



Craig Rose. *England in the 1690s: Revolution, Religion and War.* Oxford and Malden, Mass: Blackwell Publishers, 1999. xvii + 331 pp. \$77.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-631-20936-2.

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Transforming England: The Decade of the 1690s

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The 1690s has been an awkward decade in recent scholarship. Nobody knows quite where to put it. Revisionist rewriting of seventeenth-century English history rarely makes it beyond the Revolution of 1688, which brought William III and Mary II to the throne, leaving the 1690s to the long eighteenth century favored by J.C.D. Clark. And, as the first decade in the “Second Hundred Years’ War” – the series of wars that pitted Britain against France between 1689 and 1815 – the 1690s did mark the beginnings of Britain’s eighteenth-century rise to European power. But the Revolution with which the decade began was also an event rooted in the seventeenth-century past. It reflected long-standing and divisive issues that had, at various times, produced parliamentary paralysis, civil war, the fragmentation of English Protestantism, a short-lived republic, and – under James II – the prospect of Catholic renewal.

English leaders of the 1690s regularly revisited these seventeenth-century events in their minds and imaginations as they worked out the implications of what had happened in 1688. In spite of themselves at times, they worked out a lasting and transformative re-settlement of the country’s fundamental institutions. Indeed, the “reluctant revolutionaries”[1] of 1688 achieved what had eluded the Long Parliament, the Commonwealth, Oliver Cromwell, and Charles II: an enduring polity that would withstand the social and economic challenges of modernization, of global trade and empire, of European warfare, and of the beginnings of industrialization.

In Craig Rose the reign of William and Mary has found an able interpreter, one who is equally at home exploring the financial complications of European warfare and the ecclesiastical complications of Protestant disagreement. Providing a balanced survey of ideas and events, Rose has written the most

ambitious book about the decade since Henry Horwitz’s study of its parliaments.[2] His lucid narrative chapters about politics, party, and warfare open up the history of the 1690s in much the same way that the work of Geoffrey Holmes once opened up the reign of Queen Anne.[3]

Rose also includes a separate chapter about Scotland and Ireland that provides much analytical integration of the histories of the three Stuart kingdoms. Overall, this is a compelling and readable work that eschews conceptual posturing in order to provide a “student-friendly general book on the period” (p. xiii) for British undergraduates. Most American students will find the book manageable by chapter but challenging in its entirety. Advanced American students and teachers of British history and literature will find it indispensable.

Rose is, however, more interested in exploring political and religious ideas and attitudes than in explaining political processes. In keeping with current historiographical priorities, he seeks to present the events of the 1690s as contemporaries understood them; and he more than succeeds in this endeavor. His frequent and lengthy quotations from letters, poems, sermons and speeches enable contemporaries to speak for themselves, though these voices do sometimes interrupt and distract from Rose’s own analysis of events.

Rose treats the 1690s in both their seventeenth and eighteenth-century contexts, and he touches upon three major historical transformations that began in these years. The first Williamite transformation was the relative closure the decade brought to the issues of the seventeenth century. Fears about popery and arbitrary government, panics about sectarianism or republicanism, Protestant disagreements, and Country resentments about taxation and ministerial manipulation were not banished from English poli-

tics after 1688. But the open competition for place and power between the whigs and the tories – “two broad and mutually hostile political traditions” (p. 64) rather than centralized parties – left each side hoping that it could control the new monarchs and shape the emerging Settlement. Left to their own devices, whigs and tories would, of course, have carried out parliamentary politics in the spirit of civil war, each attempting to punish and proscribe the other for the misdeeds of the 1680s or those of the 1640s and 1650s. Indeed, as Rose shows in a particularly strong chapter about the Church of England, memories of those deeds (and the 1689 destruction of Scottish episcopacy) ruined prospects for a broad remodeling of the church establishment for the sake of bringing in many non-conformists.

But William III had not taken the English crown only to be paralyzed by civil war in parliamentary or ecclesiastical guise. He refused to become the king of either party; and in a manner perhaps more skilful than Rose allows, he trimmed between whigs and tories throughout his reign, maintaining his freedom of action despite numerous parliamentary setbacks. Critical to William’s success was the long war of his reign, which enabled him to posture as the defender of Europe against the “Universal Monarchy” of Louis XIV and as a Protestant champion of the “cause of God and Christ against Satan and Antichrist” (p. 107).[4] To some extent, the war enabled whigs and tories to redirect their fears about each other toward the burgeoning military and commercial colossus across the Channel. Insecurity in the face of foreign threats, both perceived and real, had long fed the religious and political angst of seventeenth-century Englishmen. But William’s war enabled both whigs and tories, in their different ways, to redirect and address their insecurities through action against a common enemy.

“The most revolutionary aspect of the revolution,” (p. 105) William’s war, was transformative in other ways as well. It accustomed the nation to levels of taxation that would previously have produced parliamentary apoplexy. When taxation proved insufficient, the war prompted unprecedented short-term

borrowing and the erection of a long-term funded debt anchored in the new Bank of England. In all that debt, the war created a new “moneyed interest” that would replace both sectarian republicans and Jesuit legions in Country nightmares. The war accustomed the nation to the fielding of large armies overseas; and it accustomed the nation’s leadership to the experience of temporary military setbacks and commercial disruptions for the sake of ultimate commercial and colonial gain. In sum, William’s war transformed the landscape of government, began the eighteenth-century modernization of the English state, and brought the English back into European affairs.

A final Williamite transformation – or more properly, a Marian transformation – was the redirection and redefinition of Protestant enthusiasm for reformation. Protestant union had failed, but its proponents found new ways to promote reformation. Queen Mary served as inspiration for a movement within the Church that promoted better pastoral care and deeper piety. She was also admired within the new ecumenical movement of churchmen and dissenters that focused upon the reformation of manners. Eighteenth-century moral earnestness was already at work in these movements, which continued after Mary’s untimely death in 1694, as Protestant pluralism began to replace seventeenth-century confessional strife.

Notes

[1]. W. A. Speck, *Reluctant Revolutionaries; Englishmen and the Revolution of 1688* (Oxford, U.K. and New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

[2]. H. Horwitz, *Parliament, Policy, and Politics in the Reign of William III* (Newark: University of Delaware, 1977).

[3]. G. S. Holmes, *British Politics in the Age of Anne* (London and New York: Macmillan and St. Martin’s, 1967).

[4]. Rose’s quotation comes from Sir Thomas Rokeby, one of William’s appointees to the Court of Common Pleas.

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