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# A Tale of Two or Three Kingdoms

Refuting the Handbook of Not the English Revolution  
and the modern myth of seventeenth-century 'Britain'

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Michael J. Braddick (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the English Revolution*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2015; 636 pp.; ISBN 9780199695898, £95.00, hbk

I

Conservative historians have sought in various ways to deny the force of the English Revolution of the mid-seventeenth century. One approach was to suggest that there was no revolution anyway, that the Long Parliament met in 1640 with no impetus for change, and the fact that it ended with the execution of the king and the inauguration of a republican government was the result of a series of unintended consequences. But this seemed to explain why the Civil War should not have happened, rather than why it did. A subtler means of circumvention was to assert that although there was an English revolution, it was only partial, and was driven by religious fanaticism rather than social and political radicalism.<sup>1</sup> The argument for religious causes must, however, have been less than conclusive, since it has fallen out of favour in recent times, perhaps also because it sits uneasily with the latest notion, which is to propose that even if there was a revolution, it was not English, but just as much Scottish and Irish.

The conflation of the three 'kingdoms' has a particular usefulness for the revolution deniers, enabling them to bypass the socio-economic transformation that Civil War contemporaries saw as the platform for the challenge to the king, and which was distinctive to the English kingdom. The 'British' dimension was conceived in the 1980s by Conrad Russell, as another attempt to explain the Civil War without acknowledging the force of socio-economic change.<sup>2</sup> The 'British' idea was not readily embraced at first. Even some revisionist historians, like my tutor Barry Coward, were heard to say there was no substance in it. Yet largely through a misplaced sense of inclusiveness, relating to a modern rather than historical state

of mind, it has persisted. This article takes issue with a recent example of the 'British' interpretation. In the so-called *Handbook of the English Revolution* the contributors are briefed to search out a British dimension in all things, while the seminal socio-economic changes taking place in England, and clearly perceived by contemporaries, are conspicuous by their absence.<sup>3</sup> Some historians of the Celtic lands recognise that the dominant power of the English kingdom makes it difficult to avoid 'an Anglocentric narrative' for the Civil War conflict yet they continue to talk of a British Civil War(s).<sup>4</sup> The forced assimilation entails a reluctance to differentiate between the contingent and the causative, and conceals the distinctive drive of English affairs.

In a powerful contemporary view, James Harrington observed that the underlying impetus for the challenge to the crown was a transfer of socio-economic potential from the king and the high nobility, to 'the people' – meaning the lesser gentry, the yeomanry and the trading classes. This only occurred in England, and Harrington placed the revolution just in the English context, to which the affairs of Scotland and Ireland had no inherent relevance. He treated the three lands as separate entities. He saw the Civil War as specifically English, and attributed it to a sequence of momentous changes in the English kingdom.<sup>5</sup> The circumstances of the three lands were indeed quite distinct, whether in economic development, socio-political systems, or the level of state formation. The differences were clear and can be briefly encapsulated. Ireland was characterised by diverse power structures, further divided by colonialist intrusions. The context of Scotland was of a feudal or personal system of power, with a prevailing theocratic tendency. Neither society resembled the consolidating, commercialising nation that was taking shape in England and Wales. The actual incorporation of Wales into the English economic and representative system reveals the most important trend of the period, while an unfounded equation between the situations of England, Ireland and Scotland conceals it. Unlike the Celtic lands, England was in the process of becoming a definable 'state'. Not the least disservice done by the 'British' dimension to historical understanding is to obscure the form in which the first unitary and fully autonomous modern state emerged, in sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century England.

Given the fundamental differences between the three societies, it is difficult to see any basis for shared aims that could generate a common movement. And indeed, no such development can be discerned. Military action in the three lands was linked only by the contingencies of different agendas that occasionally impinged upon one another. The essential purposes of each land were naturally distinct. Any Irish challenge to the English crown must have constituted a colonial rather than a civil war.

In Scotland, only the Kirk possessed the public status and independent character to challenge the authority of the crown. To conflate these very different situations disguises the real circumstances of Ireland and Scotland just as it does those of England.

There is then, no consecutive structure to the 'British' view. It never identifies a common issue about which the three communities could be jointly concerned. The only premise appears to be that since Charles I ruled in all three lands, the Civil War must have derived from Scottish and Irish as well as English causes. This fallacy is starkly displayed in a thoroughly muddled contribution to the 'Handbook' from John Morrill. He recognises that the natural definition of the context of Charles's downfall is that it was specifically English. He notes that the revolution at its climax appeared as a purely English event. The king was executed in the name of the English state, for denying the authority of the English parliament, which regarded itself as the embodiment of the state. The act expected the acceptance of the 'good people of this nation of England'. No other perspective was thought relevant. Charles's crimes were said to have been against 'this nation'. The Scottish and Irish forces that he had recruited were 'foreigners'. This all seemed to indicate that the revolution took place in the specific and distinctive context of the emergent English nation-state. Now most people would suppose that if it walks like a duck and talks like a duck, then it probably is exactly that. But no, says Morrill, it is not a duck at all – it is British. Because, he avers, 'Charles I *was* also king of Scotland'.<sup>6</sup> This is a proposition without logical force. The fact that Charles I *was* also King of Scotland is not an acceptable basis on which to assume that a Scottish element was intrinsic to the English Civil War.

Further contradictions are revealed in another general tendency of the 'Handbook'. It is not pejorative to call it a Handbook of Not the English Revolution, for many of the leading contributors are driven by a desire to avoid the concept of revolution. This produces the strange situation where two of the principal editors begin by disowning the title of their book. Presumably, the commissioning publisher recognised that the 'English Revolution' was the only adequate, brief description of the event in question. But Michael Braddick and Peter Lake would have preferred to call it 'The War (s) of the Three Kingdoms'. Braddick regrets that the title the English Revolution is 'more problematic' than it would once have been.<sup>7</sup> Lake talks of 'the event formerly known as the English revolution'.<sup>8</sup> Braddick has to acknowledge, however, that terms such as 'The Wars (s) of the Three Kingdoms' have 'little currency' outside the realms of academia.<sup>9</sup> This may be because the phrase 'The War (s) of the Three Kingdoms' is scarcely intelligible, either as a representation of the event, or in itself. Any claim to coherent sense vanishes into the cavity of indecision

between singular and plural. Let us begin to offer some clarification. There were two wars as such in the British Isles between 1638 and 1648. One was between Charles I and the Covenanting Church of Scotland, which was a religious war. It had no direct connection to the other, which was the war between Charles I and the parliament of England for command of the emergent English state, and this was the Civil War.

The position of Ireland was different again, in a way that of itself counts heavily against the concept of the 'War (s) of the Three Kingdoms'. Many would not accept that Ireland was ever an English kingdom, or indeed any kind of kingdom. As F. Aalen says, it was a politically diverse society where authority was divided among a multitude of chieftains, and it was no more than 'part colonised' by the Anglo-Normans.<sup>10</sup> Ireland was not an English kingdom. It was the land of the Irish, though subject to persistent English colonial intrusion. Not that this contrast is likely to deter those who would impose a 'British' definition on everything. After all, 'The War (s) of the Three (or possibly Two) Kingdoms, and Ireland', is only marginally less intelligible than the original formulation.

Joseph Cope's article on 'The Irish Rising' provides some relief from the confusion, because although it pays lip service to the need to recognise the 'British' dimension, it omits to actually find one, and refuses to ignore the alternative possibility of long-term causes in separate lands. 'As with the English Civil War and Revolution generally, historians must account for the long-term tensions that come to the surface during the conflict, and the short-term contingent factors that lead to the outbreak of hostilities ... grievances as far back as the early seventeenth century plantations'. Cope finds the Irish Rising to have been, not surprisingly, an anti-imperial revolt. It stemmed principally from 'the simmering resentment caused by the New English in the late 16th and early 17th centuries – Tudor and Stuart plantations reflected anti-papal and ethnocentric assumptions ... hostility to Irish customs and the Catholic religion ... growing pressure on Irish and Catholic interests'.<sup>11</sup>

It is true that the Irish Rising of October 1641, and the need for a military response, served to increase the pace of radicalisation among English parliamentarians, obliging them to bring forward plans for vetting royal appointments. But as I have noted elsewhere, the desire to control the activities of ministers was already explicit in the Long Parliament's first radical measure, the Triennial Act of February 1641, which stemmed from a long standing ambition to extend the force of representative rights.<sup>12</sup> So applying Cope's well-balanced guide, the Irish Rising was a short-term, contingent factor, which had nothing to do with the long-term contentions between Charles and his English parliaments. English colonists were always at risk of reactions in Ireland, and the Catholic

inclinations of the Irish were provocative to radical Protestantism in England and Scotland. There was certainly military activity in Ireland, involving various forces, and the indigenous population suffered heavily. But there was no actual war either with or within Ireland. The balance of religious sympathies, and the strength of Strafford's regime meant that Charles might find support there, but the position of Ireland itself had no inherent relationship to the contest between king and parliament at the centre of the English state. Ireland in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was an ethnic society with a dispersed pattern of political authority, which was interestingly different from that of conventional kingdoms, though vulnerable to their unwanted military attentions. It does scant justice to the real situation, and the real problems of the Irish people to reinvent them as a structured political entity capable of taking part in the modern conceit of the British Civil War(s). And the circumstances of Ireland and England were so completely disparate that it is difficult to see how any Irish involvement in the actual Civil War could be anything but merely contingent.

John Morrill appears to recognise that Ireland did not relate to the kingship of Charles I in the same way as England and Scotland. Nevertheless he persists in collapsing all the varying circumstances into one miscellaneous event. So we have, 'The revolution in the British Context and Irish Context'. This is not a happy phrase. Coherence vanishes once again into the unbridgeable gap between singular and plural. Morrill is trying to reflect the truth that Ireland was different, while continuing to suggest that it had an equal part in the same occurrence. The fact that this fails as language underlines the structural fallacy of the 'British' idea, which merely gathers up a series of diverse circumstances, and presents them as one phenomenon.

This disjuncture appears in graphic form at the end of Morrill's article. He acknowledges that the interests of the three lands were actually 'separate'. But again this fails to prevent him jumbling them together in an inconsequential mix. In a kind of alchemist's prose, Morrill tells us that although the interests of Ireland and Scotland were separate, 'It is not surprising that the authority of the state collapsed, first in the winter of 1659-60 in Ireland, and then through the occupying force in Scotland throwing in the towel and marching south to force elections that would unscramble 1649 as a British and Irish as much as an English event'.<sup>13</sup> Here, manifestly, terms and concepts are thrown together with no substantial connection shown, as if forcing them into the same sentence will turn them into one occurrence. Unsurprisingly, this uncritical flurry of words carries a glaring contradiction, which explodes the 'British' idea. For the 'state' in question is, by Morrill's own admission, the English state.

And the only connectivity at work is the varying situation of English state power at different times and places.

## II

The 'British' view notes that Charles's monarchical credits included Scotland and Ireland. Nothing is said of the fact that the catalogue of claims extended to France. English monarchs had a better claim to France than to Ireland. And Charles's French queen, Henrietta Maria, had a small but coherent part in Civil War causation, which was not true of the Celtic lands. She became protector of her co-religionists, which brought the 'fear of popery' propaganda to the door of the royal court. More concretely, she represented the most successful absolutist regime in Europe, and she was free with her political advice, persistently urging the king to assert his authority over parliament. She sought support in France for the Royalist cause, which eventually found refuge there. France had a closer relationship with the issues of the Civil War than did the two Celtic lands, but it is absent from the 'Handbook'. The index has half a page of references to Scotland, and the same to Ireland, but none to France. Why leave France out of the indiscriminate mix of 'kingdoms'? The multiple civil war(s) can surely sustain another layer of confusion without strain. Why not 'The War (s) of the Three (or possibly Two) (but certainly not Four) Kingdoms, and Ireland'?

The history of France sheds real light on the English Revolution. A comparison with France underlines the distinctiveness of events in England, while the equation with Scotland and Ireland conceals it. Harrington saw nothing in the Celtic lands that reflected on the English revolution, but he noted a socio-political divergence between England and France. He portrayed medieval politics as a wrestling match between crown and nobility. In the last century in England, the power of the feudal nobility had waned, and the current challenge to the crown came from 'the people'. In France, however, the nobility had retained its feudal position, but joined the king's party, which had thereby 'thrown the people'.<sup>14</sup> It was a strikingly clear contemporary view, which modern historians have amplified. The French crown in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries established a polity where taxes were raised arbitrarily from the general populace, through a military-backed bureaucracy, while the nobility were largely exempt. Rights of consent were effectively eliminated.<sup>15</sup> England took an opposite route. The tax burden on the poor was relatively light. The principal public levy was the parliamentary subsidy, paid by the gentry and freeholders, who thereby assumed a powerful commitment to the practice of representative consent. So in England, the rights of consent developed

exceptional force. In fact, parliament's unique capacity to represent what Richard Hooker called the 'entire society' gave it a defining part in the making of sovereign law, a status which eluded the disappearing representative bodies of France, but underpinned the ambitions of the one in England.

These distinctive lines of development show how socio-economic change could have political implications. But the 'British' interpretation offers nothing in the way of corroborating contrasts, or reasoned associations. Basic differences are ignored, while issues in the Celtic lands are inflated as if they equate to the breakdown of relations occurring between king and parliament in England. The Scottish parliament is found to be objecting to the spread of monopolies in 1621, and the impression left that this is in line with the grievances of English MPs.<sup>16</sup> But it is scarcely comparable to the English parliament's long drive from 1610 onwards to establish economic freedoms and rights of consent against a range of royal prerogatives and fiscal powers, such as imposed customs dues. At a time of clearer vision, before the British fog had settled over academia, David Stevenson noted a fundamental distinction – 'Scotland had no strong national myth of free parliaments like England'.<sup>17</sup> The Scottish parliament was amenable to royal control. David Smith describes the arrangement of Lords of the Articles, a committee in which nobles nominated by the crown 'then chose representatives of the shires and burghs'.<sup>18</sup> This was not a true representative system, and could not pretend to embody the 'entire society'. So the Scottish parliament had no basis for acquiring the share in legislative sovereignty that lay behind the assertiveness of the English parliament, and defined its case against the prerogative. James I sought to enhance the status of the Scottish parliament to counteract his real problems, like the independent-minded Kirk.<sup>19</sup> Importantly, the Scottish parliament did not share the English ambition to establish representative control of public finance; it voted taxation routinely every four to six years, as in 1633, when the English assembly had been banished for giving nothing but trouble. And Scotland 'did not develop an open forum for public discourse like that in England'.<sup>20</sup> This meant, for instance, that there was no focus for an independent view of foreign affairs, such as the English parliament was attempting to impose on the crown in the 1620s.

Scotland was quiet until the late 1630s, when Charles and Archbishop Laud tried to force an Episcopal liturgy on the Kirk. Charles was not driven by a 'British problem' or need to unify his lands, as sometimes suggested.<sup>21</sup> There was no British problem of disunity. Charles's problem of disunity was within the English state. As Claire Cross said, he embraced the Laudian project in the late 1620s because it offered him 'a concept of order'.<sup>22</sup> Charles believed that this was necessary to counter a parliamentary

led challenge to the prerogatives of the crown.<sup>23</sup> His primary concern, like that of his father, was maintaining monarchical authority. Politically, in England, this could only be achieved by discontinuing parliament. Laud could offer a more constructive solution for the English church, where Puritans were an irregular minority, avoiding the standard provisions of worship, and could be disciplined by restoring the principles of hierarchy in explicit ceremonialist form. The attack on an orderly and united Kirk was a reckless extension of the same agenda. In this respect it can be suggested that political dissent in England, and the attempt to resist it, was a cause of the Scottish Revolt rather than the other way round.

The Scottish opposition to Charles was qualitatively different from that which he faced in England, and the two should not be confused. Julian Goodare's suggestion that The Prayer Book Revolt was 'constitutionalist' is a misrepresentation of the balance of Scottish aims.<sup>24</sup> There was no basis for constitutionalism in Scotland. The priority was always the defence and furtherance of the true Kirk. At the inception of the Prayer Book Revolt there was 'no sign that those leading the agitation thought of holding a parliament as a necessary part of the settlement'.<sup>25</sup> The later demands for a free general assembly and a free parliament were founded on the assurance that neither would support the king's religious policy. There was no pre-existing political opposition of the sort that Charles was encountering in England. And developments in Scotland continued to be defined by Covenanting aims. 'The position of the ruling elders in the Kirk and in parliament ensured that the movement dominated politics ... the Covenanter domination of Scotland equated to a theocracy'.<sup>26</sup>

This was reflected in the limited and tangential part that the Scots played in the English Civil War. Their aim throughout was to promote the principles of the Kirk. Beyond this, they had no real interest in the central, political dispute between Charles and the English parliament. John Morrill, still blinded by the 'British' view, rehearses the evidence that should have led him to a different conclusion. He recognises that once the Covenanters had re-established the autonomy of the Kirk from royal control they were disinclined to engage in the contest in England for any other reason.<sup>27</sup> When they finally did so, at the invitation of a militarily challenged English parliament, it was to try to direct English church reform along the lines of the Kirk. They withdrew because they found that English parliamentarians were inclined in the opposite direction, towards a laicised church settlement. Then, sensing that they had more chance of getting their church programme adopted by a desperate king, the Scots switched allegiance, and tried to stop the political revolution in England. In 1646 the centrist parliamentarian leader William Pierrepont was asked to rebut their demand for an equal part in the peace talks. He



had opposed the League and Covenant, recognising that Scottish aims were alien. He said the agreement was for a specific religious purpose, adding that the Scots had distanced themselves from the political struggle against the king. They had 'remained in the north, where no enemy was'. For them to claim that, 'the King relates to both Kingdoms the same' was 'confounding the particular rights of the two Kingdoms'.<sup>28</sup> Pierrepont knew that the Scots did not share the English parliament's determination to dispute state command with the king. The one Scottish priority was to secure the position of the Kirk. So at first they briefed against Charles, and latterly against the New Model Army, consistent only in their ecclesiastical imperative. They fought alternately for either side, in pursuit of a religious objective that was characteristic of neither. The Scottish contribution does not show that there was a British dynamic to the English Civil War and Revolution, it demonstrates that there was not.

### III

The attempt to inflate the significance of Ireland and Scotland in the Civil War runs side by side with a determination to minimise the real, radical force of the parliamentary movement in England. This purpose is pursued by the anti-historical means of denying the idea of sequential causation. Peter Lake sets the agenda in 'Post-Reformation Politics; or Not Looking for the Long-term Causes of the English Civil War'.<sup>29</sup> As so often in the 'Handbook' the fixed intent is betrayed by the ambiguity of the language. The natural meaning of 'not looking' is refusing to see, and Lake is indeed setting out to discount the evidence of long-term cause. This is displayed in his opening injunction that none of the changes he observes are to be taken as causes. This is a necessary warning, for the English Reformation was a change so obvious, so general, so indubitably long-term, and so peculiarly English and laicised in character that it is hard to believe that it had no political effects. Lake insures himself against these realities by restricting his view to the more formal consequences, least likely to carry causative force. He treats the Henrician Reformation as just a tussle for jurisdiction between crown and papacy, and discusses the influence that religious divisions and changing assumptions of church supremacy had on definitions of allegiance and treason.<sup>30</sup> He does not deal with political culture as such, but only with the religio-political. He notes that from the 1570s the devotional extremes gave rise to contending conspiracy theories, and he tells us that this was the dominant 'discourse' of the period. The level of invective rose and fell, but it was always more abusive than substantive, so Lake can deny it causative force, and suggest that at most it sometimes shaped the propaganda.<sup>31</sup>

Lake overlooks the truly distinctive and seminal aspects of the English Reformation, two effects of which are most notable. The transfer of the vast properties of the church mainly into the hands of the middling gentry gave them the socio-economic substance of a political agency, locally and nationally, and did much to normalise the peculiar force of property rights in England. Equally important was the shift in the location of legislative power. The Break with Rome was achieved by the demolition of the independent judicial structures of the universal church, and the establishment of the complete supremacy of parliamentary statute, which became the single, overriding sovereign law. This derived its authority, expressly, from the capacity of parliament to reflect the consent of the entire kingdom. Parliament thereby acquired a defining share in legislative sovereignty, and the most 'absolute' power of legislation came to depend on the exercise of representative consent.<sup>32</sup> This was a paradox, creating an underlying political tension. Sovereign law in England had now to be made in parliament, and the king was no longer accorded the right to exercise this greatest power alone. This encouraged a presumption that all binding sovereign functions should be subject to representative control, and this was the basis of a series of attempts to undermine the king's capacity to govern by patent. It informed the long-term campaign to end the prerogative of impositions and establish a right of parliamentary consent to the customs dues, and it underlay the enduring resistance to grants of monopoly. It was also behind the contrasting estimations of the value of parliamentary legislation, which the Commons came to regard as the basis of good government, but the early Stuart kings sidelined as a threat to their personal capacities. The parliamentary challenge to 'patent' embraced furthermore the full frontal attempt of the Commons to usurp the monarch's jealously guarded prerogative of determining the course of foreign policy. All these issues were aspects of what I have identified as a developing contest between 'patent' and 'parliament'. And this was the real political discourse of the early seventeenth century.

Discounting these critical contentions, Lake proceeds to the most extreme of negative conclusions. He notes that in the 1620s there was a heightening of tension in the exchanges between the 'Catholic' and 'Puritan' camps, but he suggests that, in any case, since this occurred when it did, it cannot be taken as causative to events in the 1640s. 'Since the Civil War did not start in the 1620s, we are still not talking about the said Civil War'.<sup>33</sup> Lake's anxiety to avoid any idea of long-term cause has led him to the incongruous, not to say impossible proposition that an event cannot be caused until it has actually begun – it can only be caused by itself. So the guns were set firing by spontaneous combustion. Nonsensical as this may appear, we can see what has driven Lake to it, for to admit the concept of

cause at all, opens up the possibility of the long-term, since clearly there can be no fixed cut-off point before which one event becomes incapable of causing another.

Causes sometimes rest on a sequence of connections, but can also be self-evident. It is clear, for instance, that Charles's decision to rule without parliament from 1629 to 1640 was an efficient cause of the Commons' determination in the winter of 1640-41 to enact a priority measure to ensure that such an extended 'intermission' of parliaments could never occur again. Thus the Triennial Act of February 1641 provided that parliament would assemble automatically every three years, ending the monarch's prerogative to decide the matter. This rationale was made explicit by MPs during the passage of the bill. They must take some course, said Lord Digby, as may not be eluded.<sup>34</sup> This was not just a response to their enforced absence in the 1630s. Their banishment then had merely exacerbated the frustrations that had built up in the 1620s, when many imperative reasons had emerged for desiring a more consistent parliamentary presence, but hopes were constantly dashed by premature dismissals.

Richard Cust has sometimes offered a corrective to the revisionist view, so we may feel that he sits uneasily in the 'Handbook'. But he is allowed to hint at a more balanced interpretation. In, 'The Collapse of Royal Power in England 1637-42', he acknowledges the long-term parliamentary ambitions that existed in England. 'The appearance of general acquiescence in the Personal Rule is deceptive'.<sup>35</sup> Indeed so. The idea that the political nation was acquiescent in the 1630s is an example of revisionist history glibly evading the force of logic. The extreme version is Kevin Sharpe's portrayal of the 1630s as a golden age of peace and harmony.<sup>36</sup> This was the grandest of illusions. The kingdom could hardly be considered at ease with itself when unity could only be fabricated by silencing the representative body. Charles chose to dispense with parliament precisely because this was the only way of creating 'the appearance of acquiescence'. But the need for such measures was also an indication that the challenge to the crown was fundamental and unlikely to disappear. As Cust says, where evidence is available, it tells of widespread disquiet with Charles's rule in every field of policy – religion, foreign affairs, and fiscal administration. 'Above all, there was a general desire for a meeting of parliament, which would give voice to these discontents'. This was certainly the central demand. But it was not just the result of the frustrations of the 1630s – it was a settled agenda. In fact, it was in 1628 that the 'often abortions of parliament' reached the top of the Commons' list of grievances.<sup>37</sup> And since the popular pressure was for *more* parliamentary influence not less, the Personal Rule, though understandable from the king's perspective, was likely to be counter-productive. So it proved, for when the Short

Parliament met in April 1640, John Pym declared, at both the beginning and the end of the Commons' catalogue of complaints, that the 'intermission' of parliaments was the grievance of grievances.

Richard Cust's assessment of the Short Parliament is also more judicious than that of other recent historians, even so-called 'counter-revisionists' like Derek Hirst, who defied the logic of the evidence by supposing that parliament met without oppositional tendencies, and the political mood was only soured by its dissolution.<sup>38</sup> In fact, as Cust says, 'MPs came to Westminster determined to secure redress of grievances'.<sup>39</sup> They included, furthermore, major long-term grievances, especially over the rights of public finance. It was difficult for the king to accommodate this, and not surprising that he simply demanded unconditional supply. There was a striking echo of the contending positions that had aborted the parliaments of the late 1620s. The crown brought forward a bill of tonnage and poundage, which the Commons had steadfastly refused to vote unless he surrendered his prerogative of impositions. This radical demand remained at the top of the Commons' catalogue of economic grievances. So the Short Parliament began at exactly the same impasse that had caused the parting of the ways in 1629, and with the same result. Parliament was dissolved because, as Henry Vane perceived, the Commons would never give one penny.<sup>40</sup> And they were inclined to be sympathetic to the Scots.

The difference in November 1640 was that further defeat in the north had left Charles with a literally inescapable need for money to pay his troops, and to buy off the Scots. So when the Long Parliament convened, dissolving it for bad behaviour was no longer an option. For the first time the Commons were in a position to realise their long-term aims. The force of their ambition was reflected in the radical nature of their first, priority measure. Since Richard Cust accepts that 'above all there was a general demand for a meeting of parliament', it is strange that he fails to acknowledge the revolutionary nature of the Triennial Act of February 1641, which was conceived as a way of ensuring that the demand for the meeting of parliaments could never again go unsatisfied. Cust treats the Triennial Act as just a restorative reform, and suggests that, 'Charles gave his blessing to it'.<sup>41</sup> In fact, the king recognised the Triennial Act as a constitutional reverse, ending his prerogative to decide the life of parliaments. Charles complained, specifically, that it was not a 'reform' but an 'alteration' of government.<sup>42</sup> He gave way to it only after long resistance and under great duress, because the Commons would not pass the supply bill unless he accepted the Triennial Act. Even while surrendering, he continued to protest at its unconstitutional force. To say that he gave his blessing to it is a sad misrepresentation.

It is a pity that in this instance Cust follows the lead of revisionist historians, who are compelled to ignore the force of the Triennial Act because it obviously reflects the rising assertiveness of parliament over the preceding decades, and the radical intent of MPs in 1640. The most glaring subterfuge was offered by John Morrill, who defined his terms so as to exclude the Triennial Act, and talked as if parliament's programme consisted only of the remedial bills of later 1641, outlawing the governmental excesses of the 1630s. Having left the Triennial Act out of account, Morrill then concluded that there was nothing that changed the constitution.<sup>43</sup> But in fact the Triennial Act transformed the constitution, giving parliament the power of automatic assembly, and an unavoidable presence at the centre of affairs, by 'a course that may not be eluded'. And it was the core priority of parliament's programme, pushed through at once with all the leverage that the Commons could muster. Specific offences could be outlawed at leisure, for the Triennial Act ensured that they could never recur.<sup>44</sup> It was, said John Pym, 'more advantageous' than all the rest, for it afforded 'a perpetual spring of remedies for the future'.<sup>45</sup>

There seems to be an institutional denial of the significance of the Triennial Act. This is reflected in Rachel Foxley's article on 'Varieties of Parliamentarianism'. She includes the act as just one of the 'reforms' that 'returned England to its proper equilibrium'.<sup>46</sup> This was precisely what the Triennial Act did not do. On the contrary, it specifically broke 'the proper equilibrium' of the past. It had always been axiomatic that only the king could call a parliament. He was relieved of that prerogative by the Triennial Act. Ignoring this departure is a stubborn blind spot among historians. It is sometimes supposed that historiography has entered a 'post-revisionist' phase. But these articles indicate that we have not really recovered from the original revisionist determination to deny the idea of radical change.

Overall, Foxley's contribution is limited by the fact that, like Peter Lake, she restricts herself to the surface play of platitude and theory. She discusses conventional assumptions about the limits of royal power, and the hypothetical derivation of the rights of the people from a mythical ancient constitution. It is strange, considering her remit, that she gives no attention to the rationale behind the Triennial Act, which transformed the status of parliament, and remained the core practical proposition of the most articulate parliamentary leaders throughout the struggle, from Lord Digby and John Pym, to William Pierrepont and Henry Ireton. Foxley's account gives no sense of the very distinctive process by which the idea of representation had implanted itself in the public mind, both as necessary practice and accepted principle. It has sometimes been noted that English parliamentarians made little use of the theories of resistance that emerged

in late sixteenth-century Europe, and resonated in the religious and political disorders in France. In England, this kind of ideological endorsement was surplus to requirements. Parliamentarians boasted their own integral justification, in what can be termed a working philosophy of the developing force of representative rights.

The platform for this was created in the process of the Break with Rome in the 1530s, achieved through the establishment of a new level of overriding sovereign law, drawing its sole binding authority from the capacity of parliament to reflect the assent of the entire kingdom. This gave the representative body a defining share in legislative sovereignty. Richard Hooker, in the most extended work of political ideas in 16th century England, encapsulated the normative force and radical thrust of the concept. 'The lawful power of making laws to command whole societies of men belongs so properly to the same entire societies ... laws they are not therefore which public approbation hath not made so'. Hooker highlighted the critical implication: 'for any prince or potentate of any kind whatsoever on earth to exercise the same of himself... is no better than mere tyranny'.<sup>47</sup> This defied the monarchical orthodoxy held by such as John Cowell and James I himself, that although the king might of his grace acknowledge sovereign laws made in parliament, he could make them in his own right if he wished. The tension became active because the English political nation embraced the idea that the king could *not* make sovereign law alone. In 1604, the hint of a claim that James could personally give ecclesiastical regulations the force of law produced a swift parliamentary rebuttal. A little noted passage in the Commons *Apology* warned that the king 'should be misinformed if any man should deliver that the kings of England have an absolute power in themselves either to alter religion ... or to make laws concerning the same, otherwise than as in temporal causes, by consent of parliament'.<sup>48</sup>

Since the greatest sovereign power of legislation could only be exercised in parliament, the presumption arose that all binding rules should be subject to the same constraint. This argument was employed by the Commons at the start of their most central and persistent campaign – against the royal prerogative of imposed customs dues. In the first major constitutional clash, the impositions debate of 1610, MPs sought to extend the right of consent to cover the customs, citing the models of sovereign representative law and consensual land taxation. Nicholas Fuller thought that the law 'should more tenderly preserve the subject's freedom of his trade (since by trades and occupations commonwealths are upholden) than the inheritance of his lands'.<sup>49</sup> They were generalising the radical idea that the king could no longer perform sovereign acts by his own patent. This principle also underpinned James Whitelocke's assertion that the

king had two levels of power – one that he could use on his own authority, and another that he could only use in parliament. The radical twist was that since it was only in parliament that the king could legislate and raise taxes, the latter power was ‘the greater of the two, and doth rule and control the other’.<sup>50</sup>

The same concept was used to justify the constitutional change of the Triennial Act of February 1641, the core, priority measure of the Long Parliament, providing for automatic assembly. In his galvanising speech on the third reading, Lord Digby declared that it was right and necessary to give parliament a permanent presence because it was there that sovereign powers were exercised: ‘The king out of his parliament hath a limited, a circumscribed jurisdiction, but waited on by his parliament, no monarch of the east is so absolute’.<sup>51</sup> In July 1642, William Pierrepont, an initiator of the Triennial Act, elucidated the English paradox that linked ‘absolute’ power to representative consent, highlighting the revolutionary conclusion to which it led.

Unlimited power must be in some, to make and repeal laws to fit the dispensations of times and persons – nature places this in common consent only, and where all cannot conveniently meet, instructs them to give their consents to some they know or believe so well of as to be bound by what they agree on ... and as long as we are often reduced to this main foundation, our king and we shall prosper’.<sup>52</sup>

So there was only one variety of parliamentarianism. It was a specific and distinctive phenomenon, arising from the English paradox that made ‘absolute’ sovereign power dependent on representative consent. This defined the challenge to the king’s prerogatives, and underpinned the desire to give parliament a permanent political presence.

The peculiar force of the English paradox is clearly displayed in the work of Jean Bodin, in the first recognised text on the modern concept of sovereignty. He was devising an antidote to the religious and political conflicts bedevilling France in the 1560s, and he set out the necessary basis of good order. His premise was that political sovereignty must be indivisible, and the principal mark of this was ‘the right to impose laws generally on all subjects regardless of their consent’.<sup>53</sup> Far from being ‘tyranny’ as Hooker suggested, the power to legislate by sole authority was, to Bodin’s mind, the necessary condition of stable monarchical sovereignty. If the prince could only make laws by consent, ‘it is not he who is the sovereign’.<sup>54</sup> Bodin appears to have been unaware that the situation in England defied this logic by specifically dividing legislative authority between king and parliament. He thought that the English Commons had

a merely supplicatory role in lawmaking, and the fact that they depended on the king to call them into being was 'sufficient proof' that they had no executive legislative power. He was right that only the king could call a parliament, but this did not entail the second assumption as he supposed, for the English parliament actually possessed a normative, even defining share in legislative sovereignty. Bodin's mistake pinpoints the political tension contained in the paradox, and prefigures the form in which it eventually found resolution. By the Triennial Act of February 1641, parliament provided itself with the automatic presence in the polity that Bodin regarded as the natural accompaniment to a central place in the sovereign lawmaking process.<sup>55</sup>

Both Rachel Foxley and Ted Vallance, in his article on 'Political Thought', note that parliamentarians made free with allegations of 'tyranny'. Again, this tells us little when characterised in conventional terms as autocratic government outside the law. Charles tried to stay within the law during his Personal Rule, and did not act as a tyrant. In this instance, however, we can get beyond the clichés. Opposition to 'tyranny' was meaningful for parliamentarians in two specific, yet connected ways. One was in Hooker's definition of tyranny as the exercise of sovereign power without reference to the representative body. The other is equally significant, because it touches on the deeper springs of motivation, and uncovers the practical purposes for which people valued the services of parliament and rights of consent. In November 1642 appeared a pamphlet entitled *A Brief Discourse on Tyrants and Tyranny*.<sup>56</sup> In essence it offered a justification for the parliamentary attack on the king's prerogative powers, and it defined 'tyranny' as the denial of economic freedoms. 'Tyranny may justly be condemned as the greatest calamity because it is in opposition to the greatest felicity, which lies in liberty and the free disposition of that which God and our industry has made ours'.<sup>57</sup> The pamphleteer was saying, as many others did, that people were challenging a monarch whose powers of arbitrary exaction and economic restraint had become unacceptable.

An extended work of political thought produced at the end of the struggle gives a precise view of the character of these motivations. In 1652, Gerrard Winstanley wrote *The Law of Freedom in a Platform*, an expressed aim of which was to put substance on the conventional polemic. Everyone talked about freedom, he said, but what real freedoms did they want? Vallance refers to the writings of Winstanley, but again only in generalities, as welcoming the arrival of a free state, 'which takes away the tyranny of conquests, which is kingly and lordly power'.<sup>58</sup> There is a more incisive passage in Winstanley, where he identifies the specific freedoms for which parliamentarians had been contending. There were in



effect just three. One was liberty of conscience – the freedom to follow a personal scheme of worship and not be forced into any particular church. The other two were economic. Top of the list was ‘the free use of trading, and to have all patents, licenses and restraints removed’.<sup>59</sup> I have described this elsewhere as ‘freedom of trade’, and identified its first emergence as a stated preference in the mid-sixteenth century. It then came gradually into conflict with the policies and powers of the government, and took shape as a principled demand in the justifying rationale of the radical free trade bill of 1604 and the constitutional attack on prerogative customs dues from 1610.<sup>60</sup> The other freedom on Winstanley’s list was part of the same agenda. It was the claim of freeholders to be ‘landlord of the earth’, and to have absolute use of their property, free of any intervening demand, whether from commoners or kings. This also came under the freedom of trade umbrella. Thus Winstanley’s survey of the actual freedoms at issue suggested a broad and coherent economic motive for the parliamentary challenge to the crown.

#### IV

So the greatest omission in the ‘Handbook’ is the lack of any reference to the socio-economic impetus so clearly perceived by Civil War contemporaries. This is, revealingly, one area where the ‘Handbook’ makes no effort to contrive an identity of interests between the three lands. There is no suggestion that the economic circumstances of Scotland or Ireland were related to the momentous changes taking place in England. Economic factors are quietly set aside. Michael Braddick avers that it is now generally accepted that socio-economic history did not move to the same rhythm as politics. This is despite the fact that contemporary sources, and recent studies show that these things were actually working in close unison. Parliament’s definitions of liberty, and its persistent challenges to the royal prerogative, were driven in large part by fiscal and commercial considerations.<sup>61</sup> As Winstanley said, the real freedoms that they sought were freedom of trade and absolute property.

The determination to avoid economic factors is further pursued by rejecting the very existence of causes, à la Peter Lake. There is a section on ‘Wider Perspectives’, but it displays an unusual notion of width in historical terms, for it extends only forwards, and not backwards in time. Thus John Miller writes on ‘The long-term socio-economic consequences of the revolution’,<sup>62</sup> as if the revolution itself was not a consequence of anything. He makes brief reference to the deep socio-economic analyses of historians such as Richard Tawney and Christopher Hill. Miller treats these as just theories, and assumes, wishfully, that they have proved

unfounded. He ignores the fact that they actually reflect the considered judgements of Civil War contemporaries. The basic proposition of the distinctive rise of a 'middle sort' of people, who came to provide the core of parliamentary support, is fully evidenced in contemporary testimonies. Commentators like John Smyth and James Harrington identified the unusual situation in England where the widespread alienation of manorial lands to tenants, and favourable economic trends, facilitated the emergence of a class of independent commercial farmers 'a yeomanry or middle people ... much unlinked from dependence on their lords'.<sup>63</sup> Lucy Hutchinson added that this 'extraordinary progress' was the basis of the strength of the 'able, substantial freeholders' who provided a core of Parliamentary support.<sup>64</sup> Of particular interest is her suggestion that the access of wealth naturally produced a demand for political change: the transfer of 'the vast properties of the church into the hands of the people, cast the balance clear on their side, and left them only to expect an opportunity'.<sup>65</sup>

Historians who would deny these developments might claim that contemporary observations are not necessarily accurate, however cogent and consistent they may appear. But the rise of the yeoman farmer is fully borne out by recent studies.<sup>66</sup> And research has also affirmed that they became a notable element in the parliamentary ranks. In David Underdown's summary: 'It accords with the observable facts ... that parliament's strength rested on its appeal to the middle sort, the craftsmen and small traders in the towns, the yeomanry and substantial freeholders in the countryside'.<sup>67</sup> John Miller seeks insurance for his dissenting view by suggesting that in any case a focus on England is no longer sufficient in view of the 'British' dimension recently discovered by revisionist historians. To the present author this rather confirms that the underlying purpose of the 'British' myth was to try to escape the reality of the seminal socio-economic transformation of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries that was regarded by contemporary commentators as a platform for the challenge to the crown, and which only occurred in the English kingdom.

The article in the 'Handbook' that touches, if obliquely, on the economic dimension, and comes closest to recognising a genuine feature of the English Revolution is Phil Withington's contribution on 'Urban Citizens and England's Civil Wars'. The fact that he brings the focus back to England restores some balance, and underlines the diversionary aim of the 'British' idea, for it is easier to ignore the special part played by the English towns if you transpose the contest into an imaginary 'British' arena. As with many other factors, the position of the towns was only significant in England, and their parliamentary inclinations were clear

to contemporaries. Withington seems concerned that, in defiance of the contemporary view, modern historians have not taken the English towns to be 'noteworthy participants in the mid century struggles'.<sup>68</sup> Yet he fails to offer an appropriate corrective.

The towns presented a problem for revisionist historians because the urban situation might naturally appear to be defined by a paramount interest in trade and manufacture. The response has been either to ignore the towns, or devise motivations that had nothing to do with their economic character. This agenda was set by Anthony Fletcher's original revisionist demotion of the role of the towns. He recognised that their enthusiastic mobilisation for parliament required explanation – then suggested a cause that scarcely reflected the scale of the phenomenon. He thought that the towns saw the king as an aggressor, and supported parliament as the guarantee of their local security interests.<sup>69</sup> But if the generality of market towns in England saw the king as an aggressor, it was not as an aggressor against their parochial position, but as against the common, national provisions of parliament, on which they now set much store.

Fletcher turned a blind eye to this probability, and Withington sadly perpetuates the pattern of avoidance. He starts from a memo of Samuel Hartlib's, urging the towns to keep up their defences in the cause. Hartlib himself put it in a national perspective. The safeguards he recommended were for 'the preservation of the parliament itself, and the whole land'.<sup>70</sup> Withington turns this inside out, into a localist phenomenon. He seeks a notion of citizenship as a kind of military order, inculcated by internal rivalries. A formal concept of citizenship is, in any case, an over-elaboration in this context. English market towns bore little resemblance to city-states. Contemporaries used 'citizen' just as a general title for the working people of a commercial centre. 'Citizens, that is merchants', said Thomas Hobbes, helpfully. He characterised them as 'mortal enemies' to taxation, who supported parliament because it 'pretended the people's ease from taxes'.<sup>71</sup> Withington's depiction of urban life as 'a field of conflict ... constituted by configurations of civil institutions'<sup>72</sup> is obscure and theoretical. It is hard to see what this could actually mean, either in itself or in terms of Civil War motivation, and it is not a picture that brings to mind any of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English towns that I have studied. They were concerned most conspicuously with economic freedoms, as also noted by Hobbes and Winstanley, and observed furthermore by John Corbet in the garrison at Gloucester. He found the cause sustained principally by the fact that the restrictions and impositions of royal economic policy were unacceptable to 'a generation of men truly laborious, and jealous of their properties, whose principal aim is liberty and plenty'.<sup>73</sup>

It is a fundamental misjudgement to see the urban viewpoint as local and institutional, when the general conditions of trade implied the opposite. Withington's attempt to isolate 'citizenship' within the towns is misplaced. The most significant form of citizenship developing in sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century England was the citizenship of the state. The towns operated in a context where the only discrete political unit was the nation. The English kingdom was exceptionally compact, and free of regional powers. There were no independent cities like those on the continent. London's dominance made it not a divisive force but the hub of a coordinated commercial system. The towns traded in a uniquely open yet integrated national market, unusually free of internal customs barriers. The reciprocal connections of regional specialisation and exchange could extend to the full. And it was only in England that there emerged a broad class of commercialising yeomen farmers to complete the operation of a national market. Furthermore, they all participated in a precociously unified system of administration and representation, and the towns were constant users of the nationally definitive regulations of parliamentary law to serve their economic interests.

The coordinated market came to be perceived as self-regulating: 'one thing driveth or enforceth another, like as in a clock'.<sup>74</sup> And since it generated commercial opportunities, the sense grew that it should be left uninhibited and unencumbered, allowing maximum scope for profit. There arose what I have identified as the demand for a principled right of 'freedom of trade', against arbitrary exactions and restraints.<sup>75</sup> What was required, said Sir Edward Coke, was 'freedom of trade ... not burdened by impositions to burden trade, or monopolies to restrain it'.<sup>76</sup> This agenda became the economic policy of the House of Commons. It also involved long-term challenges to various aspects of the royal prerogative. The recognition of freedom of trade as the economic imperative in the public mind, and a basis of political radicalism, substantiates the contemporary perceptions of the significance of economic liberty to the parliamentary movement.

The merchants and traders were actively involved in these campaigns, and from the beginning of the century they were taking a constitutional interest in the assertion of representative rights against the prerogative. They entered into a powerful and distinctive alliance with the gentry in the Commons. This link, and the politicisation of the merchants, is illustrated in the parliamentary records preserved by the boroughs. The merchants of Dartmouth kept notes of the 1610 debate, with drafts of speeches seeking to end the king's right of impositions. By 1621 they were speaking in the House, in the van of the movement for freedom of trade against discretionary customs dues. The merchants of Totnes also saw parliament as the

guarantor of the conditions in which they wished to work, and regarded the limited free trade bill, pushed through by the Commons in 1606, as the most beneficial provision in the life of the town, 'by the wisdom of the state in parliament'.<sup>77</sup> In 1624, the merchants of Plymouth preserved a Commons' declaration subverting the intentions of the crown, and unilaterally abrogating the monopoly in the cod fishing trade. The Plymouth representative added: 'which said order is remaining in the town chest'.<sup>78</sup> Such statements and commitments underlined their growing faith in parliamentary provision. They were looking to the Commons as the best, and perhaps the only guarantee of the real imperatives in their lives – concerning the vital conditions in which they wished to trade. This provides a positive and appropriate reason for the general and consistent parliamentarianism of the English towns.

The merchant-gentry alliance had entered the political arena in 1604, when the merchants initiated the radical free trade bill of that year, seeking to 'dissolve all companies'. This predictably failed to get the royal assent, but it produced the first public statement of the principle of freedom of trade, saying that they were, 'inheritable in the freedom of those trades as in the inheritance of their lands ... it is against the rights of the subjects of this kingdom to restrict it to some few'.<sup>79</sup> The same axiom informed the direct constitutional attack on the royal prerogative of impositions in the debate of 1610. The leading parliamentary speaker Nicholas Fuller thought that the law should 'more tenderly preserve the subject's freedom of his trade (since by trades and occupations commonwealths are upholden) than the inheritance of his lands'.<sup>80</sup> It remained the central ambition of the Commons to establish a right of consent to the customs, and displace the king's power of impositions. This was latterly pursued by a policy of refusing to vote tonnage and poundage unless the king relinquished the right of impositions. The fact that neither king nor Commons could give way on this issue led to the final breakdown of relations in 1629. But following the collapse of the Personal Rule, parliament found itself in a position to achieve its purpose, and outlawed prerogative impositions by the Tonnage and Poundage Act of May 1641, the second revolutionary measure of the Long Parliament. By this, 'Charles surrendered forever his claim to levy customs dues of any kind without a parliamentary grant'.<sup>81</sup> It also installed freedom of trade as the normative economic ethos at the centre of the polity.

This can be seen as the arrival of the first fully capitalist society. Withington does touch on the little matter of the rise of capitalism. He says this quietly and in passing, as if not to wake John Miller and Peter Lake, but say it he does. 'The characterisation of citizens as harbingers of capitalism and civic republicanism is entirely plausible', and from 1570

'urban economies not only expanded but became more capitalistically structured'.<sup>82</sup> This gets closer to reality, though it is out of step with the rest of his article, and is not followed up.

Focusing on structures is not in any case the best guide to the emergence of capitalism. The most important 'structural' developments were on the open fields, where commercial, individual holdings, were being enclosed out of the common lands. This marked a transition from a 15th century world which boasted a majority of independent smallholders, to a late seventeenth-century context where most were effectively landless and dependent to some degree on labouring for others. This was a partial change in the mode of production, though not fully formed. The more significant development was the changing ethos. It can be seen as a rise of individualism, which was indeed reflected in the displacement of the open fields by commercial units, and the associated disappearance of moral restraints on private profit. This is graphically illustrated by the conflict of interest described by the yeoman farmer Henry Best in 1641, as he sought to complete the separation of his consolidated farm, against the villagers' attempts to hold him to the old communal provisions.<sup>83</sup>

But the most general change was in the shape and conditions of marketing. It was a revolution in the relations of exchange. It lay in the new dimension of interregional commerce, long distance, but integrated and perceived as self-regulating, engendering a demand for freedom of trade against arbitrary exactions and restraints, to set the profit motive at liberty. A fully commercialised economy could proceed free of intervening claims, once the prerogatives of the old regime had been foreclosed. The distinctive combination of integrated networks and individualist assumptions explains why a fully-fledged capitalist economy arose in England in the seventeenth century, and nowhere else in Europe to the same degree. In France, for instance, although certain areas of trade and manufacture displayed capitalist tendencies, economic activities remained dispersed and disjointed, lacking the general, unifying systems that produced the coordinated commercial context in England. And of this seminal development the communities of Ireland and Scotland were also entirely innocent.

## Notes

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6. J. Morrill, 'The revolution in the British Context and Irish Context', *Handbook*, p556.
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8. *Ibid.*, p21.
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13. J. Morrill, 'The revolution in the British Context and Irish Context', *Handbook*, p573.
14. Harrington, *Oceana*, Morley (ed.), p58.
15. See D. Parker, *The Making of French Absolutism*, London 1983; and *State and Class in Ancien Regime France*, London 1996.
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27. *Handbook*, pp556-557.
28. *The Answer of the Lords and Commons ... to the Commissioners of Scotland*, Thomason Tracts, BL E811 (2), pp43-44, October 1646.
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30. *Ibid.*, p22.
31. *Ibid.*, p34.
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33. *Ibid.*
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