This is a large-scale treatment of a large-scale subject. The book is a narrative history of the disorders of the British archipelago, with an emphasis on the military conflicts. These are conventionally viewed as separate wars, and Trevor Royle divides his material in accordance with the convention. There are no fewer than forty-nine chapters in the book, with an epilogue, so inevitably the chapters are grouped into parts. Part 1 covers the build-up or as the author sees it, the “descent” to war, from 1638 to 1642, with proper emphasis on Charles I’s disastrous policies in Scotland and Ireland. Part 2 takes us from the outbreak of the civil war in England to the king’s engagement with the Scots, while the third part continues the story down to the conclusion of the third civil war, at Worcester in September 1651. Parts 4 and 5 deal with the transition from commonwealth to protectorate, and the restoration of the monarchy, respectively. In this choice of periodization, the book’s main title, and its sub-title, lie a pointer to the varying focus of this work as a whole. It is in part a guide to the “wars of the three kingdoms,” with due attention to the relationships between the king and his separate territories, partly a study of something more cohesive, a “British civil war,” and partly a narrative of political events, textbook-style, of the aftermath of these conflicts. The bibliography is full and reveals that the basis of the book is a thorough survey of printed primary sources and up-to-date secondary ones. There are good maps of the land-based military campaigns, although none of the maritime ones. Generally, the author’s grasp of the big issues and his control of the material are impressive, not least because he appears not to have written on this period before. As an overview, a brisk, stimulating, and readable narrative, this book is a remarkable achievement.

As one would expect from a successful writer of accessible history, the standard of writing is high. Royle has an engaging prose style. The first sentence sets the pace: “There was no doubt about it, the saviour of the Protestant cause was dead, the right-hand side of his face shattered by a stray musket ball which had entered his head between right eye and ear.” Royle is an accomplished military historian primarily, so the most successful dimension of the book is his treatment of the major set-piece battles. But there are many lively accounts of civil war battles in print, and the book aspires to be more than another Baedeker of battlefields. The title implies a contribution to the historiography on the nature of the conflict of the three kingdoms, but those seeking any original treatment of that subject would do well to look elsewhere, particularly to David Scott’s Politics and War in the Three Stuart Kingdoms, 1637-49 (Palgrave, 2004).[1] Royle’s is a conventional, competent, but intellectually unambitious survey. It has nothing startling to add to the significant body of literature on the Stuart kings’ ill-fated attempts to govern their kingdoms, because only through the study of high politics and not through the study of battles can the mainsprings of the conflict be exposed. Underpinning the purely military analysis of the wars must lie a discussion of the political, religious, and socio-economic conditions that brought the wars to pass and which sustained them. Unfortunately, once away from the relatively safe territory of the battlefields, Royle’s limited familiarity with the landscape of the seventeenth century becomes evident.

Inevitably in a book this size, there are a number of factual errors in the narrative, slips such as the assertion that the Exchequer was abolished during the Interregnum, the misdating of the 1654 parliamentary elections, the attribution of the tract Light Shining in Buckinghamshire to the Levellers rather than the Diggers. More
significantly, the author’s grasp of the major conceptual forces that shaped conflict in this period is adequate but hardly insightful. He describes the Calvinist doctrine of predestination as “the heresy that individuals are saved or damned before birth” (p. 22) without any gloss or further explanation. The narrative duty performed by the Independents is illustrative. Oliver Cromwell recruited into his regiments Independents, “inclined to political liberty and nonconformity” (p. 301). A few pages later, the Independents are defined again: “radical, in favour of freedom of worship, pro-war” (p. 310). In a brief textbook, this might be an acceptable summary, but in a blockbuster of nearly 900 pages, its brevity is made to bear far too much narrative weight. By page 703, the Independents (not the heterogeneous mix of republicans, royalists, and presbyterians) are those that Cromwell and the major-generals sought to exclude from Parliament in the summer of 1656; the “anti-Commonwealth Independents” scrambled into the second Protectorate Parliament nevertheless (pp. 703, 723).

A range of mistakes is associated with Royle’s dramatis personae. Among the principals, Prince Rupert’s brother, Maurice, is consistently wrongly called Maurice of Nassau, a different Maurice altogether. Oliver Cromwell was not a descendant of Henry VIII’s minister, Thomas Cromwell, but the descendant of a client of the hammer of the monasteries. Among the lesser figures, John Winthrop was never governor of Virginia. Although through his wife, he enjoyed an estate in the west country, Sir William Waller was hardly “a Devon squire” (p. 203), any more than Sir John Clotworthy was “a Devon man” (p. 118). It was not Thomas Berry but James Berry who killed Charles Cavendish at the battle of Gainsborough. The regicide Adrian Scrope did not leave public life after the execution of Charles I. It would be tedious to continue the list of errors of this sort, but there are more of them, and there are more of them than there should be. They betray the recent and limited acquaintance of the author with his biographical subjects. Neither is Royle immune from the pitfall of self-contradiction, a mark of the hasty writer. Just one example: in the 1650s, England was “a sensible orderly country at ease with itself” (p. 672), but it was also “a country in danger of becoming ungovernable” (p. 697).

The epilogue is a curious and unconvincing attempt to draw comparisons between the civil wars Royle has been discussing over the previous 815 pages and the American War of Independence. Its effort to construct a parallel between Oliver Cromwell and George Washington was presumably undertaken in a bid to win American readers. This book is not the magisterial, sure, and certain guide to the period that those who buy a book of this size might expect. Its natural comparator is the late Austin Woolrych’s Britain in Revolution (Oxford, 2002), at over 800 pages another blockbuster, and covering much the same ground.[2] Woolrych wins on every count, and answers any need there may have been for an epic, narrative treatment of the British crisis of the mid-seventeenth century.

Notes


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