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In England’s Troubles (2000), Jonathan Scott offered a large-scale history of the English experience in the seventeenth century, at whose heart was a vigorous account of the period’s political writings. The imperative to combine analysis of events and ideas in the English revolution was one of the many polemical claims made by that book for its own historical method. Indeed, Scott presented his history as an act of multiple re-inorporation, reuniting the Civil War with later episodes of instability; religion with politics; England with Europe (and, specifically, the United Provinces); and classical humanist republicanism with radical pamphleteering, in a large and various entity which he called “English radical imagination,” and which he argued constituted the very “substance” of the English Revolution. In the author’s own words, “English radicalism, the profoundest intellectual consequence of seventeenth century instability, was the English revolution.”[1]

It might seem strange, then, that Scott has chosen to follow that integrated account of the revolution with a separate monograph on English republican writing. Commonwealth Principles nevertheless arrives flush with claims to novelty, presenting itself as the first book-length introduction to English republicanism.[2] Scott aims in this book to go beyond the “partially realised aspiration” of his predecessors' contextual methodology, by insisting on the ongoing relationship between republican thought and political events, and on the continuities between classical republicanism and religious radicalism (p. x). For all its rhetoric of innovation, then, Commonwealth Principles has much in common with its predecessor. The two books might best be viewed as companion volumes, which is another way of saying that there is considerable overlap between them in both approach and substance. Nevertheless, it is welcome to have here expanded and combined in one systematic analysis the insights of the middle section of England’s Troubles, of Scott’s earlier work on Algernon Sidney, and of a number of more recent essays.

A particular virtue of this book is its full development of the revisionist reading of James Harrington rehearsed in those essays, shorn of their more intemperate slurs against Harrington’s
intellect and even his sanity, such that their larger significance beyond the reinterpretation of that one writer is now visible. [3] Notwithstanding Scott's objections to studies based around a single author, the individuality of his contribution to the republican debate in fact hinges on the figure of Harrington. Scott argues that, by misreading Oceana as a representative English republican text, rather than the eccentric and atypical work that he believes it to be, previous scholars have seriously misrepresented the central features of English republican writing. Accordingly, he shifts the focus of attention away from constitutional forms, Machiavellian moral scepticism, and negative anti-monarchism, and towards an account of English republicanism as a positive program of classically inspired, Christian humanist inflected moral reformation, which had much stronger connections with theories of political resistance based on natural rights than has previously been recognized. In doing so, he demonstrates the continuing vitality of scholarship on English republicanism, bringing new definition to a notoriously elastic term while also painstakingly tracing its development over time and the significant philosophical differences between its main protagonists.

Those protagonists include the usual canon of Milton, Harrington, Sir Henry Neville, and Sidney, but Scott is careful to devote substantial coverage to more neglected figures such as John Streater and Sir Henry Vane. His focus on republicanism as a moral cause, rather than on particular constitutional forms, also grants him scope to make a major contribution to the current rehabilitation of the infamous turncoat Marchamont Nedham, in a patient and sympathetic analysis which is one of the most rewarding elements of the book. Nedham is especially important to Scott as a figure who embodies the continuities between Leveller and republican writings and activities. It is unfortunate that so much of this argument seems to hang by the somewhat slender thread of Scott's attribution to Nedham of the 1646 tract Vox Plebis, whose authorship has in fact been the subject of scholarly controversy. Scott settles this matter to his satisfaction in two footnotes, mentioning, but not engaging with, the alternative theories of R. B. Seaberg and Samuel Dennis Glover, [4] and before long is using this attribution as the basis for seeing Nedham's hand in England's Miserie and Remedie (1645). Nevertheless, Scott's project of reincorporating republican and Leveller thought is a welcome direction for scholarship in this area to be taking, and should significantly broaden this book's potential readership beyond those with a specific interest in the republican debate.

Readers from outside Scott's immediate field, however, and those for whom the book genuinely is the "introduction" to the subject that its author claims it might be (p. ix), may find the work's idiosyncratic, tripartite organization and its style of argument somewhat off-putting. This is another characteristic that Commonwealth Principles shares with England's Troubles, a monograph history which explicitly eschewed straightforward narrative, and which therefore abandoned chronological organization in favor of an analytical approach to historical explanation which (sometimes confusingly) would cover the same passage of years several times, with different emphases on each occasion. [5] Commonwealth Principles does in fact offer a chronological account of English republicanism, but only in its third and final section. Before reaching this, the reader must pass through over two hundred pages of context and analysis, prefaced by an introduction and a chapter entitled "Classical Republicanism" which outline not only Scott's methodological and analytical assumptions, but the minutiae of his complex relationship to the historiography of republicanism. As suggested above, Scott is especially acute when tracing the roots, often in the intricacies of historical process itself, of what he takes to be historiographical misconceptions; but his eagerness to do so at every available opportunity sometimes comes at the expense of the clear delineation of his own argument. Even once these
initial chapters have passed, the mode of the text is often corrective and polemical before it is expository or explanatory. As late as the final chapter of the book's opening section, we find Scott framing his important discussion of English republicanism's place in a wider European context in terms of an argument with Jonathan Israel. The purpose of this first part, entitled "Contexts" (a buzzword in Scott's work, and one which he employs with sometimes bewildering frequency), is to establish the genealogy of English republicanism in classical thought, its inflection through the language and ethos of Christian humanism and contemporary radicalism, and its place in the larger spaces of Europe and empire. Chapters 2 and 3 also reprise salient arguments from England's Troubles in order to relate republicanism to contemporary political and religious events and perceptions. This would be a lot of "contextual" matter to digest in a hundred pages even without the historiographical commentary, and particularly when the substance of republicanism which is to be contextualized has only been outlined in heavily concentrated form.

Readers less familiar with the terrain of English republicanism might therefore prefer to skip, at least initially, to the book's second part, a comparative analytical section in which particular components of republican philosophy, such as the political theory of rebellion, constitutional prescriptions, republican virtue and imperial endeavor, are discussed in turn, as they appear in the writings of individual republicans. This system generates more illuminating comparisons than can be summarized here, bearing out Scott's claims for the variety within unity of republican thought, and it is this section which is most likely to make the book of use as a work of reference. Given the advantages of this thematic organization for Scott's analytical project, it will perhaps seem churlish to complain that it confines treatment of the writings of individual authors to scattered sub-sections of six pages or fewer. Nevertheless, the reader struggling to accumulate a sense of the totality of each writer's thought is likely to find this frustrating, and it is a pattern which requires Scott to write rather densely while rarely giving him the space to analyze very deeply. It also hampers the development of some of the book's most promising subordinate arguments, such as the suggestion that the Israel of the Old Testament may have been as potent a subject of republican reflection as classical Athens or Rome. Nor does the book's structure always save it from repetitiveness. Scott's chapters on republican "Liberty" and "Virtue" are so much the intellectual core of Commonwealth Principles that they inevitably bleed across his strict divisions, into his chapter on "Empire" for example; and his commitment to uniting ideas with events inevitably struggles to defy his structural separation of analysis from chronology. Much of the book's final, chronological section therefore seems familiar by the time we reach it.

This cannot be said, however, for the final chapter of the chronology, in which the pace quickens markedly to cover the years 1680 to 1725. Scott here emerges dramatically from the density of his earlier arguments to stake bold claims for his subject's significance in a broader panorama: English (or rather Anglo-Dutch) republicanism, we are told, forms the middle part of a single historical process which began with the Reformation and Renaissance, and which would culminate in the Enlightenment. Scott argues that it was as a consequence of the Anglo-Dutch political and intellectual achievement of the seventeenth century that "the world would genuinely be transformed" (p. 357). The size of this claim is both exhilarating and a little surprising, arriving with something of the effect of a deus ex machina--almost literally so, as the argument depends on the replacement of a narrative of rational, secularizing intellectual progress with one which privileges "a Christian reason deriving from Plato and Erasmus" (with Jonathan Israel once again brought in at the close to act as the fall guy) (p. 355). Scott has certainly made a powerful case
throughout the book that "classical republicanism and natural law theory shared an appeal to the faculty of human reason which was Greek in origin, but frequently in the early modern period Christian in application" (pp. 25, 26). The Anglo-Dutch angle might seem less well substantiated, particularly to readers unfamiliar with the much fuller case made for this by Scott in his previous work; *England's Troubles* functions here less as a mirror image of the present book than as an indispensable prelude to it.[6]

Unfortunately, however, for all the grand intellectual and historical ambitions of *Commonwealth Principles*, more humble matters appear to have been neglected. It is perhaps inevitable in a work of this size that some minor errors of spelling and typography have been allowed to slip through (including, unfortunately, some confusion over the title of one of Nedham's works, p. 274). It is a more serious concern, however, in reading a work such as this which might be envisaged as the starting point for further exploration of the primary texts considered, to find that the references are frequently unhelpful or defective. Scott's careful analysis of the full range of Harrington's works, and his bibliographic remarks on the shortcomings of J. G. A. Pocock's edition and their consequences for subsequent interpretations, are among the shrewdest parts of the book. It is therefore especially unfortunate that he claims to be quoting *Oceana* when actually citing *The Prerogative of Popular Government* (p. 155, n. 25); and he appears to mix references to Pocock's edition indiscriminately with references to the 1771 Toland edition. The student wishing to use Scott's book to refer back to Harrington's writings will therefore need to have both editions to hand, and to be willing to chase a further reference via its quotation in an essay by David Armitage (p. 218, n. 37). Elsewhere, a footnote reference seems not to have been checked at all before the book went to press (p. 87, n. 10). Taken individually these may seem to be minor errors (although Scott himself is not above gratuitously admonishing a fellow scholar for inaccurate quotation, p. 153, n. 10), but such widespread evidence of sloppiness does little for the reader's confidence in the book's reliability as a work of reference. This is regrettable, since there is so much else here that commands attention and respect. Scott is now firmly established as one of the most prominent scholars of seventeenth-century republicanism, and this latest synthesis of his views will be impossible for scholars of this literature to ignore.

Notes


[2]. As Scott admits, this claim is made on the grounds that previous surveys of the literature
have been weighted towards a single principal author, have incorporated English republicanism into a larger history of political thought, or have been organized collaboratively. See, for example, David Armitage, Armand Himy and Quentin Skinner, eds., *Milton and Republicanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975); and David Wootton, ed., *Republicanism, Liberty and Commercial Society 1649-1776* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994). For an invaluable recent survey of the scholarly literature, see Reid Barbour, "Recent Studies in Seventeenth Century Literary Republicanism," *English Literary Renaissance* 34 (2004: pp. 387-417. Scott's claim of novelty may come as a surprise to readers of David Norbrook, *Writing the English Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). Scott's explanation that his own focus on prose is in contrast to Norbrook's alleged concentration on poetry seems to do a disservice to the interdisciplinary ambitions of both authors.

[3]. See especially Jonathan Scott, "The Rapture of Motion: James Harrington's Republicanism," in *Political Discourse in Early Modern Britain*, ed. Nicholas Phillipson and Quentin Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 139-163. Scott there describes Harrington's interest theory as "ludicrous" (p. 153) and implies that his thought may have been colored by the onset of insanity earlier than the biographical record would have us believe.


[5]. For Scott's rejection of narrative organization, see *England's Troubles*, p. 45.


[7]. Examples of inaccurate page references include p. 119, n. 55 and p. 141, n. 49.
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