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Causes of the English Civil War by Conrad Russell

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# Reviews

**Conrad Russell, *Causes of the English Civil War* (1990), xv + 236 (Clarendon Press, Oxford, £35.00).**

Conrad Russell begins his provocative, sometimes exasperating enquiry into *The Causes of the English Civil War* on a note of weariness and distaste. 'We have certainly spilt enough ink on the causes of the English Civil War,' he tells us, and the enterprise 'has not, on the whole, had a beneficial effect on seventeenth century historiography' (1). The search for causes, Russell believes, has distorted our perception of the period, leading historians to posit spurious connections between unrelated phenomena, and to ignore important themes altogether because they have no apparent bearing on the Civil War. His goal is to circumscribe the question more tightly, by defining more strictly the 'effects' which demand explanation, and by sharply delimiting the causes which may be invoked to explain them.

To understand Conrad Russell's project in *The Causes of the English Civil War*, we should refer back to a book published nearly twenty years earlier under a deceptively similar title. Better than any other single work, Lawrence Stone's *Causes of the English Revolution* epitomizes the historiographical tradition that Russell has been striving for the past twenty years to supplant.

The titles of the two books hint at the fundamental disagreement between Russell and Stone. Lawrence Stone contended that the downfall of the Stuart monarchy is properly described as a revolution, and therefore merits comparison with other events similarly classified. The first chapter of Stone's *Causes* consists of a systematic overview of social scientific definitions and models of revolution. (Not all of this theoretical baggage, it must be admitted, was ever unpacked in the course of the trip.) Russell, in contrast, is highly suspicious of the very idea of revolution, which he considers to be 'one of those universals invented for the purpose of demonstrating the merits of nominalism' (8). Russell rejects the English Revolution for the very reason that Stone embraced it: the notion facilitates a structural and comparative analysis of events that Russell, unlike Stone, would prefer to treat as utterly unique and largely contingent.

Both historians properly begin by defining the effects for which causes are to be sought. For Lawrence Stone, the primary *explanandum* was the collapse of the Stuart regime, in both its secular and ecclesiastical aspects, during 1640. Everything else – the descent into Civil War, the defeat and execution of the king – followed comprehensibly from this catastrophic event. The downfall of the Stuart monarchy therefore had long-term, deeply rooted social preconditions, even though contingency and individual choice played a considerable role in determining the specific course of the crisis.

Stone distinguished between long-term preconditions (operating from 1529 to 1629), mid-term precipitants (from 1629 to 1639) and short term triggers (1640–2). Triggers and

precipitants received far less attention in Stone's text than did the long-term preconditions – the social causes operating over the century that followed the Henrician Reformation.

To summarize a multifaceted argument very briefly, Stone concluded that the English Revolution resulted from a condition of 'disequilibrium' or 'multiple dysfunction': a set of overlapping and intermingling conflicts which were ultimately rooted in the demographic and economic changes of the sixteenth century. Prominent among these changes was the rise in population, leading to greater social and geographical mobility, and hence to heightened anxiety and conflict, at all social levels, over relative status and power. These social conflicts, in Stone's account, interacted in complex ways with the erosion of royal finances (occasioned by the sixteenth-century price revolution), with the weakening of the established church in the aftermath of the Reformation, and with the growth of militant Puritanism.

Russell ignores most of these alleged 'preconditions' and minimizes the rest. Since he denies that any English Revolution in fact took place, he has no need to invoke long-range social tensions and conflicts to explain it. Many of the themes which preoccupied Stone are brusquely despatched in a few pages of Russell's first chapter. It has long been a central tenet of 'revisionist' historiography that early Stuart society was tolerably stable – a view reflected in the title Russell has given to the recently published collection of his seminal essays on the period: *Unrevolutionary England*. Various 'social interpretations' which seek to relate the Civil War to demographic pressure, or to social and economic conflict, are brushed aside with the observation that 'No group was unanimous, and no area was unanimous either' (3). This trivial truth presumably invalidates any attempt to establish patterns or trends.

Russell further denies that the coming of the English Civil War can be understood as a single event. With a smart crack of the revisionist's hammer, he splinters the topic down into 'a somewhat unpredictable sequence of events and non-events' (10). Specifically, he identifies five 'events' and two 'non events' that occurred (or failed to occur) between 1639 and 1642. Each of these (non) events had different causes, and the order in which they did/did not occur was as important as the (non) events themselves. Since this sequence was unpredictable, no single explanation of the English Civil War seems possible.

All of Russell's (non) events belong to the category of short-term causes that Stone called 'triggers'. They are: (1) the outbreak of the Bishops' War; (2) the victory of the rebellious Scots; (3) the failure of the Long Parliament to reach a settlement with the king; (4) the failure of the king to prorogue parliament in 1641; (5) the division of the kingdom into parties of roughly equal strength; (6) the failure of negotiation during the early stages of the war; and, finally, (7) the steady diminution of royal authority under Charles I.

Russell then pursues the causes of these seven (non)-events through seven thematic chapters. These chapters deal in turn with the 'British problem' (relations among England, Scotland and Ireland), religious divisions stemming from the Reformation, the ideology of constitutionalism and the rule of law, the fiscal crisis of the monarchy and the personality of King Charles.

It would be neither fruitful nor feasible to trace here the criss-crossing tracks of Russell's 'five events and two non events' through the thickets of this sophisticated and at times convoluted text. The general conclusions which finally emerge are less startling than the labyrinthine construction might lead one to expect. The principal causes of the English

Civil War appear to have been the financial weakness of monarchy, the religious conflicts deriving from the Reformation and the political ineptitude of Charles I. What, one may ask, is especially 'revisionist' about this interpretation? How does it differ, in essentials, from that of Lawrence Stone or, for that matter, S. R. Gardiner?

Russell admits that the financial and religious crises were deeply rooted in the sixteenth century. He implies that some sort of crisis – some traumatic confrontation between crown and parliament over finance, religion and foreign policy – was clearly in the cards by 1625, if not by 1603. Despite the revisionist anathemata against hindsight, teleology and 'high roads to Civil War', there were apparently some long term 'preconditions' (in Stone's sense) after all. Russell continues to insist that the Civil War 'as we know it' is unthinkable without the specific personality and behaviour of Charles Stuart. But surely not even the most fervent Whig-Marxist would dispute this tautology, since 'the Civil War as we know it' ineradicably *includes* King Charles. Russell has no deep quarrel here with Lawrence Stone, who also acknowledged the role played by chance, circumstance and personality.

The real novelty of Russell's *Causes*, and the one area where he incontestably has the edge on Stone, is Russell's handling of the 'British dimension': the dialectical interplay of events in the 'multiple kingdom' of England, Scotland and Ireland. Lawrence Stone almost completely neglected events beyond the boundaries of England. The rebellions in Scotland and Ireland receive only fleeting mention among his precipitants and triggers. There is no reference to either country in Stone's analysis of the preconditions of revolution.

What Stone, like most historians before Russell, regarded as an essentially English conflict must be understood as a complex series of interlocking but analytically discrete narratives, involving not only England but the whole troublesomely diverse patrimony of the House of Stuart. No future account of Britain's Time of Troubles can ignore or undervalue the relatively autonomous histories of Ireland and Scotland.

Russell, to be sure – in his zeal to correct the anglo-centric myopia of his predecessors – occasionally produces optical distortions of his own. It may be technically true to say that the English Civil War was merely 'the fourth round in a ten round battle', but it is surely perverse to describe it as 'something of a diversion' (218). Since England was the largest, richest, best educated and, by a long chalk, the most powerful country in the archipelago, the English Civil War was clearly the main event, on whose outcome the fate of all three kingdoms depended. But Russell's essential point stands: we can no longer explain the English Civil War, as Stone tried to do, by studying England alone. Queen Elizabeth, of Blessed Memory, boasted of being 'merely English'. Had Charles Stuart, regarded in some circles as a Blessed Martyr, been merely king of England, he might have reigned as long as Elizabeth.

Russell's pan-Britannic perspective is especially fruitful in his discussion of religion, which occupies fully one half of the book. Despite his disappointing failure even to confront the work of Christopher Hill, Keith Wrightson, David Underdown and other historians who have explored the social context of early Stuart religion, these chapters constitute the best available survey of recent work in the field. Russell is particularly good on the alliance of English and Scots Calvinists, which facilitated the Scottish victory in the Bishops' Wars, forcing Charles to summon the fatal Long Parliament.

Two other suggestive themes should be briefly mentioned. Russell persuasively argues

that we should not confuse the Royalist party (as it developed from the summer of 1641) with the pre-1640 court. Many members of Charles's government deserted him, at least for a time, when the Scots forced the calling of parliament. Further, many pillars of the royalist cause in 1642 had opposed Charles, and especially Laud, in 1640. Polarities such as court/country, and even government/opposition, therefore, grossly oversimplify a complex and shifting pattern of allegiance.

Russell shows that the absolutist theories already fashionable on the continent encountered serious resistance in England not only in parliament, but within the court and on the Privy Council as well. This important finding makes more comprehensible Charles's disastrous reliance on the Laudian hierarchy in seeking to strengthen his position. As Russell explains, belief in the rule of law was not a monopoly of the parliamentary opposition: it was generally espoused by all propertied laymen. Herein lay the real danger of this ideology to the monarchy.

In practical terms, the rule of law meant the predominance of common law and parliamentary privilege over the financial necessities of the crown. Charles's dilemma was that this principle was espoused not only by his parliamentary critics, but by most of his lay counsellors as well. The addition of the entire ruling class to the rule of law and the rights of private property made it virtually impossible for Charles to resolve, by peaceful means, the desperate financial problems bequeathed to him by his predecessors. Laud and his clerical associates, meanwhile, were far less squeamish than Charles's lay advisors in placing *raison d'état* above the traditional liberties of the subject. This is all very persuasive, though it also sounds alarmingly close to the dreaded Whig interpretation of history.

From this perspective, Charles's reliance on the High Church party in his efforts to bolster royal authority, appears not only intelligible but intelligent. But nobody – Whig, Tory, Marxist or Revisionist – has a good word to say for poor Charles. Even Russell remains critical, even faintly contemptuous of the king. He sometimes seems to suggest that if only Charles had been more resolute, more determinedly authoritarian, he might have prevailed – indeed, *should* have prevailed – over a selfish and irresponsible parliament. And here we come to the book's most serious weakness: its failure to treat parliament with justice or even comprehension.

Russell implies that the English parliament was being stupid, and somehow perverse, in holding out so tenaciously against the general tide of absolutism. Russell repeatedly scolds parliament for its 'irresponsibility' in opposing 'honest taxation', and he flatly accuses Pym and his friends of treason in forging an alliance with the rebellious Scots. Russell claims that the members of parliament had only themselves to blame that their institution came so near to extinction.

It is admittedly refreshing to have the case against parliament argued with such vigour. The royalist case has not been so intelligently defended since Clarendon. But some of Russell's criticisms of parliament are disingenuous. He maintains, for example, that parliament was risking suicide by not acceding to the crown's demands, as though more compliant behaviour would have purchased security. But it was the compliant continental estates that went under, and it was the fractious, irresponsible and ultimately regicidal House of Commons that survived. Russell's understanding of parliament is hindered by his inability or refusal to take seriously the members' professed ideals. His index contains

no entries for words like 'rights', 'liberties', 'freedom', 'privilege' or 'property'. Even 'parliament' itself is quite literally conspicuous by its absence: the only relevant entry reads 'parliaments, absence of, 1629-40'. The subject of parliament – its social composition, public reputation, self-image and ideology – is the largest single lacuna in *The Causes of the English Civil War*.

Readers of this journal are likely to be exasperated by Russell's neglect of most of the subjects with which *Social History* is concerned. Russell's account of parliament would be far more satisfactory had he related parliamentary intransigence to such matters (all well-established by Tudor-Stuart social historians) as the commercialization of land-holding, the expansion of the gentry and the rising educational qualifications of the parliamentary elite. On all of these subjects, Stone remains a far surer guide than Russell.

Russell is particularly intolerant of anything that might smack of the sociology of knowledge or religion. His insistence on keeping different aspects of human experience in hermetically separate compartments will strike many readers as excessively fastidious. For example, Russell devotes fully one half of his text to religion and to the political ramifications of religious conflict, but he refuses (*a priori*, it would appear) to consider any possible links between religion and social change. One need not be a Marxist or a Weberian to find this segregation of the sacred and mundane a trifle archaic.

But there is no point in arguing over what are essentially matters of cognitive style and anthropological presupposition. Despite its flaws (mostly sins of omission), *The Causes of the English Civil War* is a highly original and stimulating work from which all students of the period, even impenitent Whig-Marxists like this reviewer, will profit. As an introduction to the topic, however, Stone still holds the field.

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**David Warren Sabean, *Property, Production, and Family in Neckarhausen, 1700-1870* (1990), xxiii + 511 (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, £37.50, US \$54.50, paperback £12.95, US \$18.95).**

David Sabean has spent the past two decades studying the village of Neckarhausen in southern Germany, including seven years at the Max-Planck-Institut für Geschichte. During that time, he has given us glimpses of his research in conference papers and lectures. Now, at last, he has produced the first of what will be at least a two-volume work on the village. (There are references throughout this book to material that will appear in another.)

Neckarhausen was a classic land of small peasant agriculture in the eighteenth century. Narrow ploughed strips were divided into three large fields. New crops were introduced and old ones discarded as time passed. Artisans combined craft work with farming. Weaving was an additional source of income for many families. As population grew and land-holdings shrank, younger villagers were forced to seek seasonal work outside the village. None of this is unusual. What is unusual about Neckarhausen is that inheritance