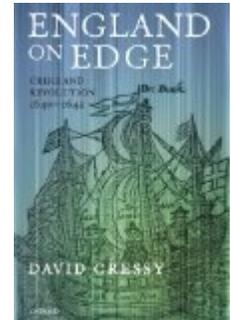


**David Cressy.** *England on Edge: Crisis and Revolution, 1640-1642.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. xiv + 446 pp. \$45.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-19-923763-0.



**Reviewed by** David Underdown

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What used to be called "The Debate over the English Revolution" has been transformed out of all recognition during the past thirty years or so. There was no revolution in the 1640s, we have been told, certainly not one with deep, long-term social and economic causes. One of the more risible recent interpretations reduces the whole affair to an old-fashioned baronial revolt, a recapitulation of the Wars of the Roses, so to speak, in which nobody below the level of the nobility mattered very much. Meanwhile, we discover, the "English Civil War," long thought to be part of that now-discredited revolution, was not English at all, but part of a "War of Three Kingdoms"; and even this "British Dimension" is not enough to explain what was happening, because we need to look at it in the context of the whole Atlantic world. In *England on Edge*, David Cressy will have none of these theories and instead takes his own fresh look at the evidence. Having done so, he concludes that there was indeed a revolution in England in the 1640s, and locates it, as Lawrence Stone did, in 1640-42, rather than at the end of the decade, when Parliament was purged, the King

executed, monarchy and the House of Lords abolished, and England became a republic.

So Cressy's objective is to describe what actually happened during these two contentious years before England divided in civil war, to discover, as he says, "as much as possible about the social and religious condition at the time of its most acute domestic crisis" (p. xi). England, we should note--not Scotland or Ireland. Anyone familiar with Cressy's earlier work will not be surprised to learn that he approaches the task with immense determination and thoroughness. He exploits every possible source of evidence intelligently and imaginatively, from the well-known holdings of the National Archives and the British Library, to those of the most remote county record office or out-of-the-way local history publication. His flair for choosing the apposite quotation and the telling anecdote never deserts him, and the result is a vividly compelling picture of a country collapsing into chaos: if not into revolution, certainly into a situation in which revolution was a very likely outcome.

In a famous phrase about the years 1640-42, the political philosopher James Harrington observed that "it was the dissolution of this Government caused the War, not the War the dissolution of this Government" (*Oceana*, 1656). Cressy deftly adapts Harrington's aphorism by substituting "revolution" for "dissolution of this government" (p. xii). But whichever formulation we may prefer, it is clear enough from the evidence that he painstakingly assembles that Charles I's government had reached an advanced state of decay by the summer of 1642. Cressy leads us through the collapse of military discipline, as discontented levies mutinied (on at least two occasions murdering their Catholic officers) when they were marched off to fight the Scots. Soldiers often took the lead in dismantling altar rails in parish churches, the most obvious symbols of the newly ritualized worship that Charles's Archbishop, William Laud, had introduced during the 1630s. In both church and state, Charles I's regime was collapsing around him.

It can of course be argued that these and the many other outbreaks of disorder were the work of a small minority. Certainly much of the violence was located in urban settlements, particularly London, and it might have been helpful if Cressy had been willing to confront the issue of regional differences in political allegiance. The capital was convulsed by the attack on Laud's palace at Lambeth, by disorders at sessions of the Court of High Commission, and by the great welcoming demonstrations when the Puritan martyrs William Prynne, Henry Burton, and John Bastwick returned to London after their imprisonment. Yet large parts of what Charles I always regarded as the most important of his three kingdoms--England and Wales--were less affected. The Celtic fringe of Wales and Cornwall, along with substantial parts of "downland" southern England, for example, were relatively undisturbed and were more likely to support the King in the civil war that followed.

What it all amounted to, Cressy shows, was a serious disruption of the cultural systems on which social and political stability depended. "All's undone," Sir Edward Dering groaned in January 1642: the collapse of ecclesiastical discipline had led to the "breaking asunder that well-ordered chain of government" that England had enjoyed for more than a century (p. 219). As Cressy reminds us in his lively chapters on the explosion of print culture, the breakdown of order was frighteningly apparent to many besides Dering. His coverage of the growing disorders is impressive, and would be even more striking if he had said more about the increased level of rural rioting against enclosures and fen drainage during these years.

In any discussion of a political situation as chaotic as this one, we always need to look at the relative strength of the countervailing forces of tradition and change. Cressy does his best to achieve a suitable balance, but he clearly places most emphasis on the side of radical change. The result is a tendency to downplay the strength of rural conservatism, even though it gave Charles I a party that was strong enough to fight a civil war. To take one example, he describes the 1641 Protestation, which bound its subscribers to uphold the rights of both King and Parliament, as well as the protestant Church of England, as platitudinous and "anodyne" (p. 260). Yet in wartime neutralist movements among the peasantry it was to surface repeatedly as a practical compromise position, and its promoters had much wider support than the noisier puritan separatists or cavalier zealots.

Having skillfully navigated the complicated elements in the drift into civil war, Cressy asks in a postscript why all this should matter to us. It matters, he insists, because we need to know that there really was a revolutionary situation in England by 1642 and that recent "revisionist" historians have underestimated it by presenting their comforting picture of stability. We need to get it

right. Cressy does not believe that the conflict came about by accident, nor does he accept the contention that "unrevolutionary England" was transformed primarily by two swift chains of events in Scotland and Ireland. We might wish that he had gone even further by considering the possibility that there were more profound reasons why the English government had become so dysfunctional by 1640--whether there had been underlying social, cultural, and even economic developments during the previous century that made the monarchical-conciliar system, that had worked reasonably well for the Tudors, no longer sustainable. Perhaps this is a question that we are not supposed to ask any more and, in any case, it would require at least another book to answer it. As it is, we should be grateful to David Cressy for providing us with so lively and graphic an account of how it actually worked out during these two tumultuous years.

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