited to command her armies abroad or to suppress domestic rebellions at home. The gentry wielded considerable power as sheriffs, justices of the peace, and deputy lieutenants and were the representatives of royal power with which the ordinary person was most familiar. However, they also remained the source of much low-level disorder with their jockeying for favor and position, and their perpetual factionalism spilled over into disputed elections, feuding, and faction fights. In her attempt to portray the English as an obedient people, Wall quickly passes over or omits to mention the fact that the gentry and nobility were themselves the source of much agrarian disorder by manipulating their tenants and neighbors among the smallholders to engage in enclosure riots and other agrarian protests or masking their feuds as poaching affrays while themselves remaining just below the horizon. While it does not fit neatly into the subject of social protest, another form of aristocratic violence which was becoming more widespread in seventeenth-century England was dueling, including multiple combats. As representatives of royal authority charged with preserving the peace, the aristocracy presented a bad example.

Towns faced a multitude of difficulties which threatened the preservation of order beginning with the bitter conflicts engendered by the Reformation. The problem of urban poverty persisted, and magistrates, urged on by Puritan sermons, engaged in social engineering to alleviate poverty and thus head off social protest. Wall also demonstrates that many town governments were more broad-based and participatory than generally supposed. The high degree of participation–if only at the lower levels of town government–made acceptance of authority in towns more palatable. Wall does preserve the distinction between open and closed municipal corporations, and stresses that the long-range trend was towards more oligarchy with a demand for more deference and greater social distance between the town fathers and the more humble folk.

The author has sensible things to say about the governance of the family and household. The male exercise of patriarchal authority to restrain female rebellion was much exaggerated by the household conduct books written by celibate clerics, and more notice needs to be taken of the actual exercise of power by the wife over children, apprentices, and servants. The preponderance of surviving evidence suggests that in landed, mercantile, and artisan families, partnership was the more usual basis of marriage. Male heads of households, when naming someone to execute their wills, frequently chose their wives or other female relatives, so they must have respected their ability to handle property and make wise decisions.

The practice of authority within county and urban communities is examined through an analysis of casebooks, letters and papers, and diaries of JPs. Although some gentlemen wished to be in the commission of the peace only to enhance their prestige, most JPs labored long hours and spent much time in the saddle reconciling differences between their neighbors and attempting to deal with the problems which could lead to disorder. The inculcation of obedience began with catechism lessons and sermons or homilies. This rests upon the assumption that there was an incumbent resident in every parish church and chapel in the realm, which certainly was not the case in the mid-Tudor and early-Elizabethan periods. There is also a danger in assuming that public officials–whether in our own age or past ages–are competent and equal to their duties, but to assume competence and attention to duties on the part of unpaid and part-time constables and magistrates in early-modern England without more evidence strains credulity. Indeed, popular demonstrations and rituals of folk justice were often precipitated by the failure of magistrates and constables to take proper action as prescribed by law and custom. Given the random and partial nature of justice in early-modern England, the administration of poor relief or the taking of recognizances appear to have been more effective ways of reconciling differences, securing obedience, and preventing crime than punishment.

Wall, I think, exaggerates the degree of obedience of the English people. One way she does this is by glossing over the popular resistance to the various religious settlements. That the English Reformation was a slow reformation is widely accepted, and the English people did not

buy into every religious policy which came along. While some were conservative, many went out of their way to disagree with official religious settlements in their quest for religious novelty until the enforcement of religious uniformity became quite impossible by the middle of the seventeenth century.[1] There was also a pronounced tendency towards political dissent in the reigns of James I and his successor, especially after the Overbury murder scandal, and the gentry were especially active in disseminating criticism of the government–including seditious libels.

Most of the numerous anti-enclosure riots employed low-level violence and took the form of localized demonstrations to protest changing land-use. Again, a high proportion of them were actually procured by aristocratic landlords and disguised gentry feuds. If authorities failed to deal with such grievances, they could grow into full-fledged insurrections as was the case with the Midland Revolt of 1607. Food rioters also displayed self-imposed discipline by refusing to plunder shipments of grain or offering to purchase the grain at fair prices. Wall might have strengthened her argument at this point by showing that protesters often possessed a fairly sophisticated understanding of the distinctions in English law between localized protests, which were regarded as riot, a misdemeanor punished lightly, and generalized protests which could be construed as high treason. Magistrates usually understood that riots protesting loss of use-rights on common wastes and in forests and fens or protests against the export of grain during periods of dearth had a certain legitimacy. In response, JPs tried to negotiate or dealt out lenient punishments provided their own personal interests were not involved. But, the protesters did not attract the attention of the magistrates by scrupulously adhering to a "culture of obedience." They knew what it took to attract the attention of the justices, and they calculated just how far it was safe to go in doing so.

Discipline and order were also evident in the Pilgrimage of Grace of 1536 and the East Anglian Risings of 1549. Both of these groups of rebellions claimed the mantle of legitimacy. But the Western Rising of 1549, although attracting a few clerical and gentry supporters, set out to dispute the government's authority to enact a new religious settlement while King Edward VI remained under the age of twenty-four. Moreover, the crowd in this rebellion was defiant rather than submissive and resorted to violence toward the persons of the gentry and ecclesiastical officials, and undertook a siege of Exeter. The resistance of the men of Cornwall and Devon to the royal forces under the command of Lord Russell was especially stout and several thousand died in the ensuing battle.

While one can argue with some of Wall's interpretations and omissions, the fact remains that the author has produced a commendable book which can serve as an introduction for undergraduates and beginning graduate students to the nature of popular and aristocratic rebellion and riot and the exercise of authority in England prior to the civil wars.

Note

[1]. Cf. Michael C. Questier, *Conversion, Politics and Religion in England, 1580-1625* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 1996).