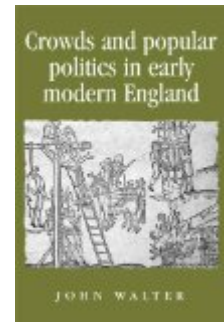


John Walter. *Crowds and Popular Politics in Early Modern England.* Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006. 224 pp. \$80.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7190-7475-2.



Reviewed by Tim Harris

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John Walter has undoubtedly established himself as the finest social historian of crowd action and popular politics in early modern England. Yet much of his work has appeared as essays and articles--the type of scholarship he does lends itself best to that format--which are scattered around in various places, some less readily accessible than others. Manchester University Press has thus done a tremendous service in bringing together some of Walter's major essays in this collection. Aficionados of Walter's work might be disappointed that some of his most recent essays--on popular politics on the eve of the English Civil War--are not reproduced here, though from the introduction we learn that they are part of a larger project currently in progress. What we have here is a sample of the quality and range of Walter's published output between 1980 and 2001. The volume includes the classic essays on the Maldon food riots of 1629 and the Oxfordshire rising of 1596 (the rebellion that never was); Walter's analyses of the geography of food riots 1585-1649, the social economy of dearth, and the impact of the Civil War on English society; his famous study of public transcripts, popular agency and the poli-

tics of subsistence, adopting the theoretical approach of James C. Scott to the early modern English context; and his perhaps less well-known essay on popular culture and popular protest in early modern England, which appeared in the Russian journal *Sotsial'naia istoriia: problemy sinteza* (1994).

Walter reveals how a painstaking exploration of the archive and a critical sensitivity to the inherent biases within the sources can enable us to shed valuable light on the aspirations, concerns, anxieties, and lived experiences of the more humble types who inhabited the early modern English landscape. He demonstrates how bottom-up history can be done, when so many of our sources are top down, and he emphasizes the importance of studying the interaction of the people with the state (in both its central and local manifestations), rather than examining either in isolation. He has done such a marvelous job in rescuing the likes of Ann Carter (executed Maldon food rioter) and Bartholomew Steer (executed Oxfordshire rebel) from the enormous condescension of posterity

that they now merit their own individual entries in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

Walter proceeds by way of double contextualization. The first involves setting crowd actions within the immediate local context of social, economic, and political structures and relationships, in order "to get behind the impoverishing and power-saturated records of authority that labelled protest as 'riot' in order to recover the fuller meaning of the actions so stereotyped" (p. 8). The second necessitates a consideration of the structures of power in the early modern English state, and how the formal weakness of the state's repressive force could make it very willing to respond to popular grievances. As we would expect, Walter has invaluable things to say about why riots happen and in what ways the people can be mobilized. Yet his work also sheds much light on why riots did not happen. It is important to listen to the silence in the record, he reminds us; "exploring those times and places where protest did not occur can be as revealing as focusing on 'hot-spots'" (p. 7). Fear of disorder could prompt the authorities to take appropriate pre-emptive measures, such as making sure the market was adequately supplied with grain in times of dearth. Thus, we need to free ourselves of the assumption of a sufficient causal link between economic crisis and collective protest. In Oxfordshire in 1596, for example, the suffering caused by dearth and enclosure was real enough, and prices and poverty were frequent topics of conversation. Yet Bartholomew Steer, despite being a good student of the traditions of disorder, could persuade no more than three others to assemble with him at Enslow Hill on that fateful day in November: the key to his failure lay in his inability to mobilize the middling sort and any but the young. Walter also warns against the "stepping-stone" history that can result from focusing on individual examples of collective protest, which encourages us to see popular political engagement as spasmodic (discontinuous in time and space), and criticizes the tendency of earlier students of the crowd to

see early modern riots as "pre-modern" forms of protest and thus, as pre-political and even primitive. Following Scott, Walter shows that there were numerous "weapons of the weak" short of violent collective outbursts that might be deployed by the lower orders to criticize those in authority, which "provides a corrective to that historiography which equates the absence of riot with the absence of popular political consciousness or the acceptance of existing patterns of subordination" (p. 216).

A short review cannot do justice to the subtlety and sophistication of such a rich collection essays. Walter's work has proved a tremendous inspiration to me since I began my own studies of the crowd, and I would urge those unfamiliar with Walter's scholarship to become so through this collection. Nor is this book purely for students of the crowd and popular politics. Political historians—even those who see themselves as focused on high politics—should certainly read this study, since it says so much not only about the power structures of the state but also about why the state chose to act in the ways it did at various moments (whether in times of self-confident strength or of perceived vulnerability). How many high political narratives of Charles I's reign remind us that the "personal rule" of Charles I opened with the execution of Ann Carter and three others involved in the second Maldon food riot of 1629, which has the dubious distinction of being the only food riot of the early Stuart period that ended on the gallows? Intellectual historians and historians of ideas should also read this volume, not least for Walter's perceptive reconstruction of the implicit contract between rulers and ruled and of how the public transcripts of legitimation deployed by those in power not only developed out of a dialogue with the subordinate classes but also opened up "the possibilities of (legitimate) resistance in relation to the contradictions inherent in the transcript which permit it to be criticised in its own terms" (p. 197). There is much of interest here to gender historians (note Walter's discus-

sion of women in food riots) and, of course, to economic historians. But the list is endless. Indeed, the brilliance of Walter's critical reading of a broad array of sources means that most students of the past would benefit from the methodological and conceptual insights this volume provides. This is a tremendous book and it deserves a wide readership.

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