THE EXPERIENCE OF THE CIVIL WAR IN THE WEST

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In order to understand how the Civil War broke out in 1642, we must understand first of all why people took sides and how hard it was to do so. I would like you to imagine what happens if you strike a rock with a hammer. The hammer blow is the dual command from the king, fleeing London, and his enemies left behind in the metropolis. 'Defend me,' says the king; 'defend us,' say his enemies. If you hit a rock with that force of command, it will shatter eventually, but it will break along pre-existing lines of weakness. It is necessary, therefore, to look at West Country society for the tensions and antagonisms which already existed within it. And of these, by far the most important was religion. Without religion, it is impossible to imagine the Civil War – so long and so bitter – taking the form that it did.

To put it crudely, most of those who wanted their churches purged of ceremony and hierarchy, who were often dedicated to wholly evangelical preaching, tended to back Parliament. Most of those who wanted to retain a church with bishops, cathedrals, archdeacons, vestments and ceremonies, and many Catholics, supported the king and became Royalist. To that extent the Civil War was a war of religion, and this was true of individuals in this area. The Puritan gentry were the backbone of the Parliamentarian cause in the West: people such as Stephens in Gloucestershire, Ludlow in Wiltshire, Popham, Pyne and Ashe in Somerset, and Prynne at Bath, were the ones who thrust themselves forward in 1642 to support Parliament. Those who had more conservative religious views tended to be associated with the king and became Royalist. Communities also took sides on the basis of religion. The area around Taunton was notoriously full of Puritans and became a notable centre of Parliamentarianism; in the same way, the area where the counties of Somerset, Gloucestershire and Wiltshire met combined Puritan zeal with support for Parliament.

But religion was not the only tension in society. There was also social division. In the West, as everywhere else, there were more nobility and more wealthy gentry among the Royalists than among the Parliamentarians: it was certainly the case that the Crown and the High Church appealed more to the traditional leaders of society. As a local example, consider Sir John Stawell. He was a man who in the 1640s had joined forces with the Puritans to suppress church ales and village revels, the traditional summer celebrations where villagers got drunk and ate too much in order to raise funds for the church. Stawell and the Puritans both detested church ales and wanted them suppressed. They clashed with the king, the bishop of Bath and Wells and Archbishop Laud over the issue. But when 1642 came, the coalition tore apart because for the Puritans the whole point of suppressing church ales was the fact that

they existed to maintain buildings and ceremonies which Puritans detested. Stawell, on the other hand, wanted to suppress ales because they gave the lower classes a chance to create disorder; in 1642 he found Puritans encouraging the greater disorder of a civil war and turned against them desperately, reaching for the king as the symbol of order.

Social division of a different kind existed in a large city such as Bristol. There, a group of wealthy merchants monopolised the trade of the city and dominated it politically; they took their privileges from the king, and became Royalist as soon as the war broke out. But the excluded of the city – the smaller retailers and shopkeepers who had ambitions to break into foreign trade but were kept out by the monopoly – went Parliamentarian very fast in order to oppose the inner ring. It was the 'ins' versus the 'outs'. But the issues over which the war was fought were not class issues. The rallying calls were not economic or social. They were religion and liberty.

The result was very complex, and it is not easy to decide why a particular individual, let alone a particular community, became Royalist or Parliamentarian. When you consider a town such as Taunton or an individual such as Sir Ralph Hopton, the issues of religion, basic political loyalty and class loyalty are so completely interwoven that it is very difficult to separate them from one another. On the whole, therefore, one is left with a series of impressions.

The war shattered the strongest existing friendships and brought together the most bitter of old enemies. Fifteen Somerset gentry families were divided, either brother against brother or father against son, and what is more, loyalties were not static. The Portman family changed sides gracefully in the course of the war. More staggering is the case of the Chudleigh family in Devon, who were not merely partisans of Parliament's cause, but the most talented, active and successful soldiers in Parliament's cause among the Devon gentry. And yet when the younger Chudleigh was captured at the battle of Stratton, he changed his mind within a week and became one of the most effective and fearsome of the Royalist soldiers in the West. His father changed sides as well. Then there were the turncoats. When Cirencester was stormed by Prince Rupert, the king's nephew, early in 1643, over 1,100 prisoners were roped together, stripped of most of their clothing to reclothe Royalist troops, and dragged through heavy snow and mud to Oxford. When they got there, starving and frozen, they were given a stark choice: they could either be sent to Oxford gaol or change sides and join the Royalist army. Just over sixty decided on the gaol. All the rest became the king's soldiers within five minutes, and what is more they were loyal soldiers: there is no trace in the records of any defection thereafter.

Finally, there was neutralism. Of the scores of merchants and retailers who made up the corporation of Bristol, we can detect the allegiance of just over twenty. The rest carefully stayed out of active commitment to either side. Between one third and two thirds of gentry families in the West Country do not seem to have taken up a position in the Civil War. And of the rest, many were actually forced to take part. After all, if someone points a gun at your head and invites you to assist their cause, it takes a great deal of courage to refuse. But once you have agreed to contribute men and money to one side, the other side counts you as an enemy. The result is that many who were classed as partisans at the end of the war were actually conscripts. When you look for real zeal in the West Country, real commitment, it comes down in each county to about five or six individuals on each side in each year. These were the people who made the war and kept it going. Towards the end of the war, neutralism in the West turned militant as body after body of hill farmers and farmers on the Levels banded together in what they called 'clubman' associations to try to stop the soldiers on both sides from plundering them mercilessly season after season.

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If the ranks of the truly committed were so small, and given the complexity of motivation and behaviour, why did the war break out at all? The answer is simple. The king and Parliament called on the leaders in counties and towns to take up arms, and a few responded for each side. That was all that was needed to start a civil war, because these few wealthy merchants and gentry put up private money to buy soldiers and to arm them. Regiments were formed like joint-stock companies.

The western Royalists at the beginning of the war faced considerable problems. The king was far away in York, and when at last he sent a body of partisans under the Marquis of Hertford to start the war in Somerset, they entered a county which until that stage had been at peace. They appeared to be the aggressors and were trying to raise troops and gather arms in a situation where those who fired the first shots could be blamed by their enemies for ruining the peace of the county. Unlike the king, the main Parliamentary forces were much nearer to Somerset and were able, when the time came, to send reinforcements very quickly and so to tip the balance of power.

By the end of the summer of 1642, in the face of these disadvantages, the western Royalists had been chased into two refuges: into Wales and into the western end of Cornwall, both of them Celtic-speaking areas where support remained solid. The Parliamentarian regiments which were now raised or sent into the West just walked into the large towns and took them over. They walked into Gloucester through a side gate opened by a friend. They arrived outside Bristol and terrified the inhabitants into opening a side gate to avoid being plundered; and they walked into Exeter and garrisoned the city. In the same way, local partisans laid claim to unfortified country towns such as Cirencester and Dorchester, tied chains across the streets, dug trenches and declared them garrison towns, no matter what the bulk of the inhabitants might think.

The whole premise of stretching a chain across a street and digging a ditch at the main entrance is that you are not going to face a lengthy conflict. The whole premise of walking into cities such as Gloucester and Bristol and being accepted by the inhabitants is that they are going to have you living with them and being paid by them for a winter at most. In reality, however, this was a war which would not end soon. The king came west and then south, taking Oxford and the south Midlands, and settled down for the winter to replenish his stores and recruit his army. The fighting in the West had until now been insignificant, but events in the Midlands threatened to change everything. With the king now in Oxford, and his partisans in west Cornwall, the West Country was potentially in a pincer if Cornwall and Oxford chose the crack the nut of Parliamentarian resistance in the West. Both sides now set out on a war of attrition: the Parliamentarians to hold the two sides of the Royalist pincer apart, the Royalists to close the trap.

Lets us look more closely at the two experiences that ensue, of soldier and civilian in the West. The pay that was offered to these private joint-stock companies called regiments was princely. Huge sums, sums that were almost dream-like to country lads, were put up to tempt people into the armies. Those princely sums soon ran out, and hunger, cold and disease became the common lot of the soldiers on both sides. The garrisons did best because at least they could live in cities and towns where there were houses in which to take refuge and stable populations who could be taxed. But the field troops on both sides, almost from the beginning, lived off the country – just like Napoleon's soldiers – for most of each campaign. If they were lucky they could make serious money by plundering the towns they stormed. But the rest of the time they simply scrambled around ahead of each other trying to get to the bread and the cheese before someone else found it.

At first, in 1642–3, most of the fighting was between the Royalists in Cornwall and the Parliamentarians who were trying to keep them there. There was an inconclusive series of alternate ambushes on either side of the Tamar between armies of raw recruits. As anyone who has expereience of war can testify, one veteran soldier is worth ten who have never

heard a shot fired and have not got used to taking orders. The trouble in that first winter was that neither the Cornish-based Royalists nor the Parliamentarians based in Devon had heard many shots, and they kept being surprised by each other and fleeing after the first few cannon were fired. But they learned rapidly. The Cornish were hardened through a long winter during which they learned how to co-operate with each other under the same commanders. They became a better and better fighting force. The Parliamentarians, ironically, did not do so well because reinforcements from London, Gloucester and the rest of the West Country kept arriving. The Parliamentarian army got bigger by comparison with the Cornish Royalist army, but there were more and more strangers appearing, and more and more strange units who were not used to working together. The result was that the Royalist pincer closed in the summer of 1643. The Cornish army under Hopton broke out of Cornwall, having annihilated the Parliamentarian army of Devon facing them at Stratton, and linked up rapidly in Somerset with cavalry sent from Oxford.

The Cornish soldiers were a really rough lot. If you want to know what it felt like to be taken by them in 1643, you need only read the memoirs of Richard Atkins, one of those rather foppish members of the Oxford cavalry. When the Royalists took Taunton bloodlessly the first time by surrender, Atkins was picking around seeing what he could plunder while pretending to disarm the town, and found a bag of money hidden under a hedge by a householder. He hid it immediately in his jacket, writing that had any of the Cornish soldiers seen him with it they would have murdered him at once, even though he was a fellow Royalist. By the time he got to Glastonbury a few days later, the dreadful Cornish were in front of him. He found a great house which had been eaten so bare by the soldiers ahead of him that he could find nothing to live on except some mouldy cheese, and that was so bad he gave it to the dogs. Think for a moment of the situation of the person who owned the house, who had absolutely nothing, not even a bit of mouldy cheese, once the Royalist army had moved eastward.

There was a toughness in battle that went with this complete lack of compunction towards the people of Somerset, a toughness which the Cornish Royalists too often expressed as wild indiscipline. When the storm of Bristol occurred, when that great city fell to the combined armies of Oxford and Cornwall and the trap was finally closed on the centre of the West, there was a terrible slaughter of the victorious Royalist troops because the Cornish, facing the highest and most difficult part of the city's defences, failed to wait for an agreed signal. Instead they attacked headlong, hoping to capture the city ahead of the rest, to gain the honour and also the best of the plunder. The result was that they died by the score against the south wall of Bristol, while the Oxford army of the king stormed the city from the north and captured it. The Royalists had won control of the West, but had lost many of the best soldiers they needed to hold it.

What happened in 1643–4 was that both sides turned to new allies to assist them. Parliament invited the Scots into the north and thereby changed the whole balance of power there, and the king recalled the Royal army from Ireland into the western ports: most of it went north to fight the Scots, but some forces were left to secure the West and to replace the good troops lost in the storming of Bristol. They blocked up Parliamentarian Gloucester and they pushed the Royalist frontier eastwards to take Wiltshire and Hampshire. For the first time Parliament risked its main field army under the Earl of Essex in the summer of 1644. He got as far as Cornwall; but once the king had defeated his enemies in the Midlands, the Royalist pincer closed again, trapping the Earl of Essex between the Royalists in Cornwall and the king's approaching field army. Essex was smashed and his army forced to surrender at Lostwithiel in Cornwall in 1644.

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So far I have talked about armies and fighting. Now let us look at the effect upon Somerset and the surrounding counties of the experience of war. One effect of the war

was that local magnates, local leaders, were removed. It was not just that Parliamentary magnates fell from power in 1643, but that local Royalist gentry were put out of action as well, often through the action of the king himself. Lord Hertford, the greatest nobleman in the region, was sacked and succeeded by a rich Somerset gentleman, Sir Ralph Hopton. Then Hopton was sent out of the county to Hampshire and succeeded by Prince Maurice, the king's nephew. Maurice was in one sense a royal prince, a member of the English royal family, but in another sense he was a brutal German mercenary who did not know England well and was prepared to fight to the utmost not only against Parliamentarians but against civilians who resisted his demands for men and money. Maurice put strangers into the garrisons. Berkeley Castle was put under an Essex gentleman, Sherborne Castle under a Bedfordshire Royalist. The plan was always the same: to strip away the natural defenders of the local community and put in hard men, loyal only to the king, who would screw the West Country turn by turn until it produced more money and more men, even if the economy was broken in the process.

The results of this policy could been seen in atrocity after atrocity, some of them committed by locals (let their names be put in the book of infamy). In Devon the royal effort was handed over to a younger brother of the king's partisan Sir Bevil Grenville. His name was Sir Richard Grenville, a man soon known to Devon as 'Skellum' Grenville. Landless younger sons, greedy for their brothers' titles and their brothers' repute, were the sharpest hatchet men of the seventeenth century, and Sir Richard Grenville was one of the sharpest of them all. He learnt to fight in the particularly bloody and brutal wars in Ireland, and there is a story confirmed from Royalist sources of how he captured a party of Parliamentarians foraging outside Plymouth, and then entertained his troops by offering money to the first of his prisoners to volunteer to hang the rest. A young lad stood forward at once, and being an inept hangman he made a botch of it. His comrades choked to death one by one, and at the end the young man was released according to Grenville's word, given some money by him and a slap on the back with the words 'Young lad, I have taught you to be a true soldier. Now come and join the king.' Even the king was embarrassed when this story reached him in Oxford and issued a reprimand. In Somerset Sir Francis Dodington, another local gentleman, was also hanging prisoners and receiving similar reprimands from the king.

When, during the siege of Wardour Castle, the walls were undermined and blown up, one of the Parliamentary defenders was trapped in the falling masonry. The other defenders retreated into a surviving part of the castle to hold out for a few more days, and their comrade was heard screaming, trapped by a huge piece of stonework across his chest. They sent a message across the wall to the enemy, asking leave to go out and fetch him back, or else that the Royalists would do so themselves. But the Royalist commander, the same Sir Francis Dodington who had been rebuked for hanging prisoners, replied that he would not give the enemy so much grace. And so the people inside the castle listened to their friend screaming his life out for forty-eight more hours, trapped in the rubble. That was how vicious this war could be.

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So why did the war end? It ended because of the brutality. It ended because the countryside was plundered so severely by 1645 that a knockout blow was possible: if one side could completely destroy the field army of the other, then that field army would not be rebuilt because there simply were not enough resources left to make that possible. It looked in 1645 as if the king would win the war. He went north from Oxford, stormed a number of fortresses, including Leicester, and then turned south to destroy the last consolidated field army of Parliament. As that army, the New Model, marched north in

1645, it was noticeable that the country people in the south Midlands would not give it any food. They were not afraid of it. They were convinced that it was a doomed army marching to its death in the next battle. They were convinced that Parliament was doomed. But that was not the case. The king, carried away by his successes earlier in the campaign, did not wait until crack cavalry he had sent to help the siege of Taunton could rejoin him, nor for a small but experienced army marching from Wales. At Naseby on 14th June he stormed uphill into an army twice as large as his own, and his force was annihilated, leaving only the king, his chief generals and some cavalry to flee westwards into Wales. The one great army of Parliament could now turn west and destroy the Royalists here in turn. At the Battle of Langport in July 1645 the Royalist western army duly faced the great Parliamentarian field army, and did not even remain to fight. It held a river ford with some cannon, but when the army got across, the Royalists turned and ran into Devon. There they stayed helplessly while the Parliamentarian army munched its way through the western fortresses for the next year, forcing the Royalists further and further down the peninsula until their last army surrendered at Truro. The Midlands and the Welsh garrisons were mopped up in the succeeding and last stages of the war.

What is my conclusion upon this war? It is that it was the most unpleasant experience the people of the West Country had ever had to face. The Black Death and the succeeding great plagues and influenza epidemics of the late medieval and early modern period had killed far more people than the war. But the epidemics passed as visitations of God and left people's mental world standing – the Church, politics, society. What the Civil War did was to destroy all such landmarks. The ocean of blood that was shed in the first half of the 1640s, and that continued to flow in one way or another until the Battle of Culloden in 1746, succeeded in the late 1640s in removing the monarchy, the House of Lords, the freedom of Parliament and the episcopal Church of England. Eventually it left the Church so ruined that it lost a third of its clergy. The people who lived through those years not only had to put up with violent death but with a divided society and the constant experience of being plundered and bullied by soldiers of both sides, and all for a cause which seemed remote and difficult to comprehend. For many Somerset people, the only face of the Civil War they knew was not that of religious or political zeal, but of thugs on horseback riding into a village and putting ropes round the necks of terrified countrymen.

The simple truth was that there were two civil wars: the war we have always known about, of cavalier against roundhead, of magnificent literature written by the partisans of both sides; but also the war waged by zealots against the bulk of the population in order to persuade them and then to coerce them into supporting a war effort which most people had never wished for and never understood. In the end it was both wars that counted in the demolition of the Royalist cause, because had the people of the West been enthusiastic enough to continue fighting the war, the king might have raised more troops and replaced his army.

I ask you to remember Sir Richard Grenville, and Prince Maurice, and the Pophams and the Pynes, and the Prynnes: the people who made the war and fought it for ideals in which they truly believed and who helped to fashion between them the future destinies of the English. But, finally, I ask you to remember as well those hundreds of thousands of country people for whom the war was merely brutal and tragic, and whose stories, in the literature of the Civil War, have too often been utterly forgotten.

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