



Popular Protest in Late Medieval English Towns

SAMUEL K. COHN, JR

CAMBRIDGE

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With assistance from Douglas Aiton



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Popular Protest in Late Medieval English Towns

Contrary to received opinion, revolts and popular protests in medieval English towns were as frequent and as sophisticated, if not more so, as those in the countryside. This groundbreaking study refocuses attention on the varied nature of popular movements in towns from Carlisle to Dover and from the London tax revolt of Longbeard in 1196 to Jack Cade's Rebellion in 1450, exploring the leadership, social composition, organization, and motives of popular rebels. The book charts patterns of urban revolt in times of strong and weak kingship, contrasting them with the broad sweep of ecological and economic change that inspired revolts on the Continent. Samuel K. Cohn, Jr demonstrates that the timing and character of popular revolt in England differed radically from revolts in Italy, France, and Flanders. In addition, he analyses the repression of, and waves of hate against, Jews, foreigners, and heretics, opening new vistas in the comparative history of late medieval Europe.

SAMUEL K. COHN, JR is Professor of Medieval History at the University of Glasgow. His work over the past decade has concentrated on plague and the history of popular insurrection, and his previous publications include *Cultures of Plague: Medical Thinking at the End of the Renaissance* (2010) and *Lust for Liberty: The Politics of Social Revolt in Medieval Europe, 1200–1425* (2006).

Dedicated to
Rudolph Binion (1927–2011)
friend, colleague, and master craftsman
of comparative history

Maps

Map 1	Distribution of incidents according to the chronicles, 1196–1450.	<i>page</i> 11
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Acknowledgements

An ESRC three-year small research grant awarded in October 2007 (000-22-2339) made this project possible. Having just defended a Ph.D. thesis on the *Jacquerie*, Douglas Aiton served as the research assistant, Matthew Strickland was the adviser, and I was the principal investigator. In his ten-month stint, Aiton read and selected between two-thirds and three-quarters of the chronicles and documents from the Calendar of Patent Rolls analysed for this book. He also made several trips to TNA to check a sample of original documents with those edited at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth century in the CPR. Over the next three years I checked and coded the records and searched for further examples of popular protest, reading additional chronicles and volumes from the CPR and a large array of published documents and secondary sources. I compiled the databases and wrote versions of the present book that were first commented upon and criticized by Strickland and Aiton and afterwards circulated for a one-day workshop at the University of Glasgow, attended by seven senior scholars and four post-graduates (in addition to the three grant holders). They included William Hepburn, Colette Bowie, Laura Crombie, Fergus Oakes, Neil Murphy, Hamish Scott, Graeme Small, Patrick Lantschner, Andrew Prescott, Christian Liddy, and Chris Dyer. I thank all these scholars for their time and intellectual generosity, but especially the three principal interlocutors – Prescott, Liddy, and Dyer – who submitted detailed reports and criticisms and were extraordinarily generous afterwards in offering materials from their own published, as well as unpublished, research. With their comments and criticisms, I returned to the drawing board for an intense period of reading, rethinking, and redrafting. Finally, Andrew Roach, an authority on European heresy, commented on Chapter 13.

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Abbreviations

BIHR	<i>Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research</i>
BjRL	<i>Bulletin of the John Rylands Library</i>
CCR	<i>Calendar of the Close Rolls Preserved in the Public Record Office, 1227–1509, 63 vols. (London, 1900–63)</i>
CEMCR	<i>Calendar of Early Mayor's Court Rolls, a.d. 1298–1307, ed. A. H. Thomas (Cambridge, 1924)</i>
CFR	<i>Calendar of the Fine Rolls Preserved in the Public Records Office, 1272–1509, 22 vols. (London, 1911–62)</i>
CPMR	<i>Calendar of Plea and Memoranda Rolls Preserved among the Archives of the Corporation of the City of London at the Guildhall, 1323–1482, ed. A. H. Thomas, 6 vols. (Cambridge, 1926–61)</i>
CPR	<i>Calendar of Patent Rolls Preserved in the Public Record Office, 1216–1452, 49 vols. (London, 1901–9)</i>
CS	Camden Society
CUHB	<i>The Cambridge Urban History of Britain, vol. I, ed. D. M. Palliser (Cambridge, 2000)</i>
EcHR	<i>Economic History Review, 2nd series</i>
EHR	<i>English Historical Review</i>
JBS	<i>Journal of British Studies</i>
JIDH	<i>Journal of Interdisciplinary History</i>
JMH	<i>Journal of Medieval History</i>
JUST	<i>Justices in Eyre, of Assize, of Oyer and Terminer in TNA</i>
KB	King's Bench in TNA
King's Bench	<i>Select Cases in the Court of King's Bench, ed. G. O. Sayles, 7 vols., Selden Society, LV, LVII, LVIII, LXXIV, LXXVI, LXXXII, LXXXVIII (London, 1936–71)</i>
LB	<i>Calendar of Letter Books Preserved among the Archives of the Corporation of the City of London at the Guildhall: Letter-Book A-K, 9 vols., ed. Reginald R. Sharpe (London, 1899–1912)</i>

<i>ML</i>	<i>Memorials of London and London Life in the XIIIth, XIVth, and XVth Centuries Being a Series of Extracts, Local, Social, and Political from the Early Archives of the City of London A.D. 1276–1419</i> , ed. Henry T. Riley (London, 1868)
<i>ODNB</i>	<i>Oxford Dictionary of National Biography</i> , online edn (Oxford, September 2004–10)
<i>P&P</i>	<i>Past and Present</i>
<i>PROME</i>	<i>The Parliament Rolls of Medieval England, 1275–1504</i> [Electronic resource], ed. Chris Given-Wilson, The National Archives, The History of Parliament Trust (Leicester, 2005)
<i>RS</i>	Rolls Series: <i>Rerum Britannicarum mediæ ævi scriptores</i> , 119 vols. (London, 1858–96)
<i>SCBKC</i>	<i>Select Cases Before the King's Council 1243–1482</i> , ed. I. S. Leadam and J. F. Baldwin, Selden Society, XXXV (Cambridge, MA, 1918)
<i>SHF</i>	Société de l'histoire de France
<i>TNA</i>	The National Archives, formerly the Public Record Office
<i>UH</i>	<i>Urban History</i>
<i>VCH</i>	<i>Victorian County History</i>

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Part I

The setting

1 Introduction: questions and sources

More research has been devoted to the English Peasants' Revolt of 1381¹ than to any uprising of the Middle Ages; more than to the Tumult of the Ciompi, the Jacquerie, and the widespread rebellions in Flanders of 1297–1305 and 1323–8 combined.² Research on the English Peasants' Revolt has been interdisciplinary, principally the work of historians and literary scholars,³

¹ There are serious objections to calling the wide arc of revolts in 1381 the 'Peasants' Revolt'. Not only did townsmen revolt in great numbers in cities and towns within Kent and Essex, but the rebels who converged on London in June or rebelled in their own communities came predominantly from market towns in these counties, places such as Ware and Thaxted, along with small towns surrounding the capital, and many practised crafts or came higher up in the social hierarchy; see Andrew Prescott, 'London in the Peasants' Revolt: A Picture Gallery', *London Journal*, 7 (1981): 128–30; Herbert Eiden, 'Joint Action Against "Bad" Lordship: The Peasants' Revolt in Essex and Norfolk', *History* 83 (1998): 5–30, p. 10; Paul Strohm, "'A Revelle!': Chronicle Evidence and the Rebel Voice", pp. 33–56, in *Hochon's Arrow: The Social Imagination of Fourteenth-Century Texts* (Princeton, 1992), p. 36. Nonetheless, throughout this book, the common label for these revolts – 'the Peasants' Revolt of 1381' will be employed. Others such as Christopher Dyer, 'The Social and Economic Background to the Rural Revolt of 1381', pp. 9–42, in *The English Rising of 1381*, ed. Rodney Hilton and T. H. Aston (Cambridge, 1984), find nothing here to contradict the traditional label, at least within Kent, Essex, Hertfordshire, and the region around London. On the origins of the name and its replacement of rival tags in the 1880s, see R. B. Dobson, 'Remembering the Peasants' Revolt 1381–1981', in *Essex and the Great Revolt of 1381: Lectures Celebrating the Six Hundredth Anniversary*, ed. W. H. Liddell and R. G. E. Wood, Essex Record Office Publication no. 84 (Essex, 1982), p. 16. For its renaming as a 'rising', see Paul Strohm, 'A Peasants' Revolt?' in *Misconceptions about the Middle Ages*, ed. Stephen J. Harris and Bryon L. Grigsby (New York, 2007), pp. 197–203.

² For a guide to these numbers in articles published since 1964, see the *Brepols Online International Medieval Bibliography*.

³ For notable literary analyses of the English Peasants' Revolt, see Strohm, "'A Revelle!'", Steven Justice, *Writing and Rebellion: England in 1381* (Berkeley, 1994); Richard F. Green, 'John Ball's Letters: Literary History and Historical Literature', in *Chaucer's England: Literature in Historical Context*, ed. Barbara Hanawalt (Minneapolis, 1992), pp. 176–200; Susan Crane, 'The Writing Lesson of 1381', in *ibid.*, pp. 201–21; or more recently, Christopher Baswell, 'Aeneas in 1381', pp. 7–58, in *New Medieval Literatures*, 5, ed. Rita Copeland, David Lawton, and Wendy Scase (Oxford, 2003); Conrad Van Dijk, 'Simon Sudbury and Helenus in John Gower's *Vox Clamantis*', *Medium Aevum*, 77 (2008): 313–18; and Alexander L. Kaufman, *The Historical Literature of the Jack Cade Rebellion* (Farnham, 2009).

and international.⁴ Paradoxically, beyond this revolt and, secondarily, Cade's Rebellion in 1450,⁵ scholars have paid much less attention to a wide range of medieval uprisings in England than to ones on the Continent,⁶ and especially in comparison with the outpouring of publications on popular revolt in early modern England.⁷ Furthermore, the work on medieval English revolts has concentrated on the countryside, making excellent use of England's exceptionally rich manorial rolls and court records. By contrast, little attention has been directed towards popular protest in English towns and cities, and with few exceptions this work has been restricted to individual uprisings or experiences within individual towns, most prominently, London.⁸ Moreover, much of the work on late medieval insurrection in towns outside the capital and not during the Peasants' Revolt has appeared in local historical and

⁴ See André Réville and Charles Petit-Dutaillis, *Le soulèvement des travailleurs d'Angleterre en 1381* (Paris, 1898); Stefano Simonetta, 'Wyclif e la rivolta di 1381', in *John Wyclif: logica, politica, teologia. Atti del Convegno Internazionale, Milano, 12-13 febbraio 1999*, ed. M. Fumugalli Beonio Brocchieri and Stefano Simonetta (Florence, 2003), pp. 143-79; Theo Stemmler, 'Der Bauernaufstand von 1381 in der zeitgenössischen Literatur Englands', in *Historisches und fiktioales Erzählen in Mittelalter*, ed. Fritz Peter Knapp and Manuela Niesner (Berlin, 2002), pp. 45-62; Herbert Eiden, 'Norfolk, 1382: A Sequel to the Peasants' Revolt', *EHR* 114 (1999): 370-7; Herbert Eiden, 'Der Richter, der seinen Kopf verlor: Leben und Sterben des Sir John Cavendish (1381), Chief Justice of the King's Bench', in *Landesgeschichte als multidisziplinäre Wissenschaft. Festgabe für Franz Irsigler zum 60. Geburtstag*, ed. Dietrich Ebeling and Franz Irsigler (Trier, 2001), pp. 197-222; and Herbert Eiden, 'In der Knechtschaft werdet ihr verharren': Ursachen in Verlauf des englischen Bauernaufstandes von 1381 (Trier, 1995).

⁵ Before Ralph A. Griffiths, *The Reign of King Henry VI: The Exercise of Royal Authority, 1422-1461* (London, 1981), with its extensive research on Cade's revolt (pp. 610-65), only one major study of this revolt had appeared, and that by a German, a century earlier: George Kriehn, *The English Rising in 1450* (Strasbourg, 1892).

⁶ See Michel Mollat and Philippe Wolff, *The Popular Revolutions of the Late Middle Ages*, trans. A. L. Lytton-Sells (London, 1973); Guy Fourquin, *Anatomy of Popular Rebellion in the Middle Ages*, trans. A. Chesters (Amsterdam, 1978); Marc Boone and Maarten Prak, 'Rulers, Patricians and Burghers: The Great and the Little Traditions of Urban Revolt in the Low Countries', in *A Miracle Mirrored: The Dutch Republic in European Perspective*, ed. Karel Davids and Jan Lucassen (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 99-134; Rinaldo Comba, 'Rivolte e ribellioni fra tre e quattrocento', in *La storia: I grandi problemi*, ed. Nicola Tranfaglia and Massimo Firpo (Turin, 1988) II, Part 2, pp. 673-91; Samuel K. Cohn, Jr, *Lust for Liberty: The Politics of Social Revolt in Medieval Europe, 1200-1425* (Cambridge, MA, 2006).

⁷ See, for instance, Roger B. Manning, *Village Revolts: Social Protest and Popular Disturbances in England, 1509-1640* (Oxford, 1988); John Walter, *Crowds and Popular Politics in Early Modern England* (Manchester, 2006); Andy Wood, *Riot, Rebellion and Popular Politics in Early Modern England* (Houndmills, 2002); and Andy Wood, *The 1549 Rebellions and the Making of Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2008).

⁸ Most importantly, see Gwyn A. Williams, *Medieval London: From Commune to Capital* (London, 1963). Also, the attention given to insurrection in Bury St Edmunds stands out, especially M. D. Lobel, *The Borough of Bury St Edmund's: A Study in the Government and Development of a Monastic Town* (Oxford, 1935), pp. 118-70.

archaeological journals and, as with Bristol's remarkable and long resistance to the Crown during Edward II's reign, was written over a century ago.⁹ Excellent descriptions and effective use of archival sources can be found in these early works, but they mostly studied individual uprisings within the contexts of single towns, or only at specific moments in their town's histories.¹⁰ Few have attempted to find patterns in urban protest over time or space, or between types of towns that tended to revolt, such as royal boroughs or monastic ones,¹¹ or to compare English revolts with ones on the Continent. Comparisons and overviews, few in number, have been confined to brief sections in books and at best have reflected a dozen or fewer cases of factional or class conflict over the long-term of the Middle Ages.¹² As a result, untested assumptions have passed from one publication to the next, such as the notion that insurrections in towns were less frequent and less significant than in the countryside, and that the aims and ideology of urban rebels were less developed and less radical than those of late medieval English peasants.¹³ According to

⁹ Rodney Hilton, *English and French Towns in Feudal Society: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, 1992), p. 136, gives this revolt scant notice and reduces it to a class struggle between elite merchants and commoners (which it was not), with the Crown supporting the elites. An exception is Michael Prestwich's brief summary of it in *Plantagenet England 1225–1360: The New Oxford History of England* (Oxford, 2005), p. 480.

¹⁰ See for instance E. A. Fuller, 'The Tallage of 6 Edward II (Dec. 16, 1312) and the Bristol Rebellion', *Transactions of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society*, 19 (1894–5): 171–278.

¹¹ The major exception being Norman Maclaren Trenholme, *The English Monastic Boroughs: A Study in Medieval History* in *The University of Missouri Studies* 3 (1927).

¹² The only overviews we know are comments in Trenholme, *The English Monastic Boroughs*, especially Chapter 2; Susan Reynolds, *An Introduction to the History of English Medieval Towns* (Oxford, 1977), parts of chapters 6–8; S. H. Rigby and Elizabeth Ewan, 'Government, Power, and Authority 1300–1540', *CUHB*, pp. 291–312; and very briefly, W. M. Ormrod, *The Reign of Edward III: Crown and Political Society in England 1327–1377* (New Haven, 1990), Chapter 9; Prestwich, *Plantagenet England*, Chapter 18; and Hilton, *English and French Towns*, Chapter 6. Moreover, occasionally Williams, *Medieval London*, draws comparisons; for baronial revolts against the Crown from Magna Carta to the mid-fifteenth century, in which peasants and townsmen participated, see Claire Valente, *The Theory and Practice of Revolt in Medieval England* (Aldershot, 2003).

¹³ See, for instance, Christopher Dyer, 'Small-town Conflict in the Later Middle Ages: Events at Shipston-on-Stour', *UH*, 19 (1992), p. 208; Rodney Hilton, 'Popular Movements in England at the End of the Fourteenth Century', in *Il Tumulato dei Ciompi: Un momento di storia fiorentina ed europea* (Florence, 1981), p. 227; and Rodney Hilton, 'Towns in English Society', in *The English Medieval Town: A Reader in English Urban History 1200–1540*, ed. R. C. Holt and G. Rosser (London, 1990), pp. 19–28: 'In practice, the most serious conflict in feudal society was that between peasants and landowners, but the tensions in urban society ... also had to be faced' (p. 28). A similar view was held in older, standard political and constitutional histories of England; see May McKisack, *The Fourteenth Century 1307–1399* (Oxford, 1959), pp. 50–1: English towns experienced few uprisings because they lacked 'the political vitality or civic independence of the great cities of the Continent'. Also, May McKisack, 'London and the Succession to the Crown during the Middle Ages', in