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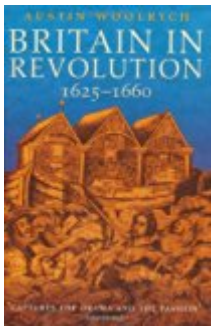
Austin Woolrych. *Britain in Revolution, 1625-1660.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002. viii + 814 pp. $35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-820081-9.



Reviewed by Stephen Roberts

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Austin Woolrych has given his book a title suitable for a textbook, but this blockbuster of a study is much more than a survey of the period. It represents a summation of half a century's reflection on a complex period of British history, and lives up to the claim implied in the title that Britain and not England is under scrutiny. The author has divided the period into six parts, shaped not by mere chronology, but by the logic of the political dynamic he detects at work. Thus, the reign of Charles I to 1640 is dealt with fairly briskly in part 1, "war in three kingdoms, 1640-1646" in part 2, the post-war maneuverings and second civil war in part 3. The last three parts tackle respectively the commonwealth, the Oliverian protectorate, and the complexities of the collapse of 1658-60. Within these parts there are chapter divisions that are not wholly chronologically driven. Austin Woolrych allows himself space, for example, in a chapter addressing the sense of crisis prevailing in the autumn of 1640, to fill in a retrospective survey of the structure of Irish politics under Charles I. Add to this the author's deployment of the Marvellian word "climacteric" to describe "bursts of crucial change" (p. 155) in four phases of the 1640s and 50s, and we have a highly subtle and effective approach to periodization unrivaled in any available volume with which this one might be compared. Each of the six parts is followed by a bibliography which itself provides a guide to a huge amount of writing on the period, further evidence of the thoughtfulness and effectiveness of Woolrych's approach to structure.

The author's earlier published works have included studies of the English civil war, the general council of the parliamentarian army in the later 1640s, the transition from the commonwealth to the protectorate, 1652-54, the dying days of the commonwealth in 1659-60, and John Milton. These enthusiasms reveal themselves in this book, naturally enough. Thus, the military dimensions of politics, at least on the parliamentarian side, are analyzed in great detail and with great care, and, given their centrality during the 1640s and 50s, are very welcome. The care with which the twists and turns of military campaigning are delineated extends beyond England to include Scotland and Ireland. The book provides the fullest integrated account of the military campaigns of the

British Isles currently on offer, and it is enriched and enlivened by narrative detail. For example, when Montrose summoned the city of Aberdeen to surrender in September 1644, Woolrych tells us not only that the citizens refused his demand, but shot dead a drummer-boy accompanying the envoy. The way in which this vignette is worked into the narrative, sparingly, vividly, and tellingly, is one of the signs of the master-historian. The same amount of attention is bestowed on military politics in England, particularly when it mattered most, in the intricate period of the later 1640s. The author is at his most insightful and original when handling the army officers and their interactions both with their political masters and with their subordinates. On the factions in purely parliamentary politics, he is generally content to follow orthodox and long-established nomenclature when dealing with peace, war and middle groups, presbyterians and independents. These predilections are partly driven by the currents of historiography, to be fair. Woolrych incorporates recent research so that we are told that the most famous of the Putney debates of 1647 took place not in the church but in a private house; on the politics of the Rump Parliament, he is happy to follow Blair Worden's analysis of thirty years ago.

On wider issues, this book sometimes takes issue with the historiographical trends: Woolrych is always his own man. He finds the revisionist view that the personal rule of Charles I was viable and ruined by avoidable error unconvincing, stressing instead the flimsiness of the whole structure that the king was building. His sympathies are generally with parliament in the civil war, and instinctively favor "moderates" of one kind or another. He has limited sympathy with radicals, and those who defy orders, who often figure as "firebrands" or "fanatics." The regicide and leader of the prosecution of the king, John Cook is a fanatic (p. 431); the gentle, complex, and allusive Welsh minister Morgan Llwyd a firebrand (p. 876), as if he were part of a double act with his compatriot, the hotter-headed and generally more incendiary Vavasor Powell. In the confrontations between Oliver Cromwell and the Levellers, Woolrych sympathizes with the table-thumping lord general in his denunciations of the Levellers as dangerous and a threat to the commonwealth (p. 443). This is a rather conservative book in other respects. The reader would not guess that so much ink was spilt on county studies in the 1970s and 80s from this account, and although there is a discussion of the "ecological" and social interpretations of allegiance in the civil wars (p. 256), there is no attempt to incorporate them into the main narrative. Although the importance of women in the Leveller movement in 1649 is acknowledged (p. 444), the word "Women" does not find a place in the index, and (staying with W) neither does Wales, and witchcraft gets as little mention as is decent in a book on the seventeenth century. Those seeking an engagement with recent developments in gender history or social history more widely will not find it, and the least inspired strand in the book is the social history background.

These limitations hardly damage the claims of this book to be authoritative, however. In looking for comparators for ***Britain in Revolution***, one must dismiss all the textbook rivals. The word "Gardinerian" comes to mind when seeking comparisons. This book invites comparisons with S. R. Gardiner's ***History of the Great Civil War*** in its scope, its accuracy, its insights, and in the skill with which the whole thing is composed. Woolrych writes beautifully, as to take one example, the descriptions of the trial and execution of Charles I testify. The book is such an achievement that it comes as almost a relief to note that even Homer sometimes nods. It was Coventry, not Gloucester garrison, to which Richard Baxter ministered (p. 249: he only spent a month at Gloucester as a visitor, not as a chaplain); and Brilliana Harley has become Harvey (p. 386). It is somewhat misleading to describe Edward Massie as having "sided with the king in 1642" (p. 304), since his appearance at York was very brief, and

Endymion Porter was more probably a crypto-Catholic than an outright papist (p. 126), whatever his enemies thought. But it is only occasionally, and at this level of minute detail that these minor slips and quibbles may be found. This book is a sure guide to mid-seventeenth-century Britain, and is unlikely to be rivaled for many years to come.