

Covenanting Citizens: The Protestation Oath and Popular Political Culture in the English Revolution

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The subject of oath swearing has long been recognised in the historiography for its importance in interpreting loyalty in early modern England, especially in times of heightened religious and political tensions. In recent years, Edward Vallance has produced an extensive study on how oath-swearing was used to secure the loyalty of citizens, protect English liberties, and the Protestant religion at key pivotal moments from the reign of Mary I until after the Exclusion Crisis in 1682.⁽¹⁾ Similarly, David Martin Jones has argued that oath swearing was a serious undertaking during the early modern period, and that all persons swearing political or religious oaths such as the National Covenant were expected to swear them with a clear conscience.⁽²⁾ Michael Questier has also found that Catholics faced with swearing the Oath of Allegiance in the early 17th century devised innovative ways to either evade or swear parts of the Oath of Allegiance without it contravening with their consciences.⁽³⁾ Oaths, therefore, are considered to be an important topic for understanding the movement of political and religious loyalty during the early modern period, and the book being reviewed contributes to this school of thought.

John Walter's book *Covenanting Citizens: The Protestation Oath and Popular Political Culture in the English Revolution* is a study on the creation of the Protestation oath in 1641 and its impact across England on the eve of the Civil War. The work analyses what circumstances led to the Protestation being framed, debated, and passed in Parliament, the reception of the oath in London and across the counties, and how it was promoted in print and from the pulpit. John Walter's previous works have examined popular crowds and revolts in early modern England, most notably, *Understanding Popular Violence during the English Revolution: the Colchester Plunderers*, in which he analysed the Colchester riots by studying the economic, social, and religious tensions in Essex in the lead up to the revolt, and *Crowds and Popular Politics in Early Modern England*. Walter's attention to popular revolts and crowds has allowed him to understand the general attitude of the crowds and their political awareness, which is utilised to great effect throughout the book.

Although the Protestation has featured in other works on oath-swearing during the Civil War, including those by Edward Vallance and David Martin Jones cited above ⁽⁴⁾, this is the first time that a monograph has focused completely on the Protestation. Walter examines the Protestation within a short timeframe, as the

early 1640s were a major turning point in the history of early modern England, including the recall of Parliament in 1640 for the first time in 11 years after the Personal Rule of Charles I, the Irish Rebellion in late Autumn 1641, and the outbreak of the Civil War in the summer of 1642. *Covenanting Citizens* focuses on these pivotal moments in relation to the Protestation, as these events helped shape the text of Protestation and the motivation for citizens to subscribe to the oath before oath subscription transformed during the 1640s as a result of the Civil War.

The book is organised into six chapters, each dealing thematically with a different perspective on the Protestation oath in 1641 and 1642. The first chapter examines the political context surrounding the creation of the Protestation in late April and May 1641, which also scrutinises the text and political debate surrounding the oath. Chapter two focuses on popular politics which played a role in the creation of the Protestation. Chapter three analyses the debates and reception of the Protestation in print and from the pulpit, both of which helped promote the arguments for and against taking the Protestation. Chapters four and five examines how the Protestation was administered and taken across the country, with a special attention to the timings behind subscribing to the oath. The final chapter analyses how the Protestation was expected to be performed when the political crisis deepened, and when war was becoming increasingly inevitable.

Walter uses a rich variety of material throughout *Covenanting Citizens*, which is employed most effectively in the second half of the book when he analyses the public reaction to the Protestation. Walter emphasises that there are thousands of surviving Protestation returns which list the names of individuals and parishes who subscribed to the Protestation across the country, which have previously only been examined by county historians. He argues that these returns are rich primary sources which help make 'an argument for a greater social depth to early modern political culture' (p. 5). Walter has conducted extensive archival research in order to comprehend how widespread the oath was, and crucially, to discern the timing of when the oath was taken. Through his archival work at numerous county record offices, he is able to show convincingly that the oath was being sworn across the country voluntarily before it was officially required in January 1642, even citing a few instances when people refused to take it after January 1642 because they had already sworn it the year before (p. 124). Moreover, by analysing the Protestation returns alongside parliamentary diaries, parliamentary journals, printed pamphlets, and published sermons, Walter is able to demonstrate how news about the Protestation travelled to the counties, and that arguments contesting the oath were animated and prevalent across politics and the general population.

Walter explains in the first chapter the political and social context surrounding the creation of the Protestation in early May 1641 by focusing on events that took place inside and outside of Parliament. Walter notes that in April that year there were growing tensions over the king's refusal to put the Earl of Strafford on trial, which were not mitigated by concern over Charles I's raising of an Irish army, especially as the army raised contained Catholic soldiers. Walter notes that the situation intensified when Charles summoned both Houses of Parliament before him on 1 May, to inform the peers and politicians that he could not find the Earl of Strafford guilty of high treason, and that there the Irish army would not be dissolved. This news not only prompted unrest in London, but Parliament also became suspicious that the king planned to dissolve them in the summons (pp. 7–9). Walter asserts that these events led to the proposal and passing of the Protestation on 3 May, and while it was compulsory for all members of Parliament to take the oath and was actively encouraged for all citizens to take it in 1641, the Protestation was not compulsory until January 1642 in the aftermath of the Irish Rebellion in late 1641 and Charles I's attempted arrest of 5 MPs in the House of Commons in early January (p. 138).

Crucially, Walter gives thorough scrutiny to the different surviving drafts of the Protestation oath, which show that the Protestation was subjected to heavy debate in Parliament. Walter analyses the parliamentary diaries written by MPs Simonds D'Ewes, William Drake, John Moore, and Sir Ralph Verney, and John Warner, Bishop of Rochester, for the House of Lords, which he compares their accounts with the official record in the *House of Commons Journal*. Walter is able to demonstrate that the Protestation oath was subject to much serious debate on 3 May, and that decisions over the wording of the oath were fervently contested (pp. 11–14). Walter shows that the Protestation was amended in the Commons, which he

convincingly argues reflected the anxieties many politicians felt towards some radical elements of the oath, most controversially, the condition for subscribers to commit themselves to defence within the law (pp. 40–2). Walter emphasises that there were several controversial elements in the text of the Protestation. Not only was there uncertainty over what constituted the ‘true reformed religion’ in the Protestant church, but there was also unease over the clauses concerning protecting the body of the king. In particular, Walter points out that the word ‘to’ was omitted from the draft for the printed version, which he argues this was done to emphasise the conditional nature of the promise to protect the king, which controversially implied that the king’s protection was subject to the condition that he protected Protestantism and the liberties of English subjects (pp. 37–9).

One of the greatest strengths of *Covenanting Citizens* is the way Walter establishes how the Protestation became widespread across the country in 1641. Walter confirms that until January 1642 Parliament provided no specifications of how the Protestation was to be taken, which meant that the unofficial publication, the *City Orders*, which was compiled by Puritan ministers and City activists, had an important influence on how the Protestation was to be taken in the parishes, especially as the text reproduced in the *City Orders* contained the draft which retained the conditional allegiance to the king (pp. 115–20). This was important, for when Parliament made the Protestation compulsory in early 1642, the guidelines were inspired by the instructions drawn up in the *City Orders* (p. 139). Significantly, Walter’s use of the surviving Protestation Returns, alongside parish registers, reveals the level of swearing of the Protestation across the counties. Although Walter admits that the evidence of the Protestation being taken in 1641 is fragmentary and widely dispersed, he has widened the types of surviving material analysed to understand how the Protestation was sworn across the country for that year. Walter demonstrates that there was a huge demand for official and commercial copies of the Protestation, causing the House of Commons to order 1000 copies to be printed at the end of July 1641, and notes that by early 1642, Parliament’s order had amounted to around 11,000 copies, which shows that there was popular interest in taking the oath (pp. 120–1).

Another central focus of Walter’s research is the significance of popular preaching in mobilising nationwide support for the Protestation. He highlights in chapter one that the preamble written to accompany the Protestation was from the onset designed and intended for a larger audience than simply Parliament, asserting that the preamble ‘rehearsed for a larger audience fears that there were active plots afoot to subvert the kingdom’s fundamental laws’, which included attacks on English liberties and reformed religion (pp. 28–30). Walter demonstrates that the preamble was used as a tool by the ministers to read aloud and explain the Protestation to their congregations so that parishioners could then subscribe to the oath. From his analysis of surviving printed sermons, Walter highlights the fact that ministers frequently framed the Protestation as an oath to protect England against the Catholic threat at home and abroad by framing the oath ‘as a covenant of scripture’, with preachers, including Thomas Mocket and Richard Ward, emphasising that the Protestation was a solemn vow and covenant made before God to protect liberties and the religion from corruption (pp. 84–7). Walter reveals that a considerable number of churchwarden accounts show that ministers who preached about the Protestation made Old Testament references of tyrannical rulers as an indirect comparison to the current rule of Charles I and his court (pp. 83–5). He reveals these biblical connotations generally came from those later identified as Presbyterians and these references were geographically spread out across the country (pp. 162–7). Furthermore, Walter confirms that while the majority of parishes generally took the Protestation on a Sunday after service, other parishioners chose other days of the week or specific dates which were of political or religious significance. This included Ash Wednesday (which was timed with a parliamentary fast day), the Gunpowder Plot anniversary, Whitsuntide, and for those taking the oath in 1642, a few were timed for Palm Sunday and Easter Sunday (p. 161). These examples support a central argument in the book, namely that those parishes who swore the Protestation while it was still voluntary in 1641 were generally religious and politically radical hotspots, and that this reflects how widely the Protestation had spread across the country (pp. 131–8).

A prominent theme throughout *Covenanting Citizens* is the role that popular politics and crowds played in the creation of the Protestation. Walter makes clear that crowds were a driving force behind the Protestation oath, which he focuses on particularly in chapter two, drawing upon his knowledge on the subject of popular

crowds. Walter contends that from April 1641, Parliament faced popular pressure to act in response to the Earl of Strafford, economic woes, and the growing fear of invasion from foreign Catholic nations. Walter establishes that after Parliament was presented with a petition signed by thousands of men advocating the need for the Earl of Strafford to face justice, tensions had deepened after Parliament's meeting with the king on 1 May. This resulted in several thousand people demonstrating outside St Stephen's Palace on 3 May to put pressure on Parliament to act, resulting in the Protestation being passed that day (pp. 51-3). Walter makes clear throughout *Covenanting Citizens* that certain elements of the parliamentary leadership had links with Puritan ministers and the London crowds who they could depend on to support the Protestation. He points out that Puritan ministers Cornelius Burgess and Edmund Calamy acted as intermediaries between the London crowds and parliamentary leaders, with Burgess enjoying the patronage of Earl of Bedford and a connection to John Pym (pp. 55-6). Furthermore, Walter establishes that these groups generally belonged to pro-Scottish factions, and that the Scottish National Covenant can tenuously be argued to be a model for the Protestation, as there were connections between the Scottish delegates who arrived in London autumn 1640 and the City radicals and ministers (pp. 36-7). By looking at the popular context surrounding the Protestation, Walter is able to convey that popular pressure helped shape the Protestation, especially as 'performing the Protestation was [expected] to be an active, not passive, undertaking' (p. 200). Walter points out that the age of most subscribers ranged between 18 and 60 which was the age that men became eligible for military service, which Walter suggests that Parliament intended to use the Protestation to mobilise an army when Protestantism and liberties were under threat (pp. 200-3).

Walter also scrutinises the instances where individuals refused to swear the Protestation for a number of reasons, including reservations over taking the oath, wanting more time to deliberate over what they were expected to promise (pp. 170-2). Walter points out that some ministers and university students at Oxford formulated their own Protestation oath, while he draws attention to Catholics who refused to swear the oath for religious reasons due to the clause requiring swearers to protect the 'true reformed religion' of Protestantism. He remarks that while some Catholics outwardly refused to swear the Protestation, other Catholics vowed to protect the king's person and the liberties of the nation, only refusing obedience on the part concerning religion. This naturally caused concern from some Protestants that Catholics within their communities were using mental reservation to swear the Protestation, with fears growing due to fears of Catholic plots, especially after the Irish Rebellion. (pp. 183-8). This is an important point for Walter to highlight, as Edward Vallance and David Martin Jones have also argued in their works that Catholics were often permitted to omit clauses of the Protestation oath which pertained to their religion, although it would have been interesting to see whether any Catholics took the oath because they have felt compelled to do so after the Irish Rebellion. Notably, Walter draws attention to the fact that women also featured in some of the Protestation returns, as the surviving draft of the Speaker's letter for January 1642 crossed out the word 'men' in the text and does not appear in the final letter. Walter notes that women who took the Protestation came from all walks of life, including unmarried women, servants, daughters, and married women. This detail on women subscribing to oaths in the early modern period should hopefully open up to further research in the future, especially for scholars looking at gender (pp. 203-5).

Covenanting Citizens is a thoroughly researched and densely detailed study on the popular impact of oath subscription during the 17th century. Walter strongly argues throughout the book that the Protestation oath was a pivotal turning point in understanding how an oath could be mobilised across the country to obtain political and religious allegiance. Walter has demonstrated how parish registers and the Protestation Returns can shed light on the popular demand of the oath before 1641, and, crucially, that crowds and sermons from the pulpit and in print encouraged people to subscribe to the oath in defence of English liberties and reformed Protestant religion. It would have been interesting to see further analysis in the conclusion on what the long-term impact of the Protestation was during and after the Civil War, although Walter's study was understandably focused on a short time-frame for the years 1641 and 1642 only. I would recommend this book for anyone interested in the history of early modern British politics, print, and religion, especially for those wanting to study the impact of how print was used as a tool to promote the oath.

Notes

1. Edward Vallance, *Revolutionary England and the National Covenant: State Oaths, Protestantism and the Political Nation, 1553–1682* (Woodbridge, 2006), pp. 51, 83.[Back to \(1\)](#)
 2. David Martin Jones, *Conscience and Allegiance in Seventeenth Century England: The Political Significance of Oaths and Engagements* (Rochester, NY, 1999), p. 15.[Back to \(2\)](#)
 3. Michael Questier, 'Catholic Loyalism in Early Stuart England', *English Historical Review*, 123, 504 (October 2008), 1132–65.[Back to \(3\)](#)
 4. Vallance, *Revolutionary England*, pp. 53, 125; Jones, *Conscience*, pp. 112–18.[Back to \(4\)](#)
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