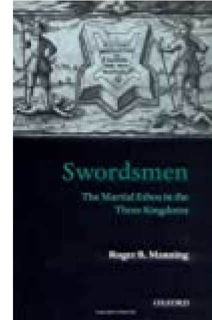
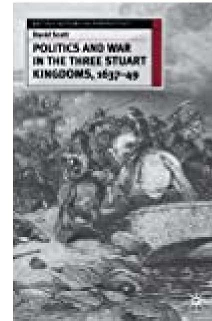


Roger B. Manning. *Swordsmen: The Martial Ethos in the Three Kingdoms.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003. xv + 272 pp. $72.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-926121-5.



David Scott. *Politics and War in the Three Stuart Kingdoms, 1637-1649.* Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. xvii + 233 pp. $31.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-333-65874-1.

Reviewed by Ian Gentles (Department of History, Glendon College, York University, Toronto)

Published on H-Albion (October, 2004)

Aristocratic Honor and the English Revolution

David Scott has written a close-grained, cutting-edge political history of the English civil wars and the contemporary conflicts in Ireland and Scotland. In some respects he is ahead of the cutting edge, since he alludes to the fruits of unpublished research by other pioneering scholars such as John Adamson and Jason Peacey. As such *Politics and War* deserves wide attention.

Scott takes a resolutely unromantic, unblinkered approach to what in some quarters is still called the English Revolution. Thus he demonstrates that the Scots could not have vanquished Charles I in the Second Bishops War of 1640 had they not enjoyed the help of a puritan English fifth column that sabotaged the king's war effort. There had been high-level contact between the king's puritan opponents in all three kingdoms for over a decade prior to 1640. When the crunch came in that year political grandees, including the earls of Essex and Warwick, Viscount Saye and Sele, John Pym, John Hampden and Oliver St. John, encouraged the Scots to invade England and helped the cause by obstructing the mobilization of the Yorkshire militia. These activities constituted

nothing less than treason, and Charles was well aware of who the traitors were. Their subsequent political intransigence stemmed from their awareness that should the king emerge militarily victorious in his struggle against them they would surely face the scaffold.

The thread of mistrust wove itself into the calculations of both sides from the beginning to the end of the civil wars. Because neither was strong enough (before 1648) to secure outright victory against the other, both resorted to outside aid to bolster their cause. The junto at Westminster began preparing the ground for an alliance with the Scots as early as the spring of 1642. Charles's response was to conclude a truce with the Irish Confederates so that Irish troops could be released to help him in England. Parliament's alliance with the Covenanting Scots was far more effective than Charles's under-the-table alliance with the Catholic Irish, and was arguably the deciding factor in the English civil war. For their part the royalists doomed themselves to defeat not because of any shortage of men or material, but because of the incorrigible quarrelsomeness of the high command.

Scott skillfully keeps three narratives going at once. He is especially good on Ireland, showing that the Confederates were constantly hobbled by an insoluble dilemma. Should they go it alone and seek an independent Catholic Ireland, or should they ally themselves with the king in exchange for guarantees of religious toleration and protection against crusading puritans in the English parliament? Both strategies were tried at different times with varying degrees of determination, and both failed.

Scott's account is full of thought-provoking reinterpretations of familiar material. The second civil war (1648) was in reality part of a larger struggle that he dubs "The War of the Engagement" after the secret agreement Charles signed with the Scots under Hamilton in December 1647. Far from being Charles's "ultimate folly," the Engagement represented "a shrewd political gamble" (p. 160). Its terms called not only for a Scottish, but also an Irish invasion of England. It thereby originated a truly three-kingdoms war. Scott also revises Underdown by arguing that it was not the Independent, but the Presbyterian party that collapsed in 1648.[1] The royalists' failure in that year was not primarily due to bad timing and poor generalship, but to the fact that the Independent junto at Westminster disposed of large financial resources and (I would add) an undefeated, battle-hardened army to carry out its will. Finally, there was nothing inevitable about the regicide. Following recent work by John Morrill, Philip Baker, John Adamson, and Sean Kelsey he argues that the Independent grandees made every effort in the weeks before and during the trial to find a way out for Charles I.[2] I am unpersuaded. To me it is clear that by the end of November 1648 the key senior officers had decided that the king–that "man of blood," that man "against whom God hath witnessed"–must die. I interpret their apparent efforts to negotiate with the king as an elaborate ruse to divert and neutralize moderates such as Warwick, Whitelocke, and Fairfax. That said, it is quite possible that Charles, had he been willing to call off Ormond's projected invasion from Ireland, and also sacrifice episcopacy, might have saved his neck if not his throne. The grandees, however, had taken the measure of the king: they knew he was too obstinate (or principled) to give way on either point.

Mention of episcopacy brings us to the centrality of religion in these wars. Charles's bursting into tears at Newport in September 1648, when his advisers told him that he must give up the bishops in order to save himself, demonstrates the centrality of religion to him. He was, after all, as Scot observes, the most pious of English monarchs since Edward the Confessor. As Scott also rightly observes, Mark Stoyle is off-base with his assertion that "dark forces of ethnic hatred" inspired most men to fight; rather, it was the force of religion.[3] In Scotland the National Covenant "raised political consciousness to unprecedented heights. [It] heightened feeling that the Scottish nation, under a covenanted king, had a special role in God's providential design to overthrow popery and establish Christ's rule on earth" (p. 16). The Covenant had "remarkable power in unleashing human potential at all levels of Scottish society" (p. 20). The war party in England made common cause with the Covenanters "out of a sense of godly fellowship in the face of the cosmic struggle between Christ and Antichrist being played out across Europe" (p. 27). Moreover, "Historians have undoubtedly underestimated the strength of English support for the Covenanters' programme" (p. 112). Religion was scarcely less important for the royalists who saw themselves fighting not just in defence of an anointed king, but also of a precious church and prayerbook. Similarly in Ireland, the clergy's call for the full restoration of Catholicism struck a deeply resonant chord among the people. As their battle standards graphically demonstrate, theirs was at least as much a struggle for the liberty of the church as for the recovery of their confiscated lands.

It is when he comes to England that Scott chooses to distance himself from Morrill's thesis that the three-

kingdom-wars of 1638-52 were Europe's last wars of religion.[4] For the English, Scott declares, religion was one of the subject's liberties that crown and parliament had a legal authority to defend and amend. Pym's statement in 1642 that "this warre was for Religion" (p. 42) was intended chiefly for Scottish consumption.

Scott occasionally augments his narrative with salty quotations from little-used sources. Thus we are treated, for the first time, to the Earl of Lauderdale's bitter reflection on the Scots' deliverance of the king to the Westminster parliament in January 1647: it "would make them to be hissed at by all nations; yea the doggs in the streets would pisse uppon them" (p. 129).

Errors are few and insignificant in this admirable book. It is not true that the Levellers' Large Petition of March 1647 "made no reference to the [New Model] Army" (p. 135). Goring did not command the entire 10,000-11,000-strong army in the southwest: he was only expected to bring to Naseby the 3,000 horse and dragoons under his personal command.

Scott's account is unabashedly anglocentric. This is because England, as the largest, wealthiest, most populous, and most powerful of the three kingdoms, was the main theater of conflict. The reader will encounter few references to "the people" or to radical popular movements. As Scott insists, seventeenth-century Britain and Ireland were immovably hierarchical societies in which small groups of upper-class men played a shaping role in public events. At key moments (especially between 1640 and 1643), the common people might be enlisted to petition, demonstrate, or riot on behalf of an upper-class agenda, but there was never any doubt as to who was in control–it was certainly not Levellers, Diggers or Fifth Monarchists.

This book will be required reading for all serious students of the mid-seventeenth century upheavals in Britain and Ireland.

Roger Manning's *Swordsmen* exemplifies the growing scholarly interest in the history of warfare and violence in early-modern Europe. Based on an impressively voluminous reading in the printed primary and secondary sources, it exhibits the author's sure-footed ability to build upon and extend the work of other researchers, including Maurice Keen, Mervyn James, Mark Peltonen, and Sidney Anglo. It also adds to the lengthening list of major corrections of the work of Lawrence Stone. Readers of Stone's book on the English aristocracy will recall his dogmatic statement that by the time of the outbreak of civil war in 1642 most of the English aristocracy had forgotten how to fight.[5] Manning shows that in reality around 70 percent of peers in 1640 had experienced battle, a proportion similar to that which prevailed in Ireland and Scotland at the same time.

Manning also revises Mervyn James's celebrated essay on honor[6] by suggesting that "Dr James may have buried aristocratic honour before it was quite dead." Rather, "chivalric values and the belief that a gentleman needed to authenticate his honour on the field of battle in an agonistic war lasted longer than historians have generally supposed" (p. 61). It lasted, Manning tells us, at least until the beginning of the eighteenth century.

Manning convincingly demonstrates that there was a revival of honor and martial culture in early-modern England. Not only did a high proportion of upper-class men pursue careers as swordsmen–either in the Dutch war of independence against Spain or during the Thirty Years War–there was also a tremendous upper-class vogue for dueling throughout the seventeenth century. Citing Mark Peltonen, he classifies dueling as "the darker side of the chivalric revival"; it was "chivalric honour gone rotten" (p. 204). Many acts of interpersonal violence, including duels, tavern brawls and riots by upper-class "roaring boys," "roisterers," and "bravadoes" were triggered by trivial verbal insults, inflamed by strong drink and a vengeful spirit. In England aristocratic feuding often went under the cover of anti-enclosure riots and poaching affrays. Valuable though these insights are, Manning dwells at excessive length on dueling and the dark underside of martial culture, devoting four chapters–almost half the book–to this theme.

There can be little skepticism about the book's main thesis, that the English peerage were re-chivalrized and remilitarized in the decades before the outbreak of civil war in 1642. Manning is less impressive when it comes to explaining why this re-emergence of the medieval tradition of knight errantry occurred in the late-sixteenth and early-seventeenth centuries. Was it principally an aristocratic revolt against absolute kings and the new nation state? Was it a mercenary search for instant wealth on the part of impecunious younger sons? It was both these things to be sure. Yet Manning almost entirely overlooks the most dynamic new factor: religious zeal, and in particular the rise of revolutionary Calvinism. When they joined the cause of the Dutch rebels against imperial Spain, men like Sir Philip Sidney and Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, with the active encouragement of privy councillors like Lord Treasurer William Burghley

and Sir Francis Walsingham, saw themselves as standing up for the beleaguered cause of protestantism. The O'Neills, the O'Briens, and all the other Irish nobles and gentlemen who offered their services to the Spanish king in the early-seventeenth century did not do so merely in order to earn a living; they thought of themselves as warriors in the sacred cause of Catholicism. Similarly, the thousands of Scots and English who enlisted under the banners of Gustavus Adolphus, the house of Orange, and half a dozen other protestant princes of Europe passionately believed that they were serving God's cause against the popish Antichrist. To neglect the role of religion in this most religious of European centuries (c. 1550-1650) is to tell an incomplete story. The book contains only a few errors. Charles I invaded the House of Commons in January 1642, not 1641 (p. 149). "Cannon" is a plural as well as a singular plural noun (p. 6). Classicists will be surprised to read that Homer and Virgil were "classical historians" (p. 73). The author refers to "Clyve James" when he almost certainly means Clyve Jones (p. 25, n. 30). A number of books and articles cited in the footnotes did not make it into the bibliography.

These reservations aside, *Swordsmen* is a valuable and worthwhile monograph that consolidates a convincing body of evidence for the re-emergence of a military ethos and culture of honor in early-modern Britain and Ireland. Both books under review testify to the growing scholarly appreciation of the importance of violence, warfare, and the upper-class culture of honor in the history of early-modern Europe.

Notes

[1]. David Underdown, *Pride's Purge: Politics in the Puritan Revolution* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), pp. 96-97.

[2]. See their essays in Jason Peacey, ed., *The Regicides and the Execution of Charles I* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001).

[3]. Mark Stoyle, *Loyalty and Locality: Popular Allegiance in Devon during the English Civil War* (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 1994), p. 241.

[4]. John Morrill, "The Religious Context of the English Civil War," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 5th ser., 34 (1984): pp. 155-178.

[5]. Lawrence Stone, *The Crisis of the Aristocracy, 1558-1641* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 266.

[6]. Found in M. E. James, "English Politics and the Concept of Honour, 1585-1642," *Past and Present* Supplement no. 3 (1978).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-albion

Citation: Ian Gentles. Review of Manning, Roger B., *Swordsmen: The Martial Ethos in the Three Kingdoms* and Scott, David, *Politics and War in the Three Stuart Kingdoms, 1637-1649*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. October, 2004.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=9860

Copyright © 2004 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.