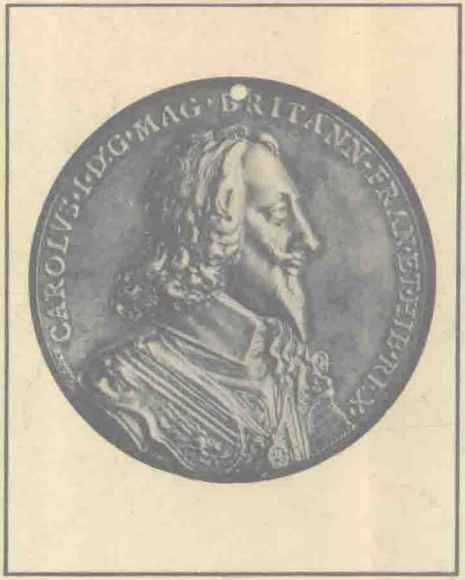
BEFORE THE ENGLISH CIVIL WAR

Edited by
Howard Tomlinson



Before the English Civil War

Essays on Early Stuart Politics and Government

EDITED BY
HOWARD TOMLINSON

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Note

The year is taken to begin on 1 January, but in other respects the 'Old Style' is used. Spelling and punctuation have been modernised throughout.

Preface

NEARLY twenty years ago my history master issued me with G. M. Trevelyan's *England Under the Stuarts* and J. R. Tanner's *Constitutional Conflicts of the Seventeenth Century* to begin my study of seventeenth-century English history. These were both excellent works in their way, and judging by the number of reprints they are still in demand, but they were outdated, even in the mid-1960s. Students now are better served than I was by way of introduction to the early Stuart period. But even to-day, the most recent and best of the textbooks to be published on the period, Robert Ashton's *The English Civil War, 1603–49* (1978) and Barry Coward's *The Stuart Age* (1980), are inadequate, such is the turnover in seventeenth-century historical scholarship. Indeed since I began teaching this period as an 'A' level special subject nearly six years ago, the booklist has had to be constantly revised by the Oxford and Cambridge Board, and the title (although not the content) of the paper changed, in the best revisionist manner, from 'The Causes of the English Civil War, 1603–42' to 'Politics, Religion and Society in England, 1603–42'. I have edited these essays, therefore, in the hope that newcomers to the period might be acquainted with the latest research on some of the major topics of early Stuart government. Having tasted these fruits it is not inconceivable that they might be tempted to look beyond them.

Schoolmasters these days do not have much leisure during term-time to devote to literary pursuits and this has put me under a greater obligation than usual to publisher and contributors alike, all of whom have had to take second place to my pupils. I am grateful for their patience in awaiting the publication of this volume. In particular, I would like to thank Sarah Mahaffy, of Macmillan, for her enthusiastic response to my initial proposal for this book and for her care in seeing it

through its final stages; and Conrad Russell and Kevin Sharpe for their suggestions as to contributors and their helpful criticism of the first draft of my chapter. Conrad Russell's letters from across the Atlantic, too, were a constant source of encouragement. Peter White of Wellington College also made some perceptive comments about my chapter, and has been and continues to be an inspiring colleague. Other Wellington historians have done more than they know in making this volume possible, and another Wellington connection, Jean Fox, my typist, coped magnificently with my badly mutilated manuscript. But my greatest debt is to my family: my four children, who have been a pleasant and necessary diversion from editorial duties; and, above all, to my wife, who during the time this book has been in preparation not only has continued to write and teach, but also has borne more than her fair share of parental responsibilities. That she has found time, as well, to read my contributions to this volume, thereby saving me from many textual errors, is a matter of some wonder. Although my writing has not whetted her appetite for seventeenth-century history, she has sustained all her burdens with characteristic cheerfulness.

Wellington College, Berkshire HOWARD TOMLINSON
September 1982

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Introduction

In the last few years there have been a number of editions of essays published on the early Stuarts. *The Origins of the English Civil War* and *Faction and Parliament*[1] are among the most important of these. Although this collection contains chapters by the editors of these two volumes, it does not seek to rival them. We are not dealing with one particular theme and these essays are of a more general nature. *The English Civil War and After*[2] might afford a closer comparison with this volume, and not simply because both collections have been edited by schoolmasters.

The title, *Before the English Civil War*, may require some further explanation. It is not intended to suggest a Whiggish stance on behalf of the editor or any of the other authors. Indeed, it would be paradoxical, to say the least, if this was intended, as the book contains essays by Conrad Russell and Kevin Sharpe, two leading revisionists,[3] and another by Anthony Fletcher, who in his latest book[4] argues convincingly that the Civil War was by no means inevitable. The title therefore simply describes the period under review and does not carry any implication of an impending drift towards civil war: the history of the early seventeenth century is presented here, as in *Faction and Parliament* 'from the perspective of the early Stuart period itself'.

I make no claim that this is a comprehensive survey. It will not take much searching to find that there are no chapters dealing specifically with, for example, social, economic, legal or cultural matters. Nor does each author necessarily attempt to synthesise the state of current research: an impossible task in some fields as will be seen from the first chapter. What I do suggest, however, is that each chapter deals with a subject of immense importance to an understanding of the period as a whole, and involves some reassessment of early Stuart politics and government.

The case for a re-examination of the policies and role of James I and Charles I is made in the chapters by Patrick Collinson, Kevin Sharpe and Simon Adams.

Patrick Collinson emphasises that the Hampton Court Conference should be seen 'as a kind of round-table conference on a variety of ecclesiastical topics rather than as a debate between two sides'. There were good reasons for the king's celebrated outburst on the second day and in any case this was untypical of the nature of the rest of the proceedings. He suggests that we should not see early seventeenth-century ecclesiastical history in terms of a 'relentless struggle' and that there was essential unity in the 'substance of religion' at least until James I's death.[5] As far as James himself is concerned we are left with the impression of a king who could be shrewd in his judgement of character and who was actively concerned with the state of the English church: Gardiner's depiction of the conference revealing 'the essential littleness of the man' is hardly borne out by this examination.

James I's son hardly possessed his father's acumen, but we are led to understand through Kevin Sharpe's sympathetic account of Charles I's Personal Rule that it is of prime importance that we take into account the circumstances of his monarchy before denigrating his abilities as king: his decisions to rule without parliament in 1629 and to go to war against the Scots, for example, were at least understandable to many contemporaries of the period. Nor was Charles's Personal Rule quite so sterile as some historians have claimed. Indeed, Kevin Sharpe presents the period as one of active and, in many cases, effective government, which mirrored the king's ideals for an ordered society. That the king's schemes ultimately failed, Kevin Sharpe suggests, is no reason to depict them as being necessarily those of a utopian dreamer, cocooned in his court.

One of the major reasons for Charles's decision to dissolve parliament in 1629 was its reluctance to finance a war which it had advocated. Simon Adams, indeed, sees the crown's conduct of foreign policy throughout the period as being hampered by financial constraints which severely limited its freedom of manoeuvre. The second major influence on foreign policy, he observes, was ideological and prompted by the outbreak of the Thirty Years War in Europe. The belief that a

continental catholic league for the extermination of heresy had been created which could only be countered by a protestant alliance was widely shared but was not accepted by either James or Charles. Again, Simon Adams, unlike some historians, convincingly shows that both kings had good reasons to avoid 'confessional confrontation', but the resultant tensions between the crown and many of its most influential subjects produced bitter factional rivalries unknown in Elizabeth's reign. This, together with the other constraints, prevented the pursual of an effective and consistent foreign policy.

In the remaining chapters of this book, David Thomas, Conrad Russell and Anthony Fletcher deal more specifically with the structure of the early Stuart state. David Thomas describes the elaborate balancing act required to ensure that the crown's expenses did not exceed its receipts. At the start of the period the scales seemed to be fairly evenly weighted: peace meant that customs revenue would increase and defence spending decline, and there was considerable potential for further sources of income. That this inheritance was squandered and the strenuous efforts made by senior crown officials to cut spending and increase revenue failed was not due entirely to James's extravagance and lack of royal support. Structural weaknesses – the way in which the crown paid its servants, the terms of their appointment and their corruption – were also responsible for the crown's difficulties, as was (albeit unknowingly) parliament. Attempts to alter radically the financial system through appeals to parliament – and here David Thomas puts the Great Contract in context – floundered, and the numerous parliamentary subsidies granted in the 1620s were insufficient to meet the real costs of war. As in Kevin Sharpe's chapter, the 1630s are presented here as a time of governmental reform and financial innovation, but the obstacles to sound government remained.

Conrad Russell's important chapter continues his reassessment of parliament, or, more accurately, those 'irregularly recurring events called parliaments'. For, as he observes, such is the strength of the Whig tradition that we need to be constantly on guard against anachronism. We need to be reminded that for this period the king was a member of parliament; there was no separation of powers between the executive

and the legislature; legislation was not necessarily a key part of government; parliaments were summoned by the king's writ and existed during his pleasure, their powers being derived from and exercised through him; the reasons for calling parliaments all had something to do with consent; MPs were aware of their own impermanence; not every gentleman wanted to be an MP; the parliamentary system was brought to the verge of extinction because it had proved so inadequate; and strongly held parliamentary convictions did not necessarily have to be opposition ones – at least until the end of 1641. Not the least of Conrad Russell's contributions in this chapter, however, is his observation that by the end of the period we are in a different world. The importance of parliaments to Englishmen, he suggests, alters in direct proportion to the state of the kingdom, so that in unsettled times, as at a time of disputed succession, royal minority or, as in Charles's case, the end of Personal Rule, 'people reach for a parliament to put things together again'. But even then, he emphasises, it is not until the passage of the Triennial Act and the Act against Dissolution that we break new ground in what it might now be legitimate to term parliamentary history.

The notion of a county community has also been the subject of some recent academic controversy. In the last chapter of this book, however, Anthony Fletcher, while not denying the reality of other kinds of community, defends the importance of the county communities because 'they were the principal unit of local government and politics'. More research will be needed before a full answer is possible to the questions of how national political awareness emerged and why it appears to have developed much more rapidly in some counties than in others, but Anthony Fletcher's survey is a more sophisticated interpretation than has been attempted hitherto. The importance of this chapter should not be underestimated. As Anthony Fletcher indicates, the energetic involvement of some localities in the political crisis of the early 1640s does not explain why a civil war broke out in 1642 but it did make it possible for both Charles and Pym to contemplate a resort to arms.

Overall, two things especially emerge from this group of essays. First, that the workings of early Stuart politics and government were much more complex than was once thought.

The simplistic judgements of the old Whig school will not do for this generation: revisionists and neo-Whigs agree about this if about nothing else. All our contributors have shown that we need to examine the mentality of the period – or in Patrick Collinson's words, 'the legal and institutional rigidities of early seventeenth-century society' – before judging the success or failure of the early Stuarts, whether in church reform, financial management or foreign policy. The second point brought out clearly by all contributors is that the early Stuarts were not doomed to failure and that the Civil War was, to quote Anthony Fletcher's last line, a 'most surprising and unintended catastrophe'. Patrick Collinson denies the existence of a 'high road to civil war' as far as Jacobean ecclesiastical affairs are concerned. Kevin Sharpe, like Clarendon, stresses that there was nothing inevitable about the collapse of Charles's Personal Rule, while Simon Adams emphasises that the foreign policy of the early Stuarts was, at worst, not without a certain logic. We see from David Thomas's survey the potential that existed from Crown revenue in 1603 – a potential that was, in part, successfully tapped in the 1630s. Finally, Conrad Russell suggests that not until late 1641 was it clear to Charles's inner circle of advisers 'that a strong and principled attachment to parliaments was incompatible with Charles's service'. Perhaps behind this phrase lies the story of the real origins of the English Civil War.

These are independent judgements; they are not presented as those of a revisionist 'school' of historians. Nor are they expected to be definitive. Indeed, if I have learnt one thing from my opening historiographical survey, it is the historian's need for humility.

1. The Causes of War: A Historiographical Survey

HOWARD TOMLINSON

It will be wondered at hereafter, that in a judging and discerning state, where men had, or seemed to have, their faculties of reason and understanding at the height; in a kingdom then unapt and generally uninclined to war .... those men who had the skill and cunning, out of froward and peevish humour and indispositions, to compound fears and jealousies and to animate and inflame those fears and jealousies into the most prodigious and the boldest rebellion that any age or country ever brought forth ....

Clarendon, *Selections from the History of the Rebellion* ... ed. Hugh Trevor-Roper (Oxford, 1978), p. 224

And by these degrees came the House of Commons to raise that head which since hath been so high and formidable unto their princes that they have looked pale upon those assemblies. Nor was there anything now wanting unto the destruction of the throne but that the people, not apt to see their own strength, should be put to feel it, when a prince, as stiff in disputes as the nerve of monarchy was grown slack, received that unhappy encouragement from his clergy which became his utter ruin; while trusting more unto their logic than the rough philosophy of his parliament, it came unto an irreparable breach; for the house of peers, which alone had stood in this gap, now sinking down between the King and the Commons, showed that Crassus was dead and Isthmus broken. But a monarchy divested of her nobility

hath no refuge under heaven but an army. *Wherefore the dissolution of this government caused the war, not the war the dissolution of this government.*

Harrington, 'The Commonwealth of Oceana' from *The Political Works of James Harrington*, ed. J. G. A. Pocock (Cambridge, 1977), p. 198

I

CLARENDON'S *History of the Rebellion* and Harrington's *The Commonwealth of Oceana* are very different works. With the encouragement of Charles I, *The History of the Rebellion* was written deliberately – to counter the parliamentary history of Tom May – as an historical narrative 'of the grounds, circumstances and artifices of this rebellion' on the model of the great works of classical antiquity. Although it was, in part, a work of political philosophy, in that Clarendon sought to show that the misfortunes resulted 'from the same natural causes and means' as had taken place at other times and in other kingdoms, 'swollen with long plenty, pride and excess, towards some signal mortifications and castigation of heaven', its primary purpose was didactic – a warning about past mistakes and a guide to future actions. *The Commonwealth of Oceana*, on the other hand, is essentially a work of political theory. Like Clarendon's *History* it was probably composed for political purposes as a post-war defence of the Good Old Cause of 'constant successive parliaments, freely and equally chosen by the people', and in opposition to the Protectorate of Oliver Cromwell, but its form is that of a republican tract rather than of an historical narrative. *Oceana* sought to explain how England had become a commonwealth of independent free-holders and how this commonwealth should have been organised for government as a republic, but the historical content was essentially subordinate to the republican message. Unlike Clarendon, Harrington wrote teleologically: he fictionalises the history of England as that of *Oceana* 'to show the rise, progress and declination of modern prudence' in order to prove that the government's only recourse had been to form a republican commonwealth based on all its citizens.

Given the contrasting natures of the *History of the Rebellion* and *Oceana* it is not surprising to find that their interpretations of the origins of the English Civil War are fundamentally different. As the opening extract indicates, Clarendon saw the reasons for the outbreak of hostilities as having been essentially short-term. He started the narrative in 1625, but it is quite clear that he believed war was by no means inevitable from that date. To Clarendon the kingdom (in the 1630s) enjoyed 'the greatest calm and the fullest measure of felicity that any people in any age, for so long time together, have been blessed with, to the wonder and envy of all parts of Christendom'; in November 1640 'it was not imaginable' that the Long Parliament 'would have run the courses it afterwards did', and the majority of members 'consisted of men who had no mind to break the peace of the kingdom or to make any considerable alteration in the government of church or state'; and in November 1641 at the time of the Grand Remonstrance debates, the 'poor kingdom' was near 'to its deliverance'.[1] That this deliverance never happened was the result of 'several accidents' which contributed to 'the several successes' of a small disparate clique. But not even the leaders of this group 'who have been the grand instruments towards this change' had the 'industry and foresight' to contrive the rebellion.[2] Nor, indeed, did they want it. Pym, Hampden, Holles, St John and Essex were represented as essentially moderate men, who were driven to desperate ends by radicals, not because of the revolutionary situation in the country, but because of moral failure on both sides. Ultimately Clarendon's great rebellion was caused by the failings of all responsible sections of the community to perform their trust: King Charles 'whose kingly virtues had some mixture and allay that hindered them from shining in full lustre'; the king's principal counsellors, especially Henrietta Maria, the great lords and the judges, who at many critical stages up to the dismantling of the king's government in the early months of the Long Parliament had given such bad advice, and who, at the time of the attempted arrest of the five members, were not only working against the king's best interests, but also failing to consult his supporters in the Commons; members of parliament who 'by their supine laziness, negligence and absence' had allowed 'a handful of

men much inferior in the beginning, in number and interest . . . to give laws to the major part'; and finally, by implication, at least, the 'supine sottishness of the people' who allowed themselves to be traduced.[3] Clarendon makes it clear that at almost any stage of the crisis, good counsel (especially, one feels, had it been given by himself) could have averted war, but as this was lacking the country drifted into civil conflict. Clarendon believed, therefore, that the English constitution was intrinsically sound. It had simply been unhinged by 'perverse actions of folly and madness, making the weak to contribute to the designs of the wicked, and suffering even those, by degrees, out of the conscience of their guilt, to grow more wicked than they intended to be'. But the wounds inflicted by such perversions could, after a suitable period of bloodletting, 'by God's mercy . . . be again bound up'.[4]

Harrington, by contrast, was far from thinking that at the time of the Civil War the English constitution was basically sound. Indeed, he believed that the rot had set in as early as the reign of Henry VII (fictionalised as 'Panurgus') who by initiating the statutes which deprived the nobility of their military tenants and their right to recruit retainers 'first began to open those sluices that have since overwhelmed not the king only but the throne'. For Harrington argued that the 'yeomanry or middle people' were beneficiaries of the weakening in military status of the aristocracy and that the crown was the loser. The yeomanry, freed from their military dependence on the great lords and also aided materially by the statute of alienations and the so-called 'new invention of entails', gained in military strength and wealth; the crown, faced by a *domos* of independent freeholders, no longer depended on the strength of 'the few' and had no certain means of power. From now onwards, Harrington suggests, decline was inevitable. Coraunus (Henry VIII) further upset 'the balance of the commonwealth' by the dissolution of the monasteries, bringing 'with the declining estate of the nobility so vast a prey unto the industry of the people'. 'The wise council of Queen Parthenia' (Elizabeth I) was too shrewd not to appreciate the strength of the 'popular party', but the consequence of 'the perpetual love tricks that passed between her and her people into a kind of romance' was that the nobility