

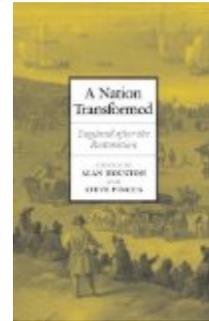
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Alan Houston, Steve Pincus, eds. *A Nation Transformed: England after the Restoration*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. x + 338 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-80252-9.

W. A. Speck. *James II. Profiles in Power*. London: Longman, 2002. xiv + 174 pp. \$13.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-582-28712-9.

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Restoration historiography transformed?

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The collection of essays, *A Nation Transformed*, has a very definite agenda. As its title implies, the overarching assumption is that England (and they do seem to mean just England) underwent a process of fundamental cultural change during the decades following the Restoration. This is intended by the editors as an explicit challenge to the oft-repeated claim that the Restoration period was notable for its deep continuities with the earlier half of the seventeenth century. Those who have made this claim are labeled by Houston and Pincus as “revisionists,” but, as this point is illustrated by quotations from scholars as diverse as Jonathan Clark, Jonathan Scott, Lionel Glassey, Tony Claydon, and John Pocock (pp. 3-5), one wonders whether these “revisionists” really deserve the single label. Perhaps this stress on continuity has always been little more than a cliché, even a truism. One could argue that continuity is still worth emphasizing, if only to avoid any suggestion of vulgar whiggery, but, like its counterclaim, of value only in specific contexts. Most Restoration historians have surely come to that most trite of all conclusions that this period, no less than most others, was one of both continuity and change. Which of those one believes, on balance, to have been the more important depends on what aspects of the period one wishes to foreground. Any attempt to generalize about changes to English culture as a whole always risks telling one more about the historian doing the generalization

than about their subject. The process necessarily involves value judgments as to which aspects of a period deserve greatest attention. If this is a debate which is worth having at all, it is one which must start with a recognition of the variety of human experience which can all be lumped together under the general term Restoration culture.

One consequence of the editors’ clear agenda is that the contributions by Blair Worden, Mark Knights, and the two editors themselves cohere to a far greater extent than is usual in such collections. In two essays which more or less complement each other, Worden and Knights consider the process which earlier writers have described as “secularization,” but which is shown here to have been much more complex. Both make much use of C.J. Sommerville’s *The Secularization of Early Modern England* (1992). Those who have stressed the continuities across the seventeenth century have often had religion particularly in mind when making that claim. We have often been told that religion remained the central feature of late seventeenth-century English life. Worden and Knights accept this, while arguing that, at the same time, religious belief was becoming less dogmatic. So long as one includes all the usual caveats when making such big claims, this seems fair enough.

The essays by the two editors on the discourses which made use of “reasons of state” show why some contemporaries were abandoning or modifying older assump-

tions. For Pincus, the crucial point about “reasons of state” is that this language now took an economic turn. One result of the political and spiritual failures of the godly during the 1650s was that the godly not only lost the argument but that the terms in which they had conducted that argument were outflanked. Doubtless, this does help explain some of the structural changes in English government finance during the second half of the century. One is, however, less convinced by Pincus’s assumption that a mercantile interest captured a central role for itself in policy-making (pp. 295-6); on the contrary, one of the reasons why the new forms of borrowing were so attractive to Treasury ministers was precisely because it made them less, not more, dependant on individual City lenders. Merchants remained just one lobby, or rather several competing lobbies, among many. Ministers continued to think in fiscal rather than macroeconomic terms.

Houston shows that “reasons of state” provided a convenient language by which the detractors of the Stuart monarchy could criticize the use of the royal prerogative. What he does not consider is that this was a two-edged sword. Any argument that sought to set up Parliament as a bulwark against an overmighty and self-assertive monarch could be countered with the argument that the monarch was the essential bulwark against an overmighty and self-assertive Parliament. If Parliament was indeed being defended with such novel arguments, it was not entirely implausible to argue in reply that its defenders were thus destabilizing the traditional balance of the constitution. The easy smear that they were repeating the excesses of the first Long Parliament meant that the shrewder Members of Charles II’s Parliaments knew that they had to be all the more careful not to overplay their hand.

Arguably, all four of these essays, which, to varying degrees, concentrate on print culture, are undermined by Tim Harris’s contribution. Harris questions a top-down approach to public opinion and to the role of the press in its creation. According to him, attitudes towards the government were formed less by what the king’s subjects read than by their immediate experience of the impact of his policies, although Harris does seem to assume that those reactions could only have been unappreciative ones. He points out that those most removed from the government, whether by geography, literacy, or social position, were as politicized as anyone (p. 150). But is that the same as saying that they were as well-informed? Subjects can be out of touch with their rulers, no less than rulers with their subjects. The weakest part

of Harris’s argument is his conclusion in which he suggests that Charles II, recognizing that the altered nature of public opinion had led to “the demystification of majesty,” adjusted his style of kingship accordingly (pp. 152-3). To take only the most obvious example, Charles’s architectural patronage at Windsor and elsewhere represented, on the contrary, the same old confident assertion of a sacred image of monarchy as favored by Charles I and James I, only on a far grander scale than either his father or grandfather had ever managed.

The other essays are less obviously related to the stated theme of the volume. Any transformations they discuss are mostly very specific ones. Rachel Weil shows how writers such as Sidney and Locke misrepresented Filmer’s views on the family; Nicholas von Maltzahn stresses the role of Longinus in colouring contemporary responses to *Paradise Lost* (how ironic that, in the medium term, Milton’s greatest consequence was to encourage a flood of toadying panegyrics in the Miltonic style); Paulina Kewes makes a plausible case for the growing status of playwrights in this period and shows how complaints about the unoriginality of new plays were themselves rarely original; while Barbara Shapiro provides a sensible overview of the influence of political change on the development of English science, concluding that any influence was very limited.

Gary De Krey’s essay on radicals in Restoration London shows no fear in asking some big questions. Rejecting the term “radicalism” but accepting the widespread existence of “radical people” and “radical ideas” (p. 93), abandoning the abstract noun while retaining the adjective, he recognizes that any discussion of these “radicals” must first confront the issue of definition. What he wishes to argue is that one can meaningfully talk about “radicals,” in the sense that they were “those who reject, challenge, or undermine the established political norms or conventions of their day, the intellectual rationales that legitimate those norms or conventions, and the structures of authority that maintain them” (p. 80). Well, as he says, this does come down to a matter of definition. The problem is that this is a negative description, defining them in opposition to the powers-that-be. Can one assume that these “structures of authority” were uncontested even by those who most firmly supported them? For every “radical,” there was someone else who thought that Charles II was soft on nonconformists, indulgent towards his enemies and lax in the exercise of his prerogatives. Not everyone agreed what the “norms” were, even when they were most anxious to agree or disagree with them. Must we accept the critiques of those

“norms” by these “radicals” only on their terms? De Krey’s argument becomes more convincing, the more fluid, contingent and muddled he portrays the ideas of his “radicals” as having been. By insisting that “radical” is a useful catch-all term, he risks simplifying the phenomenon he wishes to discuss.

If one accepts De Krey’s definition, does it follow that James II was the period’s leading “radical”? Surely here was the man who did more than anyone else to challenge “the established political norms or conventions” of Restoration England? One man’s “radical” can be another’s reactionary. The nature of that challenge is the subject of Bill Speck’s contribution to Longman’s “Profiles in Power” series. Since its publication in 1978, John Miller’s biography of James has set the tone for interpretations of his reign and it is one indication of how little has actually changed in this field that Yale University Press felt able to reissue the Miller biography in 2000 as part of their “English Monarchs” series. Speck’s book provides a concise, more up-to-date alternative, which, being much shorter, will probably be preferred by most students. Its overall shape and tone is reminiscent of Speck’s earlier work, *Reluctant Revolutionaries*, the best of the single author volumes to have appeared for the 1988 tercentenary. The format of the series does not encourage extensive endnotes and other authors might have been tempted to confine themselves to synthesizing the existing secondary literature. Speck however has been hard at work in the archives and so is able to use fresh evidence to back up his case.

The most obvious difference between his new book and *Reluctant Revolutionaries* is the extended coverage given to Scotland, Ireland, and North America. Each gets their own chapter, with Speck adopting the same

solution as most of James’s previous biographers of placing them after the English chapters. This means that James has already been overthrown in England before his rule elsewhere gets discussed. No one denies that the construction of three-kingdoms narratives presents a formidable challenge to the skills of any historian, but the challenge is one which would have been worth accepting and would have avoided the misleading impression that the other areas were sideshows to the main action in England. Of course, there is a case for arguing that for James and his English ministers, Scotland, Ireland, and the colonies were just that, a point which Speck could have considered.

Speck’s main theme is that James was his own man. As king, he had a strong sense of what he wanted to do and, once he got the chance, that agenda was implemented without hesitation. This view is surely correct. Nor, I would suggest, is there any mystery as to where he got his ideas from. For a generation, the view that persecution was not the answer to the kingdom’s religious problems had been one of the more banal policy ideas circulating among the chattering classes of Whitehall. Here is one example of Worden’s and Knights’s wider decline in dogmatism. As Speck points out, a policy of staunch Anglicanism had been tried already by Charles I with disastrous results (p. 11). James was not the only person to think that there must be another way. With his commonplace mind, he had picked up some pretty commonplace ideas and then made the mistake of assuming that everyone would be grateful when he tried to carry them out. If England was indeed a nation transformed after 1660, James’s rule as king was an attempt to force many of the elements of that transformation to their logical conclusion.

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