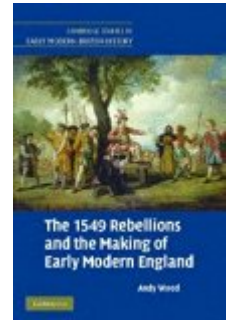


Andy Wood. *The 1549 Rebellions and the Making of Early Modern England*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007. xix + 291 pp. \$99.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-521-83206-9.



Reviewed by Krista Kesselring

Published on H-Albion (March, 2009)

Commissioned by Brian S. Weiser (Metropolitan State College of Denver)

In 1549, commoners throughout England arose in a "general plague" of rebellion. Their efforts manifested deep discontent with enclosures, bondage, and other ills of the age, as well as a finely honed capacity to organize, act, and resist. The rebellions also helped bring down the government of Protector Somerset and to inculcate among the gentry a deep fear of the "many headed monster" of plebeian politics. The risings of 1549 have had numerous narrators over the years. Andy Wood, of the University of East Anglia, previously tackled them in his *Riot, Rebellion, and Popular Politics in Early Modern England* (2002). Here, he offers his much anticipated monograph focused exclusively on the events of 1549.

Despite its title, the book concentrates almost solely on the Norfolk rising and applies many of its conclusions only to the southeast rather than to England as a whole. But what it lacks in breadth it more than makes up in depth. Deviating from the recent trend to expand coverage beyond the iconic revolts in Norfolk and in the

southwest, Wood instead offers a richly nuanced study of the rising led by Robert Kett. What he adds is an exploration of continuities with past protest, an insistence on the role of class conflict, and the application of post-Marxist theories of language.

Wood's central premise is that the events of 1549 constituted the "last medieval popular rebellions," marking the end of an epoch begun with the Peasants Revolt of 1381. In these years, the commons assumed both restorative and transformative aims in their acts of protest. While they demonstrated no ideological homogeneity, many of their number sought to remind their rulers of their duties, even while some expressed alternate visions of the distribution of social and economic power. They tended to see the state, or the Crown, as their partner and protector against the nobility. The relatively rich and the absolutely poor, yeomen and laborers, thus united under the single banner of the "commons" to effect their aims. It was this banding together that came to an end in the sixteenth century, last seen, Wood claims,

with the rebellions of 1549. Wood's aim is to understand why this unity existed in 1549, and why it disappeared thereafter. In terms of popular politics, at least, these events marked the transition between the medieval and early modern eras.

The book is divided into three parts. The first, "Context," narrates the rebellions and their repression. This section both explains the continuities with past protests and posits two important changes in the framework: the Reformation and the climax of a long-term conflict pitting the gentry and nobility against the commons. The Reformation triggered a "crisis of legitimation" through its ideological challenge to popular belief in an organic social order. The notion that the Reformation aggravated social conflict between lords and commons, through the redistribution of monastic estates among other things, also found expression in the "Christian radicalism" of the commonwealth writers. Intensely paternalist and highly critical of an aggressively selfish lordly class, their writings in turn influenced government policy. This allowed once again the sense of a partnership between a united commons and Crown, and shaped the plebeian response to the economic crisis of 1549—the astronomical inflation in food prices alongside significant decreases in wage rates and the tightening of the land market. The rebellions' defeat and brutal repression, however, shattered this fragile bond. The development of agrarian capitalism prevented its repair, as the rise of a group of yeomen farmers on the make splintered the former cohesiveness of the commons. The first part offers challenges and correctives to previous accounts of the rebellions, insisting on the utility and necessity of "class" in their analysis, for one example, and rehabilitating the disparaged commonwealth men, for another.

The second part, "Political Language," turns to newer ground and is perhaps the most innovative element of the book. Chapter 3 borrows from theorists and scholars of other rebellions and social movements to make a case for the material effects

of speech. Building from the reconstructions of rebel voices in 1381 offered by Paul Strohm (*Hochon's Arrow: The Social Imagination of Fourteenth-Century Texts* [1992]) and Steven Justice (*Writing and Rebellion: England in 1381* [1994]), Wood argues that plebeian consciousness can be recovered even from the "reported speech" of hostile chroniclers. While difficult, such reconstruction is necessary as speech and silence did not just reflect or express but rather actively constituted early modern power relations. Wood borrows Michel Foucault's notion of parrhesia, or dangerous truth telling, when examining the seemingly reckless outbursts of angry commoners. He suggests that some acted on expectations that their governors would grant them the occasional liberty of free speech, "enabling communication up and down the social hierarchy within a polity that was otherwise supposed to be closed to the popular voice" (p. 130). And in a world that made no real distinction between words and actions, rebel speech manifested agency; quoting Catherine Belsey (*The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama* [1985]), "'to speak is to possess meaning, to have access to the language which defines, delimits, and locates power. To speak is to become a subject'" (p. 131).

The following chapter turns to the specific conflicts over the meaning of such terms as "reformation" and "commonwealth," and returns to the historiography specific to these rebellions. Wood effectively counters earlier interpretations of the 1549 rebels as apolitical, argues that the commons did not merely coopt government language but deployed these charged terms according to their own long-standing usage of them, and confronts depictions of their orderly, disciplined conduct. He finds much evidence of anger, vengeance, and violence among the rebels, as well as ambitious proposals for genuine reform. In a brief but important discussion of the religious politics of the rebellions, Wood challenges the characterization of the Norfolk rebels as backers of Edwardian Protestantism, giving special emphasis

to the participation of the conservative Bishop of Norwich. He suggests that the usual distinctions made between the Norfolk rebels and their purportedly more Catholic compatriots in the south-east have been overdrawn: people in both areas saw economics and religion as intertwined in their belief that the Reformation consisted, in part, of a gentry plot against them.

The third section is titled, a bit misleadingly, "Consequences." In chapter 5, Wood examines the reasons for the decline of insurrection in the second half of the sixteenth century. Despite the occasional hint that he would like to see something intrinsic to the events of 1549 that made them the last of their kind, Wood focuses on the splintering of the "commons" and the successful incorporation of the wealthier yeomanry who once led plebeian protest into the structures of the state, a social polarization that appears most markedly in the last thirty years of the century. He cites evidence from poor relief innovations of the 1570s of shifting perceptions of the poor, no longer compared to Christ but now criminalized; he notes that the 1580s and 90s, with their harvest failures and dearth, served as the key decades for this fracturing. While much fleshed out here, this argument appears in Anthony Fletcher and Diarmaid MacCulloch's classic *Tudor Rebellions* (2004). Somewhat surprisingly, Wood does not much disagree with recent work that has emphasized the participatory nature of the early modern state in which the exercise of power rested on negotiation, but rather pushes it forward chronologically beyond the 1549 rebellions. "In the last decades of the sixteenth century," he writes, "the profound legitimation crisis that had been opened up by the early Reformation was resolved through the incorporation of wealthier social fractions, via the medium of office-holding, into state structures which, while open to the 'better sort', remained closed to the poor. What emerged from this process was a relatively inclusive, participatory state which relied for its legitimacy and func-

tioning upon local elites drawn from beyond the parameters of the gentry" (p. 188).

In a delightful final chapter, Wood turns to the politics of memory and contests over the meaning of the "commotion time." Officially sponsored histories simplified and condemned the rebellions in ways that contributed to the social distancing described in the previous chapter. Taking care to emphasize, as he does throughout the book, that plebeian ideology and voices were not homogenous, he also traces alternate and sometimes positive popular memories through particularly strong archival work. These oppositional memories, however, lived on only for about three generations because of state control of the organs of public memorialization. Yet, the story remained ripe for subversive reinvention in the nineteenth century and beyond. Subsequent reformers and radicals revived the rebels of 1549 to serve as heroes and forebears for their own causes.

Wood explains in this final section that official histories imagined "Kett's Rebellion" in Norfolk as a discrete event, separated from national politics. Commotions elsewhere—with their dangerous negotiations and uncomfortable repression—were quietly erased from the record to allow lessons more conducive to order and authority to be taught. The privileging of the Norfolk rising continues here, for better reasons but still somewhat regrettably. Wood explains his decision to focus on the Norfolk rebellion by noting its wealth of archival and narrative evidence. Yet, as he acknowledges, Norfolk manifested greater economic development and social division than did other areas; as such, the broader applicability of some of his arguments and conclusions remains to be demonstrated. Is this the story of the making of early modern England, or the making of modernity in the southeast alone? Ultimately, though, it is a reflection of the strengths of the book that one wishes he had considered the other 1549 rebellions more fully. Despite its narrow geographical focus and ambiguity on how the rebellions of

1549 themselves contributed to the "making of early modern England," this is an energizing and exciting book. While it should prompt much discussion and debate, the book demonstrates beyond doubt the sophistication of popular political culture and its impact on national politics more generally. Wood's insights into the politics of plebeian language and memory are particularly valuable, and the book will become required reading for scholars in the field.

up

up

the

up

up

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-albion>

Citation: Krista Kesselring. Review of Wood, Andy. *The 1549 Rebellions and the Making of Early Modern England*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. March, 2009.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=24365>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.