Writing the English Republic

POETRY, RHETORIC AND POLITICS
1627–1660

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David Norbrook

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DAVID NORBROOK

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FOR BERNARD AND HEATHER O'DONOGHUE

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This book attempts to show the importance of setting individual writers in

a larger process of agency, and can claim no exception for itself. When it was begun, republicanism was wholly outside the mainstream of British politics. Writing the book has been stimulated by a process of change which has seen the re-emergence of constitutional reform as a significant agenda, and Henry Marten's being honoured not only by a plaque in Oxford but by giving his name to a musical group. This book could not have been undertaken without the magnificent contributions of J. G. A. Pocock, Quentin Skinner and Blair Worden to the history of republicanism, and without Christopher Hill's reminders of a world larger than that of republicanism. I am of course much indebted to a large quantity of literary criticism, full acknowledgement of which would have swollen the book to monstrous proportions. I have tried to point readers towards a good selection of the most significant recent work, while also paying tribute to earlier work in a field which has not always seen linear progress.

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Writing the English Republic is dedicated to two friends and colleagues whom it has been one of the great good fortunes of my life to know. They have been spared any direct involvement in the book, but their sustaining friendship over many years helped to make it possible.

Note on references and abbreviations

The aim of the references is to make it as easy as possible to understand texts in their historical moment. Where practicable, citations follow the original spelling, though the forms of transliteration vary slightly in drawing on such a range of texts and editions. Except in some cases where there is a modern edition providing contextual material, I have given identifying numbers: British Library pressmarks (those beginning with E or 669) for books included in George Thomason's collection from the years 1641–61 (though I have not always used the Thomason copy), and *STC* (numerical) and Wing (alphanumerical) numbers for non-Thomason books up to 1640 and 1641 respectively. All three collections are available on microfilm.

Place of publication is London where not otherwise indicated. Dates are given Old Style, save that the year is taken to begin on 1 January. Quotations in Greek have been transliterated.

ABL	John Aubrey, *'Brief Lives', Chiefly of his Contemporaries*, ed. Andrew Clark, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1898)
Beal	Peter Beal, *Index of Literary Manuscripts, Volume II: 1625–1700, Part 2: Lee-Wycherley* (1993)
BL	British Library
CJ	*The Journals of the House of Commons*
CL	*The Letters of Sir Cheney Culpeper, 1641–1657*, ed. M. J. Braddick and Mark Greengrass, in *Seventeenth-Century Political and Financial Papers*, Camden 5th Series VII (1996)
Corns, *UV*	Thomas N. Corns, *Uncloistered Virtue: English Political Literature, 1640–1660* (Oxford, 1992)
CSPD	Calendar of State Papers, Domestic Series
Hill, *WR*	*The Collected Essays of Christopher Hill, vol. 1: Writing and Revolution in Seventeenth-Century England* (Brighton, 1985)
HMC	Historical Manuscripts Commission Reports
HP	Sheffield University Library, Hartlib Papers. With the exception of *CL*, above, I have used the reproductions prepared by the Hartlib Papers Project, *The Hartlib Papers on CD-ROM* (Ann Arbor and Godstone, 1995), with occasional silent omissions of repeated words.
HPW	*The Political Works of James Harrington*, ed. J. G. A. Pocock (Cambridge, 1977)
Hutchinson	Lucy Hutchinson, *Memoirs of the Life of Colonel Hutchinson*, ed. James Sutherland (Oxford, 1973)

JMLR	*The Life Records of John Milton*, ed. J. Milton French, 5 vols. (New Brunswick, 1949–58)
May	*Lucan's Pharsalia*, second edition, trans. Thomas May (1631; *STC* 16888)
ML	Brotherton Library, University of Leeds, Marten-Loder Papers
MPL	*The Poems and Letters of Andrew Marvell*, ed. H. M. Margoliouth, third edition, revised by Pierre Legouis with the collaboration of E. E. Duncan-Jones, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1971)
MPW	*The Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, ed. Don M. Wolfe *et al.*, 8 vols. in 10 (New Haven and London, 1953–82)
MQ	*Milton Quarterly*
MR	David Armitage, Armand Himy and Quentin Skinner (eds.), *Milton and Republicanism* (Cambridge, 1995)
Norbrook, PP	David Norbrook, *Poetry and Politics in the English Renaissance* (1984)
OED	*Oxford English Dictionary*
PRO SP	Public Record Office, State Papers
RLCS	David Wootton (ed.), *Republicanism, Liberty and Commercial Society, 1649–1776* (Stanford, 1994)
Smith, LR	Nigel Smith, *Literature and Revolution in England 1640–1660* (New Haven and London, 1994)
SR	*A Transcript of the Registers of the Worshipful Company of Stationers; from 1640–1708 A.D.*, ed. G. E. Briscoe Eyre, 3 vols. (1913–14)
STC	A. W. Pollard and G. R. Redgrave, *A Short-Title Catalogue of Books Printed in England, Scotland, and Ireland: And of English Books Printed Abroad 1475–1640*, second edition, 3 vols. (1976–91)
TSP	*A Collection of the State Papers of John Thurloe*, ed. Thomas Birch, 7 vols. (1742)
Tuck	Richard Tuck, *Philosophy and Government 1572–1651* (Cambridge, 1993)
Williams, 'Marten'	C. M. Williams, 'The Political Career of Henry Marten with special reference to the origins of republicanism in the Long Parliament', unpublished D. Phil. thesis, Oxford University, 1954
Wing	Donald Wing, *Short-Title Catalogue of Books Printed in England, Scotland, Ireland, Wales, and British America and of English Books printed in Other Countries 1641–1700*, second edition, 3 vols. (New York, 1972–94).
WMW	*Miscellaneous Works of George Wither*, 6 vols. (Manchester, 1872–78; rptd New York, 1967). Page references are to individual works within each volume.
WP	*The Poems of Edmund Waller*, ed. G. Thorn Drury (London and New York, 1893; references are to the two-volume reprint, 1905)

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Illustrations

Introduction: acts of oblivion
and republican speech-acts

When Samuel Pepys was a fifteen-year-old schoolboy, he was present at the execution of Charles I on 30 January 1649. Being 'a great roundhead', he applauded the act, exclaiming to a friend that if he had the chance of preaching a sermon, his text would be 'The memory of the wicked shall rot' (Proverbs x.7). Eleven years later, in November 1660, Pepys found himself placed at dinner close to another schoolfriend. 'I was much afeared', he confided to his diary, 'he would have remembered the words that I said the day that the King was beheaded ... but I found afterward that he did go away from schoole before that time.'[1] Pepys was desperate that his youthful desire to obliterate the king's memory should itself be forgotten.

Fortunately, he had not only chance but the law on his side. Forgetting was officially sanctioned: the Act of Indemnity and Oblivion banned 'any name or names, or other words of reproach tending to revive the memory of the late differences or the occasions thereof'.[2] This book is one attempt to counter that process of erasure, which has had long-term effects on English literary history and, arguably, on wider aspects of political identity. In the short term, the Act of Indemnity and Oblivion can be seen as an enlightened piece of legislation. Twenty years of bitter contention between and within families and social and religious groups needed oblivion to heal them. In the longer term, however, such forgetting has had its costs. Suppressing the republican element in English cultural history entails simplifying a complex but intellectually and artistically challenging past into a sanitized and impoverished Royal Heritage. The period from 1649 to 1660 has become a blank space, an 'Interregnum' standing wholly outside the nation's temporal process. The derogatory label 'the Rump', attached to the republic's Parliament by its enemies in 1660, has moved without any sense of strain from royalist propaganda into the notionally value-free technical terms of academia. The republic's political

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1 *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, ed. Robert Latham and William Matthews (1970–83), I, 280.
2 Cited by Smith, *LR*, p. 1.

institutions 'continue to languish in a historiographical blind spot'; much
the same applies to its artistic culture.[3]

At a simple documentary level, the process of oblivion creates problems
for the literary history of the mid-century. Milton is and always has been at
the centre of the spotlight: magnificent scholarship has helped to set his work
in its political context. There is a singular exception, T. S. Eliot's attempt to
'dislodge' him. Interestingly, Eliot regarded as the 'most important fact' about
Milton the prime topic of seventeenth-century royalist propaganda: his
blindness. While for republicans this might symbolize sublimity, for royalists
it marked a divine punishment for his republicanism. As one who had urged
the rehabilitation of the absolutist Sir Robert Filmer, Eliot may have slily
enjoyed this oblique restaging of old controversies. He did not push his
assault far, however – perhaps in part because he realized that the strongly
ideological nature of his own royalism was as likely to stir up as to bury radical
memories.[4]

As soon as one leaves Milton for his republican contemporaries, however,
the shadows start to descend. Several of the figures discussed in this book –
Fisher, Hall, Marten, May, Wither – have received hardly any attention in
print. Their memory has been kept at bay by a *cordon sanitaire* of defensive
ridicule. Though none of them equals Milton as a writer, they deserve some-
thing better. What most readers of seventeenth-century literature remember
about George Wither is that during the Civil War he was captured and con-
demned to be hanged. He was reprieved by Sir John Denham, who declared
that 'whilest G. W. lived, he [Denham] should not be the worst Poet in
England'.[5] In fact, Wither was never captured and during the campaign in
question it was Denham who surrendered. Another much-cited anecdote
links Wither to the republican Henry Marten, whose image has never recov-
ered from his presentation in royalist newsbooks as a buffoonish libertine.
Marten allegedly raided the jewel-house at Westminster and dressed Wither
clownishly in the royal robes. Though Marten and Wither were involved in
the fate of the jewels at different periods, there is no evidence for this story.[6]
Thomas May is best known from Marvell's satire, which presents the
debauched poet's republicanism as a mask for frustrated ambition.

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3 Sean Kelsey, *Inventing a Republic: The Political Culture of the English Commonwealth
    1649–1653* (Manchester, 1997), p. 226.
4 T. S. Eliot, 'Milton I', in *On Poetry and Poets* (1957), pp. 138–45 (139). On Eliot's anom-
    alous monarchism see Tom Nairn, *The Enchanted Glass: Britain and its Monarchy*
    (1988), pp. 345–9, and David Bradshaw, 'Lonely Royalists: T. S. Eliot and Sir Robert
    Filmer', *Review of English Studies* 46 (1995), 375–9.
5 Bodleian MS Aubrey 6, fol. 105v, *ABL*, I, 221.
6 On these anecdotes see David Norbrook, 'Levelling Poetry: George Wither and the
    English Revolution, 1642–1649', *English Literary Renaissance* 21 (1991), 217–56 (217–19).

As recycled uncritically by generations of literary historians, such anecdotes have succeeded in burying republican history in snobbish laughter. That was the purpose with which the antiquarian Anthony Wood put many of them in print, often citing selectively the more sympathetic account in one of his main sources for the republicans, the compilations of John Aubrey. To pursue the facts a little further is often to make the humour less evident. 'Tom May's Death' declares that the poet's body will be expelled from Westminster Abbey; this prophecy was fulfilled in a grisly way when in 1661 his body was disinterred in a mass exhumation that extended to many republicans and Cromwellians. The violence of such acts betrayed unease about the efficacy of the Act of Oblivion: forgetting would not happen of its own accord, the evidence must be actively erased. Wood was writing at a period of renewed Tory alarm over a renewal of the republican spirit, when some of Milton's political works were publicly burned in Oxford.[7]

The more violent the erasure, however, the more it can be seen that there was something to hide. In 1662 Sir George Downing, the English Resident in the Netherlands, captured three of the men who had signed Charles I's death warrant. The Dutch government had not been particularly enthusiastic about the extradition of men condemned to agonizing death, but Downing insisted, and the exiles were shipped home to be hanged, drawn and quartered. The king rewarded him with the strategic piece of land in Westminster that has now become Downing Street. That particular part of England's royal heritage is now little remembered; but it may stand for many lesser episodes where anti-republican violence was used to compensate for a past which itself lacked monarchist purity. Only three years earlier, indeed, Downing had been a faithful servant of the Protectorate, a colleague of Andrew Marvell, and had been vigorously harassing not republican but royalist exiles in the Netherlands. A poem for his marriage had been written by Payne Fisher, who had been effectively Cromwell's poet laureate. None of this, it is true, made Downing a republican: he was a fierce defender of Cromwell's semi-monarchical regime against its republican critics. For some republicans, Cromwell's coup of 1653 was at least as crucial a historical moment as the regicide. The blurring of any distinction between the Commonwealth and the Protectorate in the national memory is perhaps the most striking example of the elision of a republican perspective. Repellent as it may have been to some republicans, however, it is true that Cromwell's regime, with its written constitution and attempts to separate executive from legislature, was itself an anomaly in English history.[8]

7 Nicholas von Maltzahn, 'Wood, Allam, and the Oxford Milton', *Milton Studies* 31 (1994), 155–77.
8 John Beresford, *The Godfather of Downing Street: Sir George Downing 1623–1684* (1925), pp. 83ff, 69, 60; Ralph C. H. Catterall, 'Sir George Downing and the Regicides', *American Historical Review* 17 (1911–12), 268–89.

The ferocity of the anti-republican crackdown in 1660 was arguably out of all proportion to the political danger. It was fuelled by a minority of extreme reactionaries and often checked by more moderate counsels. But the fact that it was considered necessary at all is itself one kind of tribute to the republicans' achievement. If Charles's return was greeted by celebratory bonfires, we need to remember that some frantic burning of incriminating papers probably went on that year. Only recently have architectural historians begun to recognize that many interesting buildings conventionally given a post-1660 date in fact date from the 1650s.[9] Our knowledge of the portraiture of the republican period remains extremely shadowy in comparison with the attention that has been paid to court culture. One point this book tries to emphasize is that what has been referred to as the Augustan era of English poetry, initiated in 1660 and brought to perfection with Dryden's *Aeneid* (1697), was a reactive phenomenon. Strong anti-Augustanism preceded, and continued to engage with, courtly poetry. With the passing of time, however, the desperation with which England worked to eliminate compromising republican traces from its culture has been widely forgotten, and a bland monarchist surface has been substituted.

Yet in fact the process of erasure has been a continuing and active one. When Queen Elizabeth II gave an address in Westminster Hall in 1988 to celebrate the tercentenary of the Glorious Revolution, a plaque marking the execution of Charles I was discreetly covered with a curtain.[10] The celebrations in France the following year for the bicentenary of the French Revolution called up a wave of self-congratulation in England over the contrast between foreign regicide and Britain's peaceful evolution.[11] This involved a strategic silence about the regicidal revolution of 1649, which had been taken as one point of reference by the French revolutionaries. Milton's *Defence of the English People* was published in translation in 1789 and again in 1792, as part of a campaign for the trial of Louis XVI, and works by Marchamont Nedham, James Harrington and Edward Sexby were involved in French debates.[12] Some English republicans had indeed taken as much pride in exporting their revolution as the French were to do a century and a half later, and encouraged the dissemination of the Levellers' ideal written constitution in rebellious areas of south-west France. In a remarkable

9 Timothy Mowl and Brian Earnshaw, *Architecture without Kings: The Rise of Puritan Classicism under Cromwell* (Manchester and New York, 1995).

10 Christopher Hitchens, *The Monarchy* (1990), p. 12.

11 A point noted by Jonathan Scott, *Algernon Sidney and the Restoration Crisis, 1677–1683* (Cambridge, 1991), p. 108 n. 13.

12 Tony Davies, 'Borrowed Language: Milton, Jefferson, Mirabeau', *MR*, pp. 254–71 (269); Olivier Lutaud, *Des Révolutions d'Angleterre à la Révolution Française: le tyrannicide et 'Killing No Murder' (Cromwell, Athalie, Bonaparte)* (The Hague, 1973).

anticipation of French slogans, a title-page of 1652 carried the slogan 'Vive la Re Publick'.[13] Title-pages, as in revolutionary France, were sometimes dated according to the year of liberty.[14] England produced a poetics of sublimity that has parallels in revolutionary France.[15] The American Revolution can more easily be seen as continuing aspects of English republicanism, but Americans can still find it hard to understand how little those links are acknowledged in the founding fathers' Old World. At the basic level of imagining a political and literary culture divested of monarchy and its attendant trappings, however, the mid-seventeenth century can make modern Britain look archaic. The reform group Charter 88 is making demands that were voiced by the Levellers in the 1640s.

Where did this energetic republican culture come from? Did it spring from nowhere, only to disappear from sight within a few years? One might draw that conclusion from much recent historiography. A 'revisionist' movement has contested liberal and Marxist readings that traced the seventeenth-century revolution back to long-standing constitutional or social conflicts, reaffirming instead the profound social and intellectual conservatism of early Stuart England. On that analysis, republicanism was largely a response to, rather than the cause of, the execution of Charles I; before the 1640s republicanism was effectively unthinkable.[16] Some of the most exciting and innovative work on the history of political thought has accepted parts of the revisionist analysis. J. G. A. Pocock, Blair Worden and other scholars, in some important studies, have begun to explore a vigorous and energetic republican culture; but they have tended to side with the revisionists, insofar as they see that culture as a response to, rather than a significant influence on, the revolution of 1649. Before then, writes Pocock, English republicanism was ' a language, not a programme'. [17] Certainly there was a lack before then of the kind of obsessively detailed

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13 Walter Blith, *The English Improver Improved* (1652; E666.4); Andrew McRae, *God Speed the Plough: The Representation of Agrarian England, 1500–1660* (Cambridge, 1996), p. 227.

14 For example Payne Fisher's volume of neo-Latin panegyrics to the republic's leaders, *Irenodia Gratulatoria* (1652; E796.30), is dated in the 'Aera' both 'Salutis Humanae MDCLII' and 'Libertatis Angliae IIII'.

15 Compare Ronald Paulson, *Representations of Revolution 1789–1820* (New Haven and London, 1983), pp. 57ff, and Yves Abrioux, *Ian Hamilton Finlay: A Visual Primer*, second edition (London, 1992), pp. 250–5.

16 For a strong statement of this view see Kevin Sharpe, 'A Commonwealth of Meanings: Languages, Analogues, Ideas and Politics', in *Politics and Ideas in Early Stuart England: Essays and Studies* (London and New York, 1989), pp. 3–71, and for a counter-view, David Norbrook, 'Rhetoric, Ideology, and the Elizabethan World Picture', in Peter Mack (ed.), *Renaissance Rhetoric* (1994), pp. 140–64.

17 *HPW*, p. 15. Pocock's *magnum opus*, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, 1975), ch. 10, offers a superb conspectus of pre-Civil War political discourses.

constitutional programme provided by James Harrington, who for Pocock is the paradigmatic republican; but the present study will try to show that republican language was a more powerful presence than has been recognized. Worden, who has written with great insight of such vigorously enthusiastic republicans as Marchamont Nedham, nonetheless emphasizes the fact that most of those who 'cut off King Charles' head' then 'wondered what to do next'. And what they did next, in his view, fell short of anything one can legitimately term a republic. After 1653, when Cromwell dissolved the Long Parliament, republicans 'retreated into nostalgia'.[18] Republicanism did not exist before 1649, was not put into effect then, and quickly became an object of distant nostalgia: such a fleeting phenomenon hardly disturbs a general model of English culture as overwhelmingly monarchist.

This analysis of the dominance of conservative monarchism has united commentators with widely differing political views. In literary studies, the paradigm offered by Michel Foucault, who projects a massive shift in signifying systems precisely at the mid-seventeenth century, has been attractive to writers on English cultural history, where the execution of Charles I provides an obligingly neat watershed.[19] On Perry Anderson's influential neo-Marxist analysis, the persistent strength of monarchism is a symptom of the nation's backwardness, its retention of a culture of deference that has discouraged political modernization and thus contributed to economic decline. Over the last few years there has been a gradual thawing of the strict taboo on criticism of the royal family, but the new generation of British republicans seems often to have little sense of occupying a space in cultural history that is not wholly new. Tom Nairn, in the most powerful modern critique of monarchism, has reinforced that verdict, considering the term 'bourgeois revolution' to be 'over-flattering' to the deeply conservative republicans of the mid-seventeenth century.[20] The republican John Streater was saying something rather similar on the eve of the Restoration in a retort to those who claimed that kingship was natural to England:

> the long Continuation of Kingly Government in this Nation . . . created so
> many corrupt Props and Pillars to support its Dignity, that were like so many

18 Blair Worden, 'Milton's Republicanism and the Tyranny of Heaven', in Gisela Bock, Quentin Skinner and Maurizio Viroli (eds.), *Machiavelli and Republicanism* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 225–45 (226); 'Classical Republicanism and the Puritan Revolution', in *History and Imagination: Essays in Honour of H. R. Trevor-Roper*, ed. Hugh Lloyd-Jones, Valerie Pearl and Blair Worden (1981), pp. 182–200 (199).

19 See David Norbrook, 'Life and Death of Renaissance Man', *Raritan* 8:4 (Spring 1989), 89–110, and James Holstun, 'Ranting at the New Historicism', *English Literary Renaissance* 19 (1989), 189–225.

20 Nairn, *The Enchanted Glass*, pp. 151ff. For a stimulating riposte, see Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Pristine Culture of Capitalism: An Historical Essay on Old Regimes and Modern States* (London and New York, 1991).