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WILLIAM HUNT

The Puritan Moment

The Coming of Revolution
in an English County





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William Hunt

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director of the Press.

**For my mother and father,
who never despaired**

Preface

In the past thirty years local history has ceased to be the province of eccentric vicars and has become a major theater of English historiography. A host of regional and municipal studies have substantially modified our picture of seventeenth-century England.¹ The organizing concepts of earlier generations—such as the rising (and/or falling) gentry, the Puritan (and/or Bourgeois) Revolution, even the “rise of the House of Commons”—have all been subjected to searching and often destructive criticism on the basis of careful, tightly focused scholarship. It has become fashionable to insist on the essential stability of Stuart society, to stress its hierarchical structure and its intense provincialism. Local concerns, we are told, consistently predominated over national issues. Ivan Roots, the author of what has been called “the best one-volume account of the Revolution,” writes that “in Dorset, Somersetshire, and Lancashire it was local rather than national politics that men revelled in . . . Rebellions, including the Great Rebellion itself, were emphatically local movements.” Alan Everitt, the author of seminal studies of Kent and Suffolk, agrees. The members of the Long Parliament, he insists, were not revolutionaries but “angry countrymen.” They rode in “from their estates in Cumberland, Cornwall, and Kent” concerned only to end the increasing interference of the central government in their local communities. Everitt remarks, plausibly enough, that “there was nothing revolutionary in this attitude of mind.”²

The localist thesis has gained wide acceptance in the past decade. It is current orthodoxy. A highly acclaimed recent study of the Civil War period by J. S. Morrill bears the title *The Revolt of the Provinces*. But it is worth looking more closely at the examples adduced in support of the localist interpretation. Roots cites the gentry of Dorset, Somerset, and Lancashire; Everitt cites those of Cumberland, Cornwall, and Kent. J. S. Morrill's specialty is Cheshire. Now, it is perfectly true that there was “nothing revolutionary” about the gentry of such counties. In every one of these counties the vast bulk of

the gentry were Royalists in the Civil War. The localist thesis helps us to see more clearly why revolution on a national scale was extremely unlikely in seventeenth-century England. It does not do much to explain how such a revolution nevertheless occurred.

The problem, I would suggest, is that scholars have lately devoted too little attention to the regions and social groups from which Parliament drew its decisive support in the Civil War. I have tried in this book to help fill the gap. The rationale for devoting so much space to the coming of revolution in a single county is not that Essex was somehow typical of England as a whole, but that it was the revolutionary county par excellence. John Hampden called Essex "the place of most life of religion in the land"; an Essex Royalist lamented that his county was the "professed stage of rebellion," and the "first born of Parliament." Clarendon observed that Essex was the county in which the Parliamentary leaders "most confided." Early in 1647 the county's deputy lieutenants and justices of the peace boasted that Essex had been "by God's acceptance, more than ordinarily instrumental in the suppressing of the common enemy."³ If we want to understand why the English Revolution happened, we need to take a long look at Essex.

In attempting to account for the radicalism of Essex, I assign a major explanatory role to that complex phenomenon known as puritanism; hence my title. The words *puritan* and *puritanism* have fallen somewhat out of favor in recent years, owing to their admitted ambiguity. I trust that my reasons for retaining them, and indeed for seeking to rehabilitate, to some extent, the notion of a puritan revolution, will become clear as the argument unfolds, but it may be useful to provide a summary definition at the outset. I understand by *puritanism* a body of opinion within English Protestantism characterized by an intense hostility to the Church of Rome as the incarnation of Antichrist; an emphasis on preaching and Bible study rather than ritual as the means of salvation; and a desire to impose a strict moral code, which I term the culture of discipline, upon society as a whole. These attitudes were generally accompanied by an aggressive, imperialist conception of England's national vocation.

These attitudes were not necessarily peculiar to the people I consider Puritans, but Puritans were distinguished by the intensity with which they held them. This intensity earned them the hostility of more complacent Protestants, not to speak of Catholics, as well as

those who placed a high value on ceremonial splendor and uniformity. The very word *Puritan*, which implies factiousness and spiritual pride, expresses this hostility. That is why those to whom it was applied disliked it. They referred to themselves instead as the godly, the Saints, or, less hubristically, as professors. Adherents of puritanism so defined might disagree on many matters and might exhibit a wide range of personality types; but down to at least 1642 they perceived themselves, and were regarded by outsiders, as forming a distinct cultural community.

Any competent account of the origins of the English Revolution will attempt to do justice to both its material and ideological causes. But I have sought to do more than merely juxtapose them as discrete factors; I have tried to demonstrate their interpenetration. More specifically, I have aimed to present religious thought and feeling as both reflective and creative of social reality. I make no claim to have settled anything. The perception of patterns in the historical carpet is inevitably governed by personal temperament and cognitive style. One historian's gestalt is another's hallucination. Psychological diversity would alone suffice to keep historians quarreling. But as Etienne Gilson once said, it is not to be rid of history that we study it.

Acknowledgments

I hope that my specific debts to the many scholars on whose work I have drawn are sufficiently acknowledged in the notes to this book. But I must express my general gratitude to three scholars without whose fundamental, and still largely unpublished, research a work of interpretive synthesis would have been impossible: Felix Hull, B. W. Quintrell, and N. C. P. Tyack. Special thanks are also due my two former advisers at Harvard: the late W. K. Jordan, who first suggested to me a study of the county of Essex, and Wallace MacCaffrey, who provided counsel and encouragement over a distressingly long haul. My archival researches were greatly facilitated by the staffs of the Essex Record Office, the Institute for Historical Research, the British Library, the Public Record Office, the London Guildhall, Colchester Castle, the Dr. Williams Library, the Bodleian Library of Oxford, the Fitzwilliam Library of Cambridge, and the Houghton Library of Harvard. I am particularly grateful to Mr. Arthur Searle of the British Library for his help with the Barrington manuscripts. Mr. Stephen Schultz produced a fine county map on very short notice, and my typist, Dorothy Foster, has been both efficient and forbearing.

My greatest personal debt, after that recorded in the dedication, is to the poet and novelist Norman Macleod, who has taught me by his own example persistence in rash undertakings. To my late friend H. J. Balthazar I owe my appreciation of the ironic confusion of spiritual values with material needs. For advice, help, and support of various kinds I am obliged to the following friends and colleagues: Marvin Becker, David Bien, Penelope Butler, Susan Cahn, Elizabeth Clark, Laurie Colwin, Robin Jacoby, Norman Owen, and Paddy Quick. Thanks, finally, to Kathleen Stein for helping me to retain a few of my wits.

The power of Essex is great, a place of most life of religion in the land, and your power in the county is great too. The difficulties of this war need the utmost of both.

—*John Hampden*
to Sir Thomas Barrington, 1643

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PART I

The County Community 1570–1620

The laboring man that tills the fertile soil,
And reaps the harvest fruit, hath not indeed
The gain, but pain; and if for all his toil
He gets the straw, the lord will have the seed.

The mason poor that builds the lordly halls
Dwells not in them; they are for high degree;
His cottage is compact in paper walls,
And not with brick or stone as others be.

—*Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford and a native of
Essex, written ca. 1576*

1 / The English Goshen

This shire . . . deserveth title of the English Goshen, the fattest of the land; comparable to Palestina, that flowed with milk and honey.

—*John Norden, in Speculi Britanniae Pars, 1840*

The county of Essex comprises a little over one million acres, or roughly 1,570 square miles, to the northeast of London. At the death of Queen Elizabeth rather more than one hundred thousand men, women, and children lived there, the vast majority of them in rural hamlets and villages. The only town of any real consequence was Colchester in the northeast, with nearly nine thousand inhabitants, followed, at a considerable distance, by the twin clothing towns of Bocking and Braintree, with a combined population of about 2,500. No other town contained as many as two thousand souls, and only eleven held more than one thousand.¹

Yet, Essex was “exceeding rich,” according to William Camden, writing in 1607.² The Privy Council agreed. In the Ship Money assessments of 1636–37 Essex was rated at £8,000 along with Kent, Somerset, Suffolk, and Lincolnshire. Only two counties were assessed more heavily: Devon, at £9,000, and Yorkshire, with thrice the population of Essex, at £12,000.³ Since the county was overwhelmingly rural, most of this wealth was naturally drawn from its fields and pastures. Not that Essex was an exclusively agricultural county. Indeed, compared to the rest of England it was relatively industrialized and thus subject to the vicissitudes of the clothing trade. But, as a glance at Tables 1 and 2 will suggest, most adult males worked on farms, whether as owners, tenants, or agricultural laborers.

Table 1 gives the additions—the designations of occupation or status affixed to each individual for legal purposes—that were claimed by or assigned to a random sample (surnames beginning with *A* and *B*) of male testators of known status from Essex, between

Table 1. Wills of men (surnames A–B) by status of testator, Essex, 1570–1619

Addition	Number	Percent of all male wills (N = 2,071)	Percent of wills of males of known status (N = 1,356)
Gentlemen	55	2.7	4.1
Yeomen	439	21.2	32.4
Husbandmen	445	21.5	32.8
Laborers	57	2.8	4.2
Clothiers	17	0.8	1.3
Weavers	34	1.6	2.5
Other artisans	210	10.1	15.5
Food/leather trades	59	2.8	4.4
Wives/widows	378	—	—
Spinsters	40	—	—
No status and singlemen	715	34.5	—
Others	40	1.9	2.9
Total	2,489	99.9 ^a	100.1 ^a

Source: F. G. Emmison, *Wills at Chelmsford* (London, 1958), I.

^a Rounding errors.

1570 and 1619. Table 2 gives the additions of a sample of accused felons at the Essex Assizes. These tables cannot provide us with an accurate class map of Essex society. Alas, we have nothing comparable to the occupational census compiled by John Smith in 1608 for the county of Gloucestershire.⁴ The two samples are socially skewed in opposite directions. Only about half the population—generally speaking, the richer half—left wills. It is probably safe to assume that accused felons were drawn disproportionately from the strata of the population that did not make wills. But taken together, the tables are adequate to confirm the predominance of agriculture in the county's economy.

In Elizabethan England people who worked the soil were called neither farmers nor peasants. The addition accorded to a substantial farmer, whether a tenant or an owner-occupier, was yeoman. He was the English equivalent of the Russian *kulak* or the French *coq du paroisse*. The smaller subsistence farmer received the humbler title of husbandman, while the landless or dwarf-holding cottager was simply called laborer. (In 1600 the word *laborer* was almost invariably reserved for agricultural workers; other wage earners received the

£

Table 2. Sample of accused felons by status, Essex Assizes, 1570–1610

£

Addition	Number indicted	Percent
Yeomen	90	15.0
Artisans and tradesmen	191	31.8
Husbandmen	37	6.2
Laborers	274	45.7
Others	8	1.3
Total	600	100.0
Total nonagricultural	199	33.2

Leaver
Leaver
Less

Source: Essex Record Office, Chelmsford, Assize File, 1570–71, 1580–81, 1590–91, 1600–01, 1610.

designation specific to their craft.) Table 1 refers to 1,356 wills left by males of known status. Of these, 69.4 percent, or 941, bear agricultural additions. In Table 2 we see that slightly more than two-thirds of the accused felons were identified as yeomen, husbandmen, or laborers.

The countryside in which these men and their families worked was uncommonly bountiful. In 1594 John Norden described Essex as “most fat, fruitful, and full of profitable things, exceeding (as far as I can find) any other shire for the general commodities and plenty.” He called it “the English Goshen, the fattest of the land.”⁵ Michael Drayton was equally effusive. “Essex is our dower,” he sang in *Poly-Olbion*,

... which greatly doth abound
With every simple good that in the isle is found.⁶

A century later John Brome remarked that the county was beautiful as well as fertile, “of as great variety as delight . . . full of woods and shady groves, enriched with all kinds of grain.”⁷

Few modern travelers, rattling through Essex on the express from Liverpool Street to Ipswich, find the county particularly delightful or remark on its variety. Outside its northwest corner, Essex is probably the flattest county in England, and much of its landscape, particularly in the south, is blighted by urban sprawl. But the relatively monotonous landscape conceals a complex geological structure that fostered, in medieval times, a varied pattern of settlement and cultivation. In the words of an eighteenth-century agronomist, “every