

Politics, Religion and Ideas in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Britain: Essays in Honour of Mark Goldie

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Mark Goldie has been one of the most influential interrogators of England in the later 17th and early 18th centuries. This influence has come, not only from his ground-breaking work in such varied areas as the work and life of John Locke, tory political and ecclesiological thought, street political culture, puritan whiggery, and Jacobitism: but also from his support for new scholars, which has been unfailing kind, constructive, and rigorous—whether one was his PhD student, was examined by him for a doctorate (as this reviewer was), or was simply active in the field and met him in seminars, conferences, or electronically. Now a group of his friends and former students has produced this collection of essays to honour him on the occasion of his retirement from formal posts at Cambridge University.

The pieces are all of high quality, casting vivid light on details of Restoration and 18th-century culture, and they reflect Goldie's diverse interests, which allowed him to foster academics of an exciting spectrum of kinds. Tim Harris starts the volume by arguing that the 'constitutional royalism' of the mid 17th century allowed less control over monarchs than other scholars have supposed. This is followed by Dmitri Levitin's demonstration that Restoration episcopalianism did not really undermine the church's Erastianism; by Justin Champion's narration of Andrew Marvell's emergence into public life—stimulated by the street politics surrounding the penal laws against dissenters; and by Jacqueline Rose's analysis of the thought of the neglected figure, Bulstrode Whitlocke, and the centrality of persecution within this. Two Scots focussed essays come next: John Coffey's deeply contextualised account of the assassination of Archbishop John Sharp, and Clare Jackson's explication of Sir George Mackenzie's politics—both, again, shown to be wrestling with the ambiguities of persecution. A run of John Locke centred chapters form a central section of the collection. S.J. Savonius-Wroth charts Locke's shift towards the importance of individual moral improvement in the last decade of his life; Geoff Kemp sets the thinker's late opposition to censorship in a similar context of advocating personal enlightenment through access to classic texts; John Marshall looks at the philosopher's economic activity and beliefs—revealing a disturbing support for slavery and forced labour as the solution to poverty; and Delphine Soulard stresses the role of the continental republic of letters

and periodicals, not only in distributing Locke's ideas, but in creating a coherent Lockean worldview that harmonised his thoughts on politics, religion, and epistemology.

The next piece is a terrific multi-dimensional reading of Charles Sedley and Henry Purcell's Birthday Ode for Queen Mary in 1692 by Hannah Smith, demonstrating how the post-1689 regime built its image on a godly rejection of Caroline libertinism. Warren Johnston then surveys the vigorous survival of apocalyptic thought in England, right through to the late 18th century, before we return to Scotland with Gabriel Glickman's fascinating account of the late Stuart origins of the catholic enlightenment—paradoxically fostered within a Jacobitism which catholic thinkers saw as a Erastian weapon against superstition and papal power. The last two essays have roots in the Stuart era, but illustrate trends that played out through to the early 19th century. Sarah Irving-Stonebreaker traces the origins of 'useful knowledge' to protestant notions of charity; to literal readings of the bible that encouraged investigation into the utility of things—rather than their symbolic meanings—and to a nervousness about religious enthusiasm, against which practical information could be a fence. Conol Condren charts how concepts of innovation gradually escaped condemnation, or acceptance only in cases of absolute necessity to preserve wider structures.

All the pieces stand alone as important contributions. However, it is less clear what this collection, as a whole, tells us about the state of the field of politics and religion in the era Goldie has been interested in. Here, the introduction does not help as much, perhaps, as one would like. It does draw out some assumptions and methodologies that Goldie pioneered, and which have been taken up more widely—and we shall come to these soon. But, quite understandably in a volume of this kind (whose job is to honour a scholar), the opening remarks, which are by each of the editors in turn, concentrate on their particular intellectual debts to the dedicatee. This results in four mini-essays, which are only loosely connected, and which have less sense of a unified take-away than perhaps the audience was expecting, or maybe than it deserves for a collection of pieces like this. The confusion may be deepened by Tim Harris' sage observation that Goldie's care in his scholarship, and the range of his interests, has meant there is no 'Goldie view' of the field that might offer an overarching interpretation of the age.

The essays themselves do help to give some sense of where we have got to in late Stuart scholarship, but only to a degree. Many of them illustrate trends in Goldie's own work which have done something to define late Stuart studies. In particular, many of the chapters place the politics of religion at the heart of their concerns. Goldie has done as much as anyone to inform us that the discourses and debate of the period were almost always inflected through theologies, and that issues such as the possibilities and limits of religious toleration, or the proper relationship between the church and the civil magistrate, were the ones that structured thought and division. Just as in Goldie's own writings, most of the chapters also provide rich contexts for the best-known political events and writings of the period. These contexts are polemical (we have to understand statements in the rich totality of discussion—even if much of that discussion was advanced by forgotten authors in works of what posterity would see as low quality); but they are also socio-cultural. Debates, especially print debates, arose from, and had consequences in, real tensions in real communities, and we will fail to understand them without attention to this. Such tensions produced another linking theme: the almost constant threat and reality of violence in late Stuart politics—especially in disputes connected to religious coercion by the civil magistrate (an area Goldie has explored extensively). This was a society in which disagreements were often played out in riot, rebellion, subversive conspiracy, mass demonstration, and assassination—and several pieces here explore this. The passion of late Stuart debate was fired by the truth that it was never just a paper exercise.

Yet, while such themes emerge, there is little sense of a master narrative beyond them. The pieces do not always talk closely to one another, and the editors clearly decided not to try to make them do so. The chapters are organised by broad chronology, rather than being put into themed categories, and they are allowed to spread over a wide spectrum of areas, and ultimately periods. This is a tribute to Goldie's own breadth of interest, inspiring people to write on topics of such variety: and, obviously, a large part of the point of bringing these essays together is to illustrate this versatility. But the range leaves the reader with some sense that this is a music-hall style program of varieties. Each act is rewarding, but it is hard to work

out what the evening as a whole was supposed to be about; and there is no conclusion to enlighten us as we collect our coats.

Given the quality of the research on display in this volume, and its objective in honouring Goldie's contribution to scholarship, this judgement may seem harsh, indeed oafish. But 'Reviews in History' is supposed to generate discussion, and this reviewer wonders if the difficulty this otherwise excellent collection has in finding a central direction is symptomatic of the state of the wider field. I wonder if any of the editors or contributors share a sense that interpretation of this area may have lost its way?

In the 1980s and 1990s when I was being trained to think about the late Stuart age—to a good degree by Goldie's encouragement, and by the example of his writings—there were exciting new directions. There was, in particular, a sense that this era could be understood far more richly if it were integrated back into the periods before. This challenged the great historiographic divide around 1660 which had divided scholarship into different communities of researchers, and separate ranges of interest (few people had worked on years both before and after the Restoration); and it opened up new lines of enquiry and interpretation. The movement included Jonathan Scott's argument that the later Stuart age was fundamentally a re-run of the early Stuart decades; but also the revivification of interest in the politics of religion (to a good degree inspired by Goldie) which allowed the decades after the return of Charles II to be seen as the continued working out of a 'long reformation'. By the first decade of the 21st century, this set of questions had been supplemented by a vigorous, if highly controversial, set of claims about the birth of 'modernity' in the period (associated, though not exclusively, with the work of Steve Pincus). Features analysed included the advent of sustained mass politics and the rapid development of a public sphere; the accelerated development of the infrastructure of the state and its new role in structuring political disagreement; revived claims for the radicalism of 1688-9; and the role played by the fall of James II in permitting religious toleration, an entrepreneurial and labour based economy, polarised but stable party politics, new financial worlds, and a commercially-driven empire.

These trends sustained a real sense of excitement and momentum: but this may have dissipated in the last decade or so. The essays in this volume perhaps bear this out. There may have been a retreat to a pointillist investigation of (albeit vivid and illuminating) specifics, with less sense that these need weaving into larger pictures. I wonder how many readers' attention began to stray in the summary above of what the chapters of this book were about, because it had to be a list of individual things each author said, rather than an unfolding illustration of a central theme. Of course, attention to detail is vital: and richly contextual reading of significant events or turning points is a golden part of the Goldie legacy. But without a larger pattern being advanced, or even critiqued, the sense of direction is lost, and we risk lapsing into so-whattery.

This is, I think, a shame, because the work of the scholars in this volume, and many others, should help us assemble a compelling story for the period. This is clear in its main outline—but it has enough ambiguity and complexity to set agendas for stimulating debate and new research. And I am afraid that narrative's central theme is modernity. I say afraid because the term got in trouble in the discussions of Pincus' advocacy of 1688-9 as the first modern revolution; and because many scholars—including Goldie himself—dislike the term, fearing it will lead to a teleological approach to the past, and a failure to examine historical events in their own terms. If people look for the origins of modernity, many specialists worry, they will fail to understand the rich complexity of what was actually happening. But the facts, it seems to me, are these. Britain in 1714 was dramatically more like the world of the 20th century (at least—the 21st century is proving so peculiar that modern may not be the best term for it) than England had been in 1660. Its structures, assumptions, debates, effectiveness, global reach, and economy had been transformed. Because this is true, our job as historians of this period is never to lose sight of trying to explain this alteration. Because it is important, our job as advocates for the significance of our field is to assert the scale of the change.

And fortunately, for those worried about an over-simplifying teleology in claims for modernisation, the process was deeply paradoxical. A modern Britain did not emerge from a conscious plan for modernity (this

was the—largely justified—objection to Pincus’ interpretation, though Pincus might be given more credit for posing the questions that he did). It was the accidental result of other things that were happening, which we have to understand in their own terms, and in the deep contexts that Goldie pointed us to. For example, we might ask if the transformation of the later Stuart decades was not, in origin, forward looking; but rather the final crisis of contradictions that had been set up in the early 16th century. It may be time to have another look the idea of the long reformation to explain the late Stuart age: and these essays, with their frequent focus on the politics of religion (and particularly of persecution, and of state-church relations) should help us to do this.

I will provide a few examples of the sort of processes I am thinking of. The 16th century posited that the true church must be blessed providentially, but also that it was to be recognised by its suffering persecution (a consequence of the image of the godly remnant of Revelation, driven home by John Foxe’s presentation of true godliness tied to a stake and burnt). It was in the later 17th century that the contradictions of this struck fully home, particularly in the difficulty it caused in identifying a coercive state church as the true body of Christ on earth. As a result (and not because of any advance of modern theories of liberty) confidence in religious coercion collapsed, and far more widely than among the marginal sects who would benefit from the shift. Similarly, the 16th century established an apocalyptic reading of history as a cosmic battle between true and false churches. However, this generated polarising conspiracy theories, and by the later Stuart age the damage that these could do to the political and social fabric was becoming clear. Out of this realisation came new approaches to dealing with difference: a willingness to envisage religious toleration; the rise of new patterns of civil discourse; a press that began to contain dispute in satire, ritualised exchange, and the example of dialogic form—all features that could be thought to point towards modernity, but whose origins lay in the horrors of eschatology. Again, early British protestantism had had a high view of godly magistrates and had entrusted great power to their hands. But after 1660 (certainly—for some the issue had arisen earlier), Stuart monarchs raised the conundrum of what to do with *un*-godly magistrates. Charles II and James II seemed to tolerate popery at court, pressed for legal liberty for catholics, and refused to join any military crusade to protect the European reformation in the face of Louis XIV’s expansionist persecution. Claims for parliamentary control over rulers, the placing of conditions of who could be monarch, and the infrastructural expansion of the machinery of state after 1689, were all attempts to deal with this contradiction. They were not built on visions of government by consent, or efficient and effective administration.

If we can give a large role to a final crisis of the reformation in the decades after Charles I’s execution, investigating modernity need not involve any distorting and simplistic belief that the people of late Stuart Britain had clear view of what modernity was, and were consciously pursuing it. Investigating modernity can, therefore, give a coherent core to study of this period, without abandoning the absolute need to investigate it in its own terms, and to recognise that change was often unintended or paradoxical. But without such a central question, the period drifts out of focus. These essays are all excellent: but as a collection they feel, to this reviewer, like reflections of a wider malaise that we will need to tackle if the period is to remain as a fascinating and vital focus for historical interest.

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