

THE CLUBMEN & THE ENGLISH REVOLUTION

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In the mid-20th century there was a great deal of interest shown in the Marxist theory of class struggle and revolution, as applied to events in England 300 years previously. In 1940, Christopher Hill (a member of the Communist Party who later became Master of Balliol College, Oxford) proposed that there had been an English Revolution in 1640; and suggested that it was a classic 'bourgeois' revolution. The idea was based on Hill's study of the huge number of pamphlets which had been published after the removal of censorship in 1641; and his knowledge of these was unparalleled. Hill had his critics: A.L.Rowse wondered if anyone was any wiser for knowing what a few revolutionary extremists had thought; J.H.Hexter questioned Hill's methodology; in Cambridge B.H.G.Wormald stoutly maintained that there had never been a revolution, only a Great Rebellion, and Peter Laslett pointed out that the Civil War was fought between rival members of the gentry, so it could not conceivably have been a class war; but at the time the critics seemed like voices crying in the wilderness. Hill's *Century of Revolution* was a textbook when I studied 'A' level English history between 1963 and 1965.

Hill modified his views over time, conceding that the revolution had not been of the classic Marxist variety; but in *Intellectual Origins of the English Revolution* (1967 and 1997) and *The World Turned Upside Down* (1972) he re-invented the revolution, emphasizing that there had been lower-class people in England between 1640 and 1660 who expressed some very radical ideas indeed; that the world had indeed, for a time, been turned upside down; and that once the radical genie had been let out of the bottle, it was impossible to ever put him back in there.

Hill confined himself, by and large, to the study of what was written rather than what was done, and he was really only interested in what was said and done by members of the broad 'Left'. He was supremely disinterested in the writings of conservatives and reactionaries, of whom there many, starting with Clarendon, Hobbes and Filmer. Many other studies have shown what one might well have suspected all along – that the broad mass of Englishmen and women, of every class and in all areas, were conservative with a small 'c' in 1640 and remained so in 1660. Not only was there no revolution, there was very little desire for one. Moreover, there were many groups – like the Quakers and Muggletonians and 'Ranters' - who took an extreme view of religion, but those who believed in political or social

revolution - like the Fifth-Monarchy Men and the Diggers – were very few indeed, though their opponents tended to exaggerate the danger they posed.

But Christopher Hill never accepted this. He was like the late Tony Benn: admirers both of the Levellers, they were Puritans at heart. Like Benn, Hill never admitted that he had been wrong about the historical inevitability of some kind of socialism, any more than E.H. Carr did, or Eric Hobsbawm has done. Yet historiography as well as history has moved on. In *The Rise and Fall of Revolutionary England* (1996) Alastair MacLachlan showed in convincing detail how Christopher Hill's interpretation of 17th century English history had been – to say the least – profoundly mistaken; and this is a view which few would now dissent from.

In *Revel, Riot and Rebellion* (1985) David Underdown studied a wide range of literature and archives, and in particular court records of various types for the mid-17th century, in the three Western counties of Dorset, Somerset and Wiltshire; and everywhere he found conservatism and a deep attachment to the Christian faith, the parish and the old ways. This was not just true of 'Anglicans' and 'Royalists': it was true of 'Puritans' and 'Parliamentarians' too. The desire to turn the world upside down was confined to very few people indeed. The innate conservatism of English people explains the revival of Royalism in 1646-8, which led to the Second Civil War. It led to widespread dissatisfaction with both the Rump Parliament and the New Model Army. Cromwell's ascendancy during the 1650s was based on raw military power and he never succeeded in basing his regime on any widespread political, let alone Parliamentary, consensus. The Restoration became almost inevitable, and was widely and genuinely popular when it took place. These conclusions were amply confirmed by Robert Ashton's wider study *The Counter-Revolution* (1994).

There is something else confirmed by Ashton's monumental work, which interests me personally. When I was an undergraduate, I got to know a fellow student who held very extreme political views. He was not a Communist but he was most definitely of the New Left and supported the idea of revolution, wherever in Cuba, Vietnam or at home. He refused to compromise his principles, to the point of never looking for work commensurate with his abilities: he worked in a Post Office for a time; but mostly I think he joined the army of the unemployed. Rather than be a cog in the capitalist machine. There were not many people who were so intensely dedicated to socialism as to deprive themselves of the material benefits of capitalism; but he was one.

He once told me that he had considered starting a PhD course after graduation in 1969, but that he had not pursued the idea because there was simply not enough material about his chosen subject. This was to have been the phenomenon of the 'Clubmen', who took arms during the First Civil War of 1642-6, to defend local communities against both Roundheads and Cavaliers. My friend had been interested in these people because he regarded them as potential working-class heroes: people who had been prepared to take direct action when the occasion demanded it, and stand up for their rights. Imagine my surprise when, upon reading Ashton's book many years later, I found that there was plenty of evidence

about the Clubmen, or at least enough; but it revealed them as mostly Tories. I wonder now whether Hugh (for that was his name) ever knew this? I cannot ask him, because he died more than 20 years ago, of the demon drink.