

Riotous or Revolutionary: The Clubmen during the English Civil Wars

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The English Civil Wars and Regicide, 1642-49, has been viewed as one of the “great” revolutions. Like the French and Russian Revolutions, the earlier English Revolution saw protests against the government coalesce into armed rebellion, civil war, and then the overthrow of the old order, including the execution of the monarch and establishment of the new rule. In these great Revolutions, historians have pointed to revolutionary moments, such as the peasant uprisings in France in the summer and fall of 1789. To Marxist historians like Christopher Hill, these peasant uprisings act as a prelude, or stepping stone, to a larger social revolution.

In the English Civil Wars, which pitted the supporters of the King (Royalists, or Cavaliers) against the Roundhead Parliamentarians, some might point to the rise of the 1644 Clubmen in the countryside as just such a lower class, agrarian revolutionary moment. This paper uses the demands and actions of the Clubmen as a test case to see if definitions of revolution apply to such a group. It also compares them to the French peasant revolts of the mid-seventeenth century, such as the Nu Pieds, in order to question the general revolutionary content of agrarian movements in the early modern period.

This essay falls back on historian Perez Zagorin's broader and more inclusive definition of revolution. When one glances at Zagorin's broad definition of what constitutes a revolution, the Clubmen of the 17th Century seemingly fit it in a limited manner. But were the Clubmen truly revolutionary? Did these men understand the larger context as to why England was embroiled in a colossal civil war, or comprehend the loftier ambitions of the leading parliamentarians and royalists battling for control of the kingdom? Upon a more in-depth examination of Zagorin's hypothesis, one can make a much more definitive case for the Clubmen being more riotous than revolutionary.

The Clubmen reacted to a war which they saw primarily as an infringement upon local traditions and customs that they held dear and wished to continue unimpeded. Although many of the Clubmen groups favored one side or the other, all were committed to an early peace. A preference for King or Parliament did not preclude a preference for peace above both. Petitions drawn up by Clubmen associations clamored for a restoration of normal government: the abolition of county committees and of new taxes, the restoration of jury trial and ancient local institutions, and

measures restoring regional economies.^[1] Clearly the Clubmen, when compared to similar peasant riots in France at the time, or to the more revolutionary demands made by their fellow countrymen, the Levellers, do not live up to revolutionary billing.

The Clubmen's satisfaction with the status quo supports the idea that most of the English were either ignorant of, or unconcerned with, the national implications of the English Civil War. Historian Charles Carlton perhaps best illustrates this attitude in the following remarks:

During the 1640s most people in the British Isles were more concerned with the mundane happenings within their own orbits than with the earth shattering events outside. If politics attracted more of their attention than it had before, most folk were nonetheless far more concerned with buying and selling, making love, money and marriages, having and bringing up children, seeing friends and paying bills.^[2]

English historian H.N. Brailsford concurs, stating that "To understand this period, the most exciting chapter in our national history, we have to realize that the mass, the great majority of the English population, were political illiterates who had endured the civil war as neutrals, understanding little of the issues."^[3] Renowned civil war historian David Underdown agrees:

The rioters' primary objective is now thought to be the preservation of a vanished, just order of society, a mythical merry England in which landlords and grain dealers do not cheat or oppress the poor, and in which both monarch and gentry uphold the traditional laws and regulatory structures of the old "moral economy". The civil war political group expressing typically "popular" values is not the democratic Levellers, but the conservative Clubmen.^[4]

Historian John Morrill echoes these sentiments, emphasizing the apathy felt by most during the conflict, arguing "A majority had no deep-seated convictions behind their choice of side."^[5] Many in England simply chose to support the faction they felt gave them the best opportunity to preserve the status quo; whether it be royalists, parliamentarians, or local neutralists such as the Clubmen. These esteemed historians clearly illustrate the fact that many "ordinary" Englishmen were unconcerned with fomenting revolutionary ideas. The Clubmen certainly exemplify this reasoning.

Contemporary writers also conveyed the populace's penchant for indifference and apathy. Thomas Hobbes, one of the most influential authors of the period, maintained that there were few common people who cared much for either side, adding that conscripted common soldiers, "had not much mind to fight, but were glad of any occasion to make haste home."^[6] Is it reasonable then to believe that the Clubmen were passionate enough to exhibit

revolutionary tendencies? A parliamentary newsletter journalist stated the contrary by dismissing the Clubmen as “neutrals and such as like weathercockes they will turn this way and that with every blast; and will, I conceive, be ready to close in with the prevailing party, without respect to truth or justice.”^[7] A contemporary tale of the period further emphasizes the futility in attempting to prove commoners had a vested interest in the outcome of the civil war. Such a lack of interest, according to the story, was voiced by a yokel who was plowing Marston Moor the morning before the epoch battle. Told to flee because the king and parliament needed his fields to fight on, the surprised rustic asked, “What! Has them two buggars fallen out?”^[8] Certainly the message of this tale is that the common man was perhaps not only apolitical but uninformed as well.

Were the Clubmen then, truly a revolutionary phenomenon? Perez Zagorin defines a revolution as the following:

Any attempt by subordinate groups through the use of violence to bring about (1) a change of government or its policy, (2) a change of regime, or (3) a change of society, whether this attempt is justified by reference to past conditions or to an as yet unattained future ideal.^[9]

As stated earlier, the Clubmen do fit this definition, but in a limited manner. When one examines primary documents, petitions and resolutions written by various Clubmen associations, their demands fulfill only a few components of Zagorin’s analysis of what constitutes a revolutionary situation.

Perhaps the most useful primary source available is *The Desires and Resolutions of the Clubmen of the Counties of Dorset and Wiltshire*. Historian Ronald Hutton, who has devoted much time studying the Clubmen, claims those of the Dorset-Wiltshire band to be “the most sophisticated of all English Clubmen associations.”^[10] This document reveals some basic desires of the participants, yet insufficient for fulfilling Zagorin’s revolutionary scenario.

Clubmen movements broke out in parts of the country that, as one of their leaders put it, had “more deeply tasted the misery of this unnatural and intestine war.”^[11] One would be hard-pressed to find a group of people more adversely affected by the consequences of the bloody civil war than the inhabitants of the counties of Dorset and Wiltshire counties. These two counties were located in an area where parliamentary roundheads and royalist cavaliers battled frequently. Soldiers in both armies, often times underpaid and ill equipped, raided the inhabitants of these counties and plundered small communities in their path.

Nobody was spared. An aged laborer made a pathetic inventory of his household goods, all of which had been stolen by parliamentary soldiers:

7 pairs of sheets, 3 brass kettles, 2 brass pots, 5 pewter dishes, 4 shirts, 4 smocks, 2 coats, 1 cloak, 1 waistcoat, 7

dozen candles, 1 frying pan, 1 spit, 2 pairs of pot hooks, 1 peck of wheat, 4 bags, some oatmeal, some salt, a basketful of eggs, bowls, dishes, spoons, ladles, drinking pots, and whatsoever else they could lay their hands on.

Houses had been taken over as army quarters, and their original inhabitants ejected; crops had been trampled down by marching men or eaten by cavalry horses; taxes had been imposed and levies extracted by both sides; women had been violated and the rapists haphazardly punished.^[12] It is therefore not surprising that men in these ravaged villages formed the Clubmen associations in an attempt to stop the atrocities.

Morrill asserts that the primary task of the Clubmen was to prevent their own shires from becoming major battlegrounds.^[13] This assessment is clearly stated in *The Desires and Resolutions of the Clubmen of the Counties of Dorset and Wiltshire*. In this document the Clubmen express their desire first and foremost to end the war because of the fact that for three years the people inhabiting those counties admitted,

by free quarter and plunder of souldiers our purses have bin exhausted, corn eaten up, cattell plundered, persons frighted from our habitacons and by reason of the violence of the soldiers our lives are not safe, & have noe power nor authority to resist the same, nor releevd or secured upon any complaynts whereby we are disabled to pay our rents, just debts, or to mainteyne our wives and famylyes from utter ruin and decay.^[14]

Not surprisingly, the document reveals a strong desire to end the plunder by both King and Parliament so as to “peaceably return to their wonted habitations and to the obedience of the established laws.”^[15] While it may seem revolutionary to some that the Clubmen leaders enumerated their desires in such a manner, it is clear that they wish only to preserve their local situation, regardless of political happenings elsewhere in England. These demands express a communal desire to return to the status quo enjoyed prior to hostilities.

Upon examining these resolutions, successful implementation of the Clubmen into Zagorin’s revolutionary model becomes difficult at best. It is clear that violence did occur between the Clubmen and outside forces. In fact, as many as six hundred were killed in the war.^[16] While the Clubmen certainly aspired to change the policy of war, the resolutions make no mention of advocating a monumental change in government policy or of ending the regime of Charles I. They certainly were not calling for a major change in society and spoke much to restoring obedience to pre-Civil War laws. Underdown confirms this sentiment when he suggests that Clubmen of all areas, royalist or parliamentarian, had much in common: a firm attachment to ancient rights and customs, a vague nostalgia for the good old days of Queen Elizabeth, and an unquestioning acceptance of social order.^[17] Morrill agrees with these conclusions stating, “the Clubmen petitions show a yearning for settlement, but had nothing new to offer.”^[18]

If Clubmen were not a revolutionary situation, one must look elsewhere to properly classify them. Zagorin's definition of a riot seems a more appropriate fit for the Clubmen occurrence. Zagorin argues that riots differ from a rebellion in the following ways. First, they are mostly spontaneous protests in which planning and organization are minimal or nonexistent. Second, they are usually brief, lasting a day or two at the most. Third, their aims, if any, are often nonpolitical. Lastly, as spontaneous outbursts of popular anger, the nature of their protests predominate any instrumental purpose.^[19] The actions and resolutions of the Clubmen thus satisfy the requirements of this riotous scenario better than the aforementioned revolutionary one.

Evidence is abundant concerning the spontaneous reaction of the Clubmen towards the war. Several historians have argued that the Clubmen were purely a local phenomenon with scant evidence of widespread organization. Hutton cites the confusion and lack of cohesiveness by stating, "when they actually rose against troops they did so in small sects of villages, under different local leaders and with no common plan of action."^[20] Underdown, focusing on the three-county area of Dorset, Somerset, and Wiltshire, contends, that the "Peace-keeping associations" of Clubmen bent on protecting their homes and communities from destruction emerged "spontaneously" in all three counties.^[21] These examples support the fact that little planning accompanied the creation of these Clubmen groups.

Although Clubmen associations existed in ten counties during much of 1645, evidence suggests that their riotous flare-ups were short lived and unsuccessful. Morrill insists they were never an effective military force.^[22] Possibly the best example of the impotence of the Clubmen's military response to their adversaries occurred at Hambledon Hill in August of 1645, where they were easily defeated by the famed parliamentarian general Oliver Cromwell. After initial negotiations proved futile, Cromwell's forces routed an association of Dorset Clubmen numbering around two thousand, a force that nearly doubled that of Cromwell's. The victorious general described the ease of the victory in a letter he wrote to his colleague Sir Thomas Fairfax on 4 August:

I believe killed not twelve of them, but cut very many and put them all to flight. We have taken about three hundred; many of which are poor silly creatures, whom if you please to let send home, they promise to be very dutiful for time to come, and will be hanged before they come out again.^[23]

This episode illustrates that the biggest fight the clubmen militia could muster during the conflict ended in disaster; it was essentially a riot that lasted less than a day.

The Clubmen also seem to fit the third ingredient of Zagorin's definition of a riot. Their targets of affection, or detestation, often depended on their unique local situations. This is most evident in Underdown's "chalk and cheese" theory, which he applied to Wiltshire, Dorset, and Somerset counties. The historian contends that the Clubmen most

friendly to the royalist forces were from the “chalk” – nucleated settlements of the down lands. Those most friendly to the parliamentarians were from the “cheese” – fen-edge villages and clothing parishes of the wood-pasture region.^[24] Historian Simon Osborne breaks down the geographic patterns even more with his in-depth study of the proximity of Clubmen associations to various garrisons in the Midlands region. He claims that pinpointing areas of Clubmen strength and allegiance in the region becomes more complex when one takes into account the number of opposing garrisons juxtaposed in the hotly contested territory.^[25] These arguments support the spontaneity of the Clubmen responses, suggesting they were not entirely neutral. Rather, they selected their friends and foes based upon specific situations prevalent in each county. Each predicament and subsequent Clubmen response could therefore change at any given moment. Geography, opportunism, and self-interest then, likely led many Clubmen in England to lend their swords and talents to what looked like the stronger side at the time.^[26] As for the political aims of the Clubmen, the *Dorset/Wiltshire Resolutions* revealed the absence of them, especially at the national level.

As for the fourth and final component of Zagorin’s riotous situation, we have already witnessed the spontaneity with which the Clubmen associations often times were formulated. When conceptualizing the Clubmen it seems clear that they adequately fulfill Zagorin’s definition of a riot. It would also be fair to say that the associations fall short of completing the historian’s revolutionary components.

In fact, the Clubmen were most like the Nu-Pied peasant riots occurring in Normandy, France in 1639. The Nu-Pieds therefore offer another example with which one can test Zagorin’s definitions. The two movements mirror one another in many ways. Historian Ronald Mousnier describes these uprisings against new salt taxes imposed by the King, and the quartering of royal soldiers who came to collect the gabelle, as primarily regional, a contention not unlike the arguments made of the Clubmen by Underdown and Osborne. In fact, Underdown’s chalk and cheese rationalization applies to Normandy as well. The Bocage, or cheese region, exhibited much of the topographical features that Underdown argued fomented rebellious tendencies. Moreover, the Normandy inhabitants, much like their English brethren, vehemently attacked plundering soldiers that committed excesses, abuses, and malpractices against them.^[27]

Like the Clubmen, the Nu-Pieds attempted to form local militia associations to defend intrusions from outside their localities. The Nu-Pieds formed The Army of Suffering in July of 1639, a force resembling the Clubmen’s Peaceable Army assembled in the summer of 1645. Mobilization of these militia was conducted in much the same manner as bells were sounded to hastily summon them in defense of their respective village. In the end however, royal forces easily defeated the Nu-Pieds, similar to Cromwell’s victory over the Clubmen.

Mousnier maintains that the major concern of the Nu-Pieds, like their English cohorts, was the fear of external

forces. In the French case this concerned an overpowering central government infringing upon their local customs and traditions.^[28] In order to thwart these incursions, this riotous group not only raised a local army, but also composed poetry and compiled mottos to better inspire their ranks. A popular Clubmen sonnet bluntly stated:

If you offer to plunder or take our cattle,

Be assured we will bid you battle.^[29]

A Nu-Pied verse declared:

Help a brave nu-pieds,

Show that your towns are full

Of men of war zealous

To fight under his banner.

You see that everything is ready

For a fight to the death for freedom.

Like Rouen, Valognes, and Chartres,

Since they treat you with severity,

If you do not defend your charters,

Normans you are no men of courage.^[30]

Despite these literary efforts, the Nu-Pieds encountered the same fate as the Clubmen and were easily routed by the King's army by the end of 1639.

These riotous groups did not represent a revolutionary situation. Zagorin himself admits that the Nu-Pieds fall short of his vague, all-encompassing definition of revolution.^[31] The Clubmen demands pale in comparison to those personified by their more revolutionary-minded countrymen, the Levellers. *The Agreement of the People*, written by the Levellers in 1647, speaks to a radical change in national policy, one with more political representation by the masses.^[32] Leveller spokesman Col. Thomas Rainsborough and conservative parliamentarian Henry Ireton took part in one of the war's most spirited and revolutionary debates in October 1647. The two argued the extent to which popular sovereignty should be implemented in post-war England. The two also thrashed out such issues as the "overthrow of the fundamental constitution" and talked of "avoiding" monarchy and kings.^[33] These sentiments seem more in step with Zagorin's revolutionary scenario and seem to dwarf the requests of the Clubmen. So if the conservatism of the Clubmen was to prove more characteristic of the later 1640s than the iconoclasm of the Levellers, as Morrill contends, how can one say they were revolutionary?

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- [1] John Morrill, ed., *Reactions to the English Civil War* (New York, 1982), 21.
- [2] Charles Carlton, *The Experience of the British Civil Wars 1638-1651* (London, 1992), 290.
- [3] H.N. Brailsford, *The Levellers and the English Revolution* (Stanford, 1961), 13.
- [4] David Underdown, *Freeborn People: Politics and the Nation in Seventeenth-Century England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 9.
- [5] John Morrill, *The Revolt of the Provinces: Conservatives and Radicals in the English Civil War, 1630-1650* (London, 1976), 74.
- [6] Carlton, 290.
- [7] Quoted in Morrill, *The Revolt of the Provinces*, 102.
- [8] Carlton, 291.
- [9] Perez Zagorin, *Rebels and Rulers, 1500-1600* (Cambridge, 1982), 1: 17.
- [10] Ronald Hutton, *The Royalist War Effort, 1642-1646* (London, 1982), 180.
- [11] Carlton, 295.
- [12] Christopher Hibbert, *Cavaliers and Roundheads, The English Civil War, 1642-1649* (New York, 1993), 210.
- [13] Morrill, *The Revolt of the Provinces*, 100.
- [14] *Ibid.*, 198.
- [15] *Ibid.*, 197.
- [16] Carlton, 295.
- [17] David Underdown, "The Chalk and the Cheese: Contrast among the English Clubmen," *Past & Present* 85 (Nov. 1979): 47.
- [18] Morrill, *The Revolt of the Provinces*, 105.
- [19] Zagorin, 20.
- [20] Hutton, 181.
- [21] David Underdown, *Revel, Riot, and Rebellion: Popular Politics and Culture in England 1603-1660* (Oxford, 1985), 148.
- [22] Morrill, *The Revolt of the Provinces*, 98.
- [23] Thomas Carlyle, ed., *Oliver Cromwell's Letters and Speeches* (London, 1845), 197.
- [24] Underdown, "The Chalk and the Cheese," 30.
- [25] Simon Osborne, "The War, The People and the Absence of the Clubmen in the Midlands, 1642-1646," *Midland History* 19 (1994): 90.
- [26] Paul Gladwish, "The Herefordshire Clubmen: A Reassessment," *Midland History* 10 (1985): 65.
- [27] *Ibid.*, 89.
- [28] *Ibid.*, 110.
- [29] Carlton, 294.
- [30] Mousnier, 108.
- [31] Zagorin, 19-20.
- [32] David Wooton, *Divine Right and Democracy* (Harmondsworth, 1986), 283-5.
- [33] *Ibid.*, 296-7.