

Reviews in History

Published on: *Reviews in History* (<https://reviews.history.ac.uk>)

Conrad Russell

Review Number: 709
Publish Date: Thursday, 1 January, 2009
Author: Conrad Russell
ISBN: 0333124006
Date of Publication: 1973
Price: £25.99
Pages: 296pp.
Publisher: Macmillan
Publisher URL: <http://www.palgrave.com/products/title.aspx?pid=253122>
Place of Publication: London
Reviewer: Pauline Croft

Russell, Conrad Sebastian Robert, Fifth Earl Russell (1937-2004)

Conrad Russell, the fifth Earl Russell, historian of 16th- and 17th-century Britain, was the younger son of the mathematician, philosopher, political activist and Nobel prize winner Bertrand Russell. After a difficult childhood, overshadowed by his father's celebrity and the very public breakup of his parents' marriage, he went up to Merton College Oxford, in 1955, graduating with a First. He then undertook doctoral work under Christopher Hill, on the treason laws in the early 17th century, but made little progress, although he later published two notable articles - 'The ship money judgments of Bramston and Davenport' and 'The theory of treason in the trial of Strafford' - based on his earlier researches.⁽¹⁾ In 1960 Conrad became a lecturer at Bedford College, University of London, where he met his future wife Elizabeth, a fellow-historian whose warmth of character and unstinting support proved vital in enabling him to fulfil his potential. Between 1966 and 1968 he toyed with the possibility of giving up his academic career for parliamentary politics, contesting South Paddington as a Labour candidate in 1966 and being urged to stand for election at Mitcham and Beddington in 1968. Conrad was elected as a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society in 1971, the year in which he published his provocative, indeed *avant garde*, textbook *The Crisis of Parliaments 1509-1660*. In 1973 he edited a collection of essays, *The Origins of the English Civil War*, in which the most noteworthy contributions were his own 'Parliament and the King's finances' and Nicholas Tyacke's 'Puritanism, Arminianism and counter-revolution'. He encapsulated his position in the statement that historians had 'overrated both the powers and the ambitions of early 17th-century parliaments'. Those parliaments had failed to understand that the Crown's finances were genuinely in crisis, undermined on the one hand by inflation and on the other, by the extraordinary rise in the costs of

war consequent on the military revolution. He pointed to 'the rock-like obstinacy of country members' refusal to accept the real cost of government'. Hence it was not surprising that the early Stuart monarchy increasingly came to see Parliament in general and the House of Commons in particular, as an obstructive and increasingly irrelevant institution. His essay sketched out most of what later came to be known as 'revisionism', a label Conrad found irritating, on the grounds that all historians whose researches advanced the subject were intrinsically revisionist.

Promoted to a London University readership in 1974, in the following year Conrad became one of the convenors of the Tudor-Stuart seminar at the Institute of Historical Research (IHR). This brought him into regular contact with Joel Hurstfield, who had succeeded Sir John Neale as the senior convenor. Both Conrad and Elizabeth were great devotees of the IHR and never missed the seminar. Then in 1979 Conrad moved to Yale to succeed Jack Hexter, who had made the Yale Center for Parliamentary History a world leader in research, holding a wealth of microfilm, transcripts of manuscripts, and an unrivalled collection of unpublished parliamentary diaries. These resources allowed researchers to compare different accounts of crucial debates in the 17th century without the toil and expense of going round scattered English repositories and transcribing each diary in turn. Although his five years of reading at the Center were vital in laying the foundations for his later work, Conrad returned to Britain in 1984, as the successor to Joel Hurstfield in the Astor Professorship of British History at University College London (UCL). He gave a notable inaugural lecture in March 1985, entitled 'The British problem and the English civil war', which indicated that his forthcoming research would extend beyond parliamentary history into the wider world of 'British studies', which emphasised the enormous impact of the accession of James VI of Scotland to the English throne.⁽²⁾ Conrad was invited to deliver the Ford Lectures at Oxford in winter 1988, and in 1990 he transferred from UCL to King's College London (KCL), where he delivered another incisive inaugural lecture in 1991, 'The Scottish party in English Parliaments, 1640-42, or the myth of the English Revolution', later published in *Historical Research*. He was elected FBA in 1991 and remained at King's until his retirement in 2002, when he became a Visiting Professor there.

After returning from Yale, Conrad was happy to be back in the IHR. For his research students and junior colleagues, the Tudor-Stuart seminar with Conrad at its head played an important formative role in their intellectual development. Lively discussions underscored the value of archival research, and Conrad would frequently bring out the importance of a crucial reference in a way that its discoverer might not have fully appreciated. He had a remarkable memory, quoting at length from other sources, and his enthusiasm was contagious. Members of the seminar often found that Conrad read not merely for his own research but also for theirs; he generously passed on relevant material from archives as diverse as the Phelips MSS in the Somerset Record Office and the Carreg-lwyd MSS in the National Library of Wales. Conrad particularly enjoyed the summer term, when a steady trickle of friends and former students from north American universities would cross the Atlantic to appear in the IHR common room for tea before joining the seminar. He dedicated his last great book, *The Fall of the British Monarchies 1637-1642*, 'To the Members, Past, Present, and Future, of the Tudor and Stuart Seminar at the Institute of Historical Research' and in the preface thanked the current members, who had 'supplied some forty pairs of spectacles to peruse almost every problem' encountered in his research and writing.⁽³⁾

Taken as a whole, it must be admitted that the Russell oeuvre was very concentrated in its range of interests. As a postgraduate, Conrad had grown dissatisfied with the usual list of 'The causes of the English Civil War', because, as he later commented, 'They did not appear to be anchored by any logical link with the events which led up to it.' He added ruefully, 'It took me thirty years to come to terms with this insight.'⁽⁴⁾ His early publications all tackled problems where he found the accepted view either unconvincing, or too simplistic. After the publication of *The Origins of the English Civil War*, it became apparent that he was proposing a very different synthesis. 'The New Look has

arrived', opined Sir Geoffrey Elton.⁽⁵⁾ In 1976 the iconoclastic article 'Parliamentary history in perspective, 1603-1629' appeared in *History*, attacking any notion of historical inevitability in the outbreak of civil war. Instead, Conrad argued, in the early 17th century, Parliament was not yet a powerful institution, but still just an irregular event, as it had been throughout the middle ages. He depicted, not a division into two clearly defined 'sides', Crown and Opposition, but a fluid political scene in which men divided unpredictably according to the specific issue under debate, without prior ideological or party commitments. So as late as 1629 and even 1637, there was no reason to assume that civil war would be the outcome of such disagreements. Critics acknowledged the force of this argument but thought that the dismissive characterisation of the English parliament as merely 'an irregular event' greatly underestimated the nation's respect for an institution with its origins in the 13th century.

The book that made Conrad's name was his brilliant 1979 monograph, *Parliaments and English Politics 1621-1629*. 'Revisionism' was a very disparate phenomenon, advanced by a group of historians who did not all agree: not so much a programme as a collection of negative propositions. Probably the most important was its rejection of any dialectical framework for history and consequently its suspicion of any 'clash of opposites', economic or cultural, as the mechanism of change. In English political and parliamentary history, a pioneering Cambridge thesis of 1953 by J. N. Ball, on the M.P. Sir John Eliot, was followed in 1978 by *Faction and Parliament*, a groundbreaking collection of essays (including one by Dr. Ball) edited by Kevin Sharpe.⁽⁶⁾ The exploration of similar themes in early modern European states, especially by H. J. Koenigsberger on the Burgundian low countries and Sir John Elliott on the revolt of the Catalans, impressed Conrad by their relevance to the British experience of multiple monarchies. Despite many differences, Conrad later wrote that 'all versions of revisionism, like all brands of whisky, enjoyed certain broad similarities'.⁽⁷⁾ He particularly attacked the twin contentions that the explanation for the political crisis of the 1640s lay in long-term social and economic change, and that as a result, the breakdown of the English polity was both pre-determined and unavoidable. These points emerged from his detailed account of the parliaments of the 1620s, since he insisted that the exact narrative must be established before any search for causes or explanations, otherwise, the historian would risk succumbing to the dangers of hindsight. Conrad set out on the ambitious project of constructing a new political narrative. He pointed to the significant fact that outside Westminster, where they formed part of the legislature, many members of the Lords and the Commons were hard-working members of their local or county executive. Such day-to-day duties took up much more of their time than their service in relatively brief parliamentary sessions. These multi-faceted men could not easily be encased in the twin straitjackets of 'Government' and 'Opposition'. He was thus able to incorporate a full understanding of the pioneering regional and county studies produced by historians such as Alan Everitt and John Morrill. In his preface Conrad paid tribute to Elizabeth, who 'evening after evening', had listened to his reading of his draft text and discussed his findings.⁽⁸⁾ His broad conclusion was that as inflation eroded the value of the Crown's income, and as the costs of military action spiralled steadily upward, the localist outlook of most members of both the Lords and Commons, made them unwilling, indeed unable to comprehend the genuine problems faced by royal government. This was particularly so in a period of widespread continental disturbances culminating in the Thirty Years War, which seemed remote but which might threaten English interests. This was the real 'functional breakdown' (a phrase borrowed from Gerald Aylmer), rather than the classic Whig explanation of a House of Commons aggressively defending English liberties or the neo-Marxist depiction of a class struggle inexorably leading to victory for the rising 'middling sort'.

After re-working the 1620s, Conrad spent the next 12 years tackling the 'Everest' as he described it, of the origins of the civil war. Three books resulted. His collected essays, *Unrevolutionary England 1603-1642* was published in 1990 and included articles written in the 1980s. It included 'The Catholic wind', a provocative essay which posited the imaginary scenario that James II had defeated

William III in 1688, and then ironically provided some typical historical 'explanations' for the victory. 'James II ... was always on a winning wicket', with Europe-wide trends such as the decline of representative assemblies and the triumph of resurgent Counter-Reformation Catholicism uniting to make King James, not a fugitive would-be absolutist, but 'the first of the Enlightened Despots'. It was all the more lively since Conrad's ancestor Edward Russell was one of the seven who had offered the throne to William III in 1688. A *jeu d'esprit*, the piece devastatingly demonstrated that once the historian knows the outcome, it is all too tempting to excavate supposedly 'deep-seated' and 'long-term' forces.

Also published in 1990 was *The Causes of the English Civil War*, a revised version of the Ford lectures. In a structural analysis reaching back to the Henrician Reformation, Conrad emphasised how growing religious division, not merely between Protestantism and Catholicism but also between various branches of Protestantism, steadily permeated political conflict. It described the difficulties of Stuart rule over multiple kingdoms, where every problem was exacerbated by increasingly inadequate royal revenues. In many ways the book offered some conclusions to the whole project of Conrad's research on the causes of political breakdown in the early 17th century. Yet it is difficult to read, immensely allusive and suggestive rather than clearly constructed, with a sense that sometimes he saw his argument as provisional and debatable rather than wholly convincing. It also revealed Conrad's lack of interest in areas such as cultural, intellectual and literary history, and the history of the Court, whereby other scholars were increasingly throwing light on late Elizabethan and early Stuart society. More satisfactory was the magisterial account of *The Fall of the British Monarchies 1637-1642*, published in 1991. An extraordinary work of detailed research incorporating much new primary material, the book demonstrated Conrad's mastery of the day-to-day account devoid of all hindsight. It also substantiated a new view of Charles I, already outlined in *The Causes of the English Civil War*. Instead of the cultivated, devout but ineffectual monarch of standard textbooks, here was an opinionated king at the centre of politics, an active protagonist in events, with a distinctive cluster of attitudes and personal characteristics (not least his devotion to his wife and children) that proved crucial in shaping outcomes. The book revealed how fruitfully Conrad had read the work of the new 'British' school of historians, who emphasised the impact of Scottish kingship and Scottish political ideas after 1603. The central theme was precisely what the title indicated: it was the novel and perhaps insoluble problems of managing a multiple *British*, not solely English, monarchy that explained the outbreak of war in 1642. The Scots rebelled first, the Irish next, so the English were the last of Charles I's subjects to defy him. After 1637, the clash between Charles and the Scottish Covenanters destabilised the dynastic union established by James I in 1603, but perhaps more significantly, the outbreak of revolt in Ireland in late autumn 1641 destroyed the king's increasingly hopeful option of a dissolution of the Parliament. By summer 1641 Charles had achieved a nearly-successful resolution of the political crisis which began in 1637, winning many men back to his side: but the Irish revolt fractured the emerging consensus and provided the fatal catalyst of conflict. In this interpretation, the civil war might equally be seen as the result of an imperialistic attempt to enforce the political and religious hegemony of England within the British Isles, a theme going back to the early Middle Ages and continued by Oliver Cromwell. Perhaps most controversial was the claim made at the outset, that 'England in 1637 was a country in working order ... There is very little evidence in 1637 that any significant body of the King's subjects would have wanted to resort to revolution if it had been a practical possibility'.⁽⁹⁾ Although critics could argue that this approach greatly underestimated the tensions already present within Caroline England, the central argument was irrefutable: it was impossible to explain the events leading up to the outbreak of war within an enclosed, wholly *English* context. However, Conrad ignored the alternative interpretation: the very real possibility that the Scottish and Irish crises merely precipitated, rather than actually caused, the outbreak of war in England, a country already deeply internally divided by 1642.

Conrad continued to publish scholarly articles until 2002, the year of his retirement, which was also the year of his festschrift, *Politics, Religion and Popularity*, edited by Thomas Cogswell, Richard Cust and Peter Lake, all of them members of the IHR Tudor-Stuart seminar. The preface encapsulated their appreciation of the magnitude of Conrad's contribution, 'of the scope, ambition and achievement of the intellectual project on which he has been engaged, and which he has in different ways shared with us ... even where we take issue with him, his work is an unerring guide to where the important issues and questions really are.'⁽¹⁰⁾ An introductory survey of Conrad's work followed by 12 essays, ranging from court masques and sermons under James I, through the stimulus of parliamentary visits to London enjoyed by members of the Commons (with increasing frequency in the 1620s), to popular preaching and petitioning in the years just before 1642. Conrad was genuinely moved by this volume which, he said, pleased him as much if not more than any of his own publications. His last academic work emerged with the publication of the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* in 2003. Four penetrating studies of leading 17th-century political figures, John Pym, John Hampden, Sir John Eliot and Francis Russell fourth earl of Bedford, displayed once again his mastery of the detailed politics of the period, while never losing a sense of the humanity, dignity and sometimes inadequacy of those whose lives and struggles he so deeply understood.

In 1987, Conrad succeeded his half-brother John as the fifth Earl Russell. This led to a separate public career in which he resumed the political involvements of his younger days. After the election of 1974 he had become convinced that British politics would never break free of its class-based slogans until the implementation of proportional representation. Only then, as he wrote later, could the British people 'stop looking for scapegoats and start looking for solutions'. Consequently on entering the House of Lords he went to the Liberal whips' office to offer his services.⁽¹¹⁾ He became Liberal (later Liberal Democratic) spokesman for social security, on which he built up an extraordinary expertise. He was a consistent champion of university students, regarding the increase in student poverty as one of the most socially retrogressive trends of his lifetime. Conrad campaigned vigorously against the abolition of grants and their replacement by loans, pointed to the adverse effects of top-up fees, and cited examples from personal knowledge of the paradox of students so tired by the long hours of work necessary to support themselves at university that they were unable to take full advantage of their expensive education. In 1993 he published *Academic Freedom*, an attack on policies in higher education which he characterised as 'a perpetual pressure to cut-price expansion, regardless of academic consequences', thereby inevitably undermining British degree standards.⁽¹²⁾ His last book, in 1999, was *An Intelligent Person's Guide to Liberalism*, arguing that the Liberals possessed the longest unbroken political traditions in the country, going back to his great-grandfather Lord John Russell, the last of the Whigs. The book was well reviewed and sparked considerable public discussion.

By his sixties, Conrad seemed an increasingly eccentric figure, clad in a baggy old black suit and carrying his voluminous papers in supermarket plastic bags. He never mastered email or any other type of information technology, instead conducting his extensive correspondence on an elderly typewriter. He served as president of the Electoral Reform Society and was a trustee of the John Stuart Mill Institute, as well as of the History of Parliament Trust. He was very conscious of his family's political inheritance, drawing the attention of visitors to Westminster to the statue of Lord John Russell in the lobby and to the wall-painting of Lord Russell, condemned for treason by Charles II, bidding farewell to his stalwart wife Rachel. He regarded himself as a champion of traditional Whig values, particularly the Whigs' detestation of abuses of power. He was an acknowledged expert on the history of the Upper House and frequently used historical quotations in his speeches. Occasionally he lost his audience completely, but on form, he could be electrifying. On 4 May 2004, already ailing, Conrad spoke against the asylum and immigration bill, in which he quoted the 17th-century Sir Thomas Wentworth's ringing denunciation, 'God deliver us from this arbitrary government.'⁽¹³⁾ His last academic appearance was at a conference jointly organised by KCL and

Somerset House in May 2004, to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the peace treaty between England and Spain in 1604. His paper, based on the French ambassadors' accounts, contained many flashes of the old brilliance. His last speech in the Lords, on 15 September, was a brief intervention which deplored the English lack of interest in constitutional affairs, using three historical references.⁽¹⁴⁾ Conrad died on 14 October 2004, and at his memorial service at St. Margaret's Westminster in June 2005, large numbers of historians, politicians, journalists and friends came together to pay tribute to his remarkably varied achievements and interests. The fund at the IHR which Conrad founded to commemorate his wife Elizabeth, who predeceased him, was re-launched as the Conrad and Elizabeth Russell Fund, becoming a general hardship fund for graduate students at the Institute of Historical Research.

Some material has been reproduced from Pauline Croft, 'Conrad Sebastian Robert Russell, 1937-2004', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 138 (2006), 339-59, ©British Academy.

Notes

1. *English Historical Review*, 77 (1962), 312-8, *EHR*, 80 (1965), 30-50, reprinted in C. Russell, *Unrevolutionary England 1603-1642* (London 1990).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Reprinted in Russell, *Unrevolutionary England*, pp. 231-52.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Conrad Russell, *The Fall of the British Monarchies 1637-1642* (Oxford, 1991)pp. ix-x.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. From the web-site of the History Department, King's College London, quoted in *Comment* (November 2004), 15.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. *The Origins of the English Civil War*, ed. Conrad Russell (London, 1973), p. 92. G. R. Elton, 'Review of *The Origins of the English Civil War*', *The Historical Journal*, 17 (1974), 213-15.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Conrad Russell, *Parliaments and English Politics 1621-1629* (Oxford, 1979); *Faction and Parliament: Essays on Early Stuart History*, ed. Kevin Sharpe (Oxford, 1978).[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Russell, *Unrevolutionary England*, p. ix.[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. Russell, *Parliaments and English Politics*, p. vi.[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. Russell, *The Fall of the British Monarchies*, pp. 1-2.[Back to \(9\)](#)
10. *Politics, Religion and Popularity: Early Stuart Essays in Honour of Conrad Russell*, ed. Thomas Cogswell, Richard Cust and Peter Lake (Cambridge, 2002), p. viii. The volume also contains a valuable reference bibliography of the principal published writings of the honorand, compiled by Richard Cust and Elizabeth Russell.[Back to \(10\)](#)
11. Michael White, *The Guardian*, 15 October 2004, 31.[Back to \(11\)](#)
12. Conrad Russell, *Academic Freedom* (London, 1993), p. 107.[Back to \(12\)](#)
13. *The Guardian*, 15 October 2004, 31.[Back to \(13\)](#)
14. *The Independent*, 16 October 2004, 56.[Back to \(14\)](#)

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