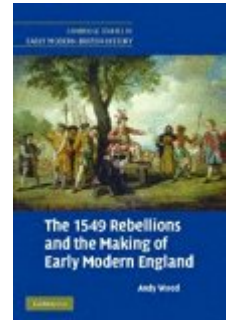


Andy Wood. *The 1549 Rebellions and the Making of Early Modern England.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007. xix + 291 pp. \$99.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-521-83206-9.



Reviewed by Jasmin L. Johnson

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Historians have a tendency to divide their subject into periods, forgetting that for the people who lived the experience, the soubriquet "late medieval" or "early modern" would be meaningless and that if people like the Norfolk rebel leader, Robert Kett looked anywhere for the inspirations for their acts, it would be to the past—to the leaders of previous rebellions such as Wat Tyler, Jack Cade, and Jack Straw.

Andy Wood informs the reader that it is his intention to "tell the story of the 1549 rebellions" (p xiii) and argues that rebels are not necessarily the inarticulate peasants which history tends to make them appear. Popular culture had, we are informed, more political insight than it is usually credited with and he makes the important point that the English Reformation was not just done to people, but with them and by them.

Wood admits that it is his intention to write a political and social history, so the military history of the various rebellions in 1549 is only briefly addressed. In addition, the overwhelming majority

of the book concerns itself with the social and political background to Robert Kett's Norfolk Rebellion (to be fair to the author, though, this is by far the best documented of the rebellions of 1549). Nevertheless there were also risings in Yorkshire, Cambridgeshire, Kent, the Midlands, and many other areas in that same year, so it is important to address the question: why so many rebellions and why that year?

There was, of course, a tradition of popular revolt stretching back to Wat Tyler and the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, with at least a further half dozen major insurrections in the century and a half which followed. Wood argues, cogently, that there is what he describes as a "red thread" linking these rebellions and suggests an "ideology of popular protest" (p. 1) stretching back over the period.

What, then, made 1549 different? The author suggests that it stands at a junction between the medieval and early modern worlds. He sees a number of influences in play—the English Reformation and the dissolution of the monasteries, the emergence of agrarian capitalism with the per-

ceived evils of enclosure, engrossment and rack renting, as well as the emergence of a number of new religious, social, economic, and political concepts. While previous rebellions probably hinged on issues rising from the inequalities of feudalism, both the gentry classes and the rebels of 1549 were beginning to see social hierarchies differently. The ballads and writings of the period seem to suggest that a king had a duty to rule within the law and at this time Edward VI was still in his minority with a Lord Protector, the Duke of Somerset, effectively ruling in his stead. Somerset appears to have been in what we might term a "no win" situation: the rebels perceived him as a tyrant and a catspaw of the gentry, while the gentry considered him too lenient towards rebels and even a supporter of their causes. The German Peasants' Wars were fresh in the mind of contemporary writers like Sir William Paget and the gentry thought they could see the abyss opening up before them. Contemporary writers such as Hugh Latimer, Henry Brinklow, and Robert Crowley spilled much ink over their perceptions of the rights of the gentry, the rights of the emerging yeoman class, and the rights of the laboring classes. Positions of power were no longer the assumed right of the gentry. Bishop Latimer himself was of yeoman stock and proud of the fact. Indeed, the eponymous Robert Kett was a middle-class tanner aspiring to gentry status and not a peasant.

The events leading up to the "commotion time" in Norfolk began in Cornwall with the "Western Rising" of 1548-49, with further trouble spreading through Hertfordshire, Middlesex, and Essex during the summer of 1548 and on into the Midland counties in the autumn of that same year. Much of this unrest was marked not by revolutionary ideas (such as those suggested by Karl Marx) but by an innate conservatism wishing for a return to the old religious practices and an end to new farming practices such as enclosure. The gentry, in putting down the rebellion, certainly seemed to have recognized this, in that they took

murderous revenge on conservatively minded priests, urban middle classes, and yeomen protesters. The gentry plainly expected the yeoman and urban middle classes, whom they termed "the honest sort" (p. 48) to be on their side against those whom they termed the "common sort," although this did not always come to pass.

With much of the South, West, and Midlands aflame, Kett's Norfolk Rebellion exploded with a violence remarkable even in those violent times. Wood attempts to explain this by suggesting that a particular rapaciousness in Norfolk gentry was matched by a "violent assertiveness" in the commons (p. 56) but this does not explain why Robert Kett, a middle-aged yeoman tanner on the edge of lower gentry status, became leader of a violent rebellion, meeting a violent end in the process. The Mousehold Heath camp and the "Oak of Reformation" have many resonances for us today, as they did for people living in the immediate aftermath of the "commotion time," but were these really proto-levellers or proto-communists, as Marx and others have suggested? From many angles do they not look more like people pushed to the brink by injustice and change they could not understand, whose aim was to right the first and reverse the second? The ending, at the Battle of Dussindale, was terrible, with huge casualties on both sides. Rebel losses are put at between one and ten thousand (the latter figure is probably unreliable) and the use of Sir William Parr, Marquis of Northampton's Italian mercenaries to put down the rebellion and the mass graves needed for its victims perhaps confirmed gentry beliefs that the German Peasants' Wars had reached their shores.

Further defiance had to be nipped in the bud. The authorities struck further terror; the repression and butchery which followed were terrifying even by the standards of those violent times although Kett and his brother were simply hanged after an (inexplicable, given the circumstances) change in sentence spared them the grisly ritual of hanging, then drawing and quartering. Howev-

er, popular resistance grumbled on for some years and many commoners looked back with a sort of morbid pleasure to the "camping time" when, some considered, they had never had it so good. Robert Kett was added to a timeless pantheon of rebels--Wat Tyler, Jack Cade, and Jack Straw--to be prayed to for aid whenever injustice rankled too far for an alehouse group or to be the stuff of court masques. Wood quotes court records in the cases of men and women bought before justices for recalling such individuals and their times.

Perhaps, as Wood suggests (pp. 187-207) popular insurrection did decline in the years immediately following Kett's Rebellion but this fails to explain why these islands should then explode into civil war within a century. Perhaps the fascinating chapter on "Memory, Myth and Representation," in explaining how the memory of Kett and his rebels was used, goes some way to allowing us to understand how this might have occurred. Is it possible that the "red thread" of continuity goes on even further than Wood is prepared to concede? There is, perhaps, more of Captain Swing, the semi-legendary leader of the nineteenth-century threshing machine-breaking riots in Robert Kett than there is of Wat Tyler's fourteenth-century rebels in his hatred of gentry greed and injustice, enclosure, engrossing, and rack rental, but even Wood's best efforts cannot efface the impression that Kett's rebels were a conservative and largely backward-looking group. The rebellions of 1548-49 seem to have been as motivated by religious and traditional demands as by those for social and political reformation.

However, it would be churlish to suggest that Andy Wood has not made a major contribution to the literature on the Tudor rebellions. His forays into the written sources and the balladry of the time are a major achievement and this book would be a fascinating read for anyone who wishes to understand how early modern England

emerged from the apparent destruction of the Henrician reformation.

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