

RIOTS AS A MEASURE OF RELIGIOUS CONFLICT IN SEVENTEENTH AND EIGHTEENTH CENTURY ENGLAND

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The English break with Rome in the 16th century was accomplished without the violence and war that characterized the Reformation elsewhere in Europe. This is not because Englishmen were mild men with shallow religious experiences or men with a natural bent towards toleration. It was the strength of the Tudors and the cautious, latitudinarian settlement of Elizabeth that enabled the English to escape the terrors of civil war, while the Narrow Sea protected them from the armies of the Counter Reformation. But if the English Reformation was quiet by Continental standards, it was by no means peaceful. Protestants and Catholics died legally for their faith, and widespread, lawless violence destroyed much life and property.

And this violence, associated with the Reformation, did not end with the stable years of Elizabeth. The Reformation left a legacy of hatred that erupted into civil war in the 17th century and continued to create great public disturbances until the end of the 18th century. It is the violence of these centuries, specifically the urban riots, that I propose to examine. I believe that they are a significant indicator of the gradual subsiding of the religious intolerance that so marked the period before 1660.

1. *Definitions*

Before we can examine these urban riots it is necessary to define a few terms. I am defining "riots" as *activity by three or more people acting in a non-military capacity, publicly and consciously endangering life and property, and directing their efforts*

*against de facto governmental authority or against other members of the same political community.*¹

For this period of English history there is no difficulty in separating riots from other forms of urban violence—mutiny, insurrection, or revolution—but rather in distinguishing urban riots from rural uprisings. My definition makes no distinction between the two, though rural uprisings were normally directed against the high price of grain, turnpikes, landlords, or some other oppressive force; and urban riots were more frequently directed against other members of the community: during the 17th and 18th centuries usually Catholics, Dissenters, or political opponents. It is for this reason that I have selected urban riots rather than rural uprisings as a measure of religious conflict.

I propose to limit myself further to only those riots that I would consider primary. Secondary riots I would define as the endless minor battles that so characterized pre-industrial society throughout Europe. These riots were often no more than street-corner brawls, usually involving only scores of people and usually directed against some specific insult, real or imagined. Max

¹One modern dictionary defines riot as “wild and turbulent conduct, especially of a large number of persons, as a mob; uproar; tumult; fray.” The legal definition is only a little more helpful. Riot is defined as “a tumultuous disturbance of the peace by an assemblage of three or more persons who, with intent to help one another against any one who opposes them in the execution of some enterprise, actually execute that enterprise in a violent and turbulent manner, to the terror of the people.” The definition I have proposed enables us to exclude large gatherings of people protesting against something with peaceful intent (though such gatherings can easily become a riot), civilian defense of a city against hostile armies, civil war, mutiny, and insurrection. Insurrections, we may note, often include riots, but an insurrection is something more. It is a rebellion against established authority, usually by armed men, with the intent of destroying permanently that authority. An insurrection becomes a revolution when it succeeds or when the people involved seek a new authority or new basis of order. For this see R. R. Palmer, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution: The Challenge* (Princeton, 1959), p. 198. The attack on the Bastille is a good example of a riot that became an insurrection and eventually part of a revolution. The uprising in Detroit in 1967 was clearly a riot, and the Nat Turner revolt of 1831 was an insurrection.

Beloff² has described riots at this level in almost all places over almost every conceivable issue: apprentices fighting among themselves or with outsiders; food riots, election riots, enclosure riots, excise riots; riots at executions, fairs, and houses of ill fame; riots over recoinage, military recruiting, smuggling; riots between soldiers and civilians, students and townsmen.

The great urban crises that occasionally brought to a halt normal urban life I call primary riots. Though these riots always broke out in response to some immediate provocation or opportunity, they always grew out of long-cherished hatreds against some religious, national, or occupational minority, or a "tyrannical" government. They tended to be ideologically based, i.e., based not simply on poverty or frustration, but on a conviction that someone or some group threatened the traditional way of life. Primary riots usually involved thousands of people, sometimes a sizable fraction of the inhabitants of the city, and often continued for several days. Perhaps the most precise distinguishing mark of a primary riot was that the mob controlled the city, or whatever part of the city it chose, and could defy the attempts of the magistrates to restore order. Only professional soldiers could subdue these mobs.³

² *Public Order and Popular Disturbances 1660-1714* (Oxford, 1938).

³ Riot was and is an indictable misdemeanor at common law. But not until 1714 did a statute define offenses of riot attended by circumstances of aggravation. An act of that year required the justice of the peace, sheriff, mayor or other authority, when twelve or more persons assembled together unlawfully to the disturbance of the public peace, to read a proclamation requiring all such persons assembled to disperse immediately. To obstruct the reading of the riot act or to continue together unlawfully for one hour after the proclamation was a felony. When the hour had passed the magistrate could act without liability for injuries caused. The law required all subjects, both civilian and military, to cooperate with the magistrate in the restoration of order. Usually the militia, or in London the train-bands, would be sufficient. But the only force sufficient to quell a primary riot was a professional military force, usually the household cavalry and foot guards, or regular army detachments. Since English magistrates, especially after the struggles with the Stuarts, were sensitive to the popular fears of a standing army—a threat to the liberties of Englishmen—and reluctant to call in troops unless absolutely necessary, some secondary riots were allowed to become primary for lack of a prompt show of force.

These are the riots that I wish to study as measures of religious conflict in 17th and 18th century England. I believe that they are valuable indicators of the level of religious intolerance that remained in England for 250 years following Henry's break with Rome. The violent legacy of the Reformation lingered on till the industrial revolution made class divisions more important than religious ones.

2. Primary Riots of the 16th and 17th Centuries

Knowing of the violence that marked the English Reformation one might expect to find the 16th century filled with numerous primary riots. But this is not the case. The only primary riot in 16th century England was in 1517, the evil May-Day Riot of that year directed against foreigners.⁴ The lack of primary riots is surprising; for secondary riots, especially food riots, occurred with regularity throughout the century, and rural uprisings were frequent through the reign of Mary Tudor.⁵

Perhaps the absence of primary riots can be explained by the iron grip the Tudors had on London and other urban centers; or perhaps the changes in religion and economic organization found their greatest resistance in the country. Perhaps the explanation is that in England monarchs imposed the Reformation from above, making it necessary for those in opposition to organize on a military footing to strike back, as did the Pilgrims of Grace in 1536 or Sir Thomas Wyatt's Gentlemen of Kent in 1554. In Scotland, where the Reformation came from below, primary riots were frequent. Those wanting change were not kings anxious to preserve order, but common people bent on creating disorder if

⁴ Martin Holmes, "Evil May-Day of 1517: the Story of a Riot," *History Today* 15 (September 1965): 642-650.

⁵ Food riots broke out in 1527, 1551, 1587, 1599, 1622, 1623, and 1630 (Beloff, p. 56). The major rural uprisings were the Pilgrimage of Grace in 1536; Kett's rebellion in Norfolk in 1549; the rising in Cornwall in 1549; and Sir Thomas Wyatt's rebellion in 1554. Many of these risings did spill over into London and some of the country towns, but the urban violence that resulted does not fit within my definition of riot, because these forces were organized

that was necessary to purify the faith.

Religion did provoke primary riots in the 17th century, the century of the Civil War.⁶ This war, I believe, should be considered the War of the English Reformation. The strong Tudors had given way to the weak Stuarts, and the Reformation which the Tudors had kept under control now erupted with full fury. Of course, the English, by postponing their civil war 100 years, changed its nature greatly. Instead of the war being between Catholics and Protestants, it was between moderate Protestants and radical Protestants. And, of course, many constitutional and some economic issues were added. But until 1660 the Anglican settlement was not complete. With the Restoration of the Stuarts and the entrenchment of the Anglican gentry the English Reformation was finished. To the previous proscriptions against Catholics were added the Clarendon Codes, restricting the free exercise of left-wing Protestantism.

The Anglican Church, though it remained moderate, was no longer latitudinarian, but its monopoly of political power was secure. Only one serious threat remained: an attack from the right, launched by Charles II and James II. But James was de-

in a military fashion and behaved as armies, albeit not with the discipline one expects from a formal military organization. One must recognize, however, that even battle veterans often lose much of their discipline when assaulting a city. G. R. Elton, *England Under the Tudors* (London 1955), p. 59, tells us that in the Tudor period men were too quick to draw weapons, and riots were common. Hundreds of small affrays and riots year by year were one of the most pressing problems of government.

⁶ A riot in 1626 in which a mob killed Dr. John Lambe, a creature of the hated Duke of Buckingham, and another riot caused by the arrest of a man on Fleet Street are civic disputes that cannot be considered part of the Civil-War violence. The first of the riots associated with the Civil War occurred in 1640. Lambeth Palace, the residence of the hated Archbishop of Canterbury, William Laud, and St. Paul's, where the High Commission was sitting, were the targets of mobs numbering up to 2000. The train-bands with some difficulty restored order. Late in the same year a mob numbering perhaps 6000 threatened the residence of the Spanish ambassador and other places where papists were thought to be gathered for mass. For these riots see William Thornton, *The New, Complete, and Universal History, Description, and Survey of the Cities of London, Westminster, etc.* (London, 1784), pp. 180-181.

feated, and with the Glorious Revolution the supremacy of Parliament and Anglicanism was secured. This, of course, is hindsight. Contemporaries could not be so certain that the political and religious settlement was safe. The urban riots that had always been a regular feature of English life, took on a marked religious tone as the Anglican establishment continued to strike out against imagined threats, primarily from Dissent, but also from Catholicism.

Let us now examine these primary urban riots, commencing with two riots that illustrate the hostility many of London's lower class felt towards the new Puritan establishment.

In 1647 and 1648 London was the scene of almost constant rioting. The hardships of war: no trade, no money, many industries closed, and numerous deserters, all created ideal conditions for riot. In late July of 1647 apprentices petitioned for the restoration of the King and protested against the militia ordinance of July 23. This ordinance replaced the existing militia committee, selected by the corporation and favorable to the King, with one selected by the army. On the 26th a huge mob frightened the Parliament into revoking the hated ordinance and remained in control of the city till August 6 when Sir Thomas Fairfax entered the City with a large part of the parliamentary army.⁷

The greatest riot of the Civil War, the "mutiny" in London in 1648, seems to have been a reaction against the moral zeal of the Puritans and the instability of a country without a king. On March 27, in celebration of coronation day, mobs lit great bonfires in the city and forced all passing through the streets to shout for King Charles. This royalism and profanation of the Sabbath called forth a response from the puritan authorities. The Lord Mayor and the justices of the peace in Middlesex determined to effect a reformation, beginning on Saturday, April 8. All went well the first day, but on Sunday morning the train-bands for

⁷ Sir Walter Besant, *London in the Time of the Stuarts* (London, 1904), pp. 55-58; *London During the Great Rebellion . . .* (London, 1648), p. 34.

Middlesex, evidently on patrol to enforce Sabbath observance, found some young men playing "cat" and drinking. After exchanging shouts, the train-band fired, using only powder, in an attempt to scare them off, but the crowd returned stones. In the battle that erupted, the train-bands captured two and drove off the rest. Soon the mob rallied and began to drive the train-bands back towards the City. The forces of authority fired again, this time using lead, and this time slaying one, but the mob marched on. At Whitechapel some seized the colors of a train-band company; others marched into Smithfield breaking open houses and plundering money, plate, and anything else they could carry off. The largest part of the mob marched to Whitehall, but was dispersed by troops in the mews.

During the night the mob controlled the city. Prisons and magazines were opened and looting was widespread. In one armourer's shop the rioters seized money and plate valued at £100 and 400 weapons. Morning found the committee of militia, guarded by a force from the train-bands and two field pieces, under attack at the Lord Mayor's house. After a short parley, the mob, shouting "Fall On! Fall On!" surged forward, capturing one gun before being driven off. Two of the rioters and one of the defenders lay dead. From here the mob marched to Newgate and Ludgate, beating drums for the raising of forces. The crowd of supporters, and perhaps of the curious, who followed the 500 armed men grew to huge proportions. Everywhere they cried "For God and King Charles!" From here the mob divided into two main bodies and several subdivisions. One group held the gates and forced the country people to hold a market at Smithfield, Holborn, and other places without the gates. The other marched to the Royal Exchange with the gun. During the day, horse and foot from Lord Fairfax's army (he succeeded to the title in March) gathered under the command of several officers and about 7:00 in the evening gave chase to the main party of rioters. After a short pursuit the opposing forces engaged in Leadenhall.

The soldiers charged, despite the firing of the gun, and scattered the mob. Isolated firing continued from the windows, but the resistance had been broken. Both sides suffered many dead and wounded, and many more were later executed.⁸

What happened in London had its counterpart elsewhere in 1648. Both Bury St. Edmunds and Norwich had similar riots where men crying for King Charles attempted to take control of the city.⁹ The primary riots of the Civil War period might be considered part of the war, but though arms were used, the rioters acted as individuals. No military leader emerged, and the pattern of looting and property damage, at least in London, clearly marks this violence as a riot. We should note, however, that indiscriminate looting was not the usual activity of an English mob. When directed against specific minorities, riots were, as we shall see, quite disciplined, but in this riot the enemy was established authority, and thus all wealth was fair game.

The Glorious Revolution of 1688, though peaceful compared with the Civil War of the previous generation, did occasion numerous great riots. The fear and hatred of papists found expression in public attacks even before the Stuart power was broken.¹⁰ And

⁸ *The Rising and the Routing of the Mutineers in the City of London on the 9th and 10th of April 1648* (London, 1648); *An Act and Declaration of the Common Council of the City of London Touching the Late Insurrections*, etc. (London, 1648); *A Full Narration of the Late Tumult within the City of London. . . Presented to the House of Peers 13 April 1648* (London, 1648).

⁹ For the riot in Bury see *Perfect Occurrences of Every Daies Journall in Parliament and Perfect Diurnall of Some Passages in Parliament*. For Norwich see *A True Relation of the Late Great Mutiny which was in the City and County of Norwich, April 24, 1648*, etc. (London, 1648); *A True Answer of the Parliament . . . Likewise a Letter from Norwich . . . of blowing up the Magazine There*, etc. (London, 1648).

¹⁰ In May 1686 a large anti-papist mob—the word mobile had become fashionable in the 1660's, and Bishop Burnet of Salisbury had shortened it to mob—paraded in Bristol and resisted the soldiers sent to restore order. A mob in Norwich on December 7, 1687, destroyed a Catholic chapel and sacked many houses belonging to Catholics. Not till the next day did the trainbands disperse them. John Latimer, *Annals of Bristol in the Seventeenth Century* (Bristol, 1900), p. 439; *The History of the City of Norwich, from the Earliest Records to the Present Time* (Norwich, 1869), p. 261.

a primary riot broke out in London when James II, convinced that all his subjects were turning to William, fled London in the early morning hours of December 11. By leaving the city without a government, James abandoned his friends to the fury of his enemies. The hatred of the populace was directed against Catholics. Despite the attempts of the leading peers to secure peace in the metropolis, unrest swept the city as news of James' departure became known. Crowds of several thousand began to gather and attack Catholic chapels, the homes of Catholics, and any house where they believed either priests or papists were hiding. That night and again the next day the mob had possession of the city. On the evening of the 12th, numerous train-bands, bodies of horse and foot, and cannons stationed at strategic points in the city brought the mobs under control. The destruction in London was great. Besides many private dwellings, the rioters had destroyed four Catholic chapels, three residences of foreign ambassadors, and one printing house. Despite the length and destruction of the Revolution riots in London, I have seen only one record of a death—the accidental shooting of an officer by one of his command.

3. *Pattern of the Riots of 1688 and 1710*

The pattern of the riot of 1688 is of great interest. The mobs apparently had leaders of their own choosing and attacked only property of Catholics or Catholic sympathizers. The rioters did not burn the buildings, for to do so would have threatened the other structures in the row; rather they pulled all the trimmings into the street—furniture, books and pictures, and all movable property, along with doors, window frames, interior paneling and even some of the beams—and burned them in great bonfires. Of course, all this was associated with much shouting, parades, and the breaking of windows that did not illuminate. Though some rioters undoubtedly looted, the general pattern was to destroy rather than carry away. Bishop Burnet said: "None were

killed, no houses burnt, nor were any robberies committed. Never was so much fury seen under so much management."¹¹

In 1710 mobs attacking the opposite religious body, the Dissenters, displayed the same discipline. The impeachment of the popular Dr. Henry Sacheverell, a Tory partisan and chaplain of St. Savior's Southwark, for a sermon denouncing the Whigs, condemning toleration and occasional conformity, and even implying that the Glorious Revolution had been rebellion against divine-right monarchy, led to riots against Dissenters. They were thought to be behind this plot against the divine who dared to speak so boldly against false brethren within the Kingdom. Many believed that the Church was in danger.

On the first day of his trial, February 27, a crowd of butchers, sweeps, watermen, disbanded soldiers, servants, and artisans attended the doctor to his trial at Westminster Hall. On the second day the members of the crowd did not content themselves with

¹¹ The most complete accounts of the Revolution riots are in Beloff, pp. 40-44; and Thomas Babington Macaulay, *The History of England from the Accession of James II*, chapter 10 (any edition). Beloff and Macaulay cite the primary accounts. The most valuable are *The Ellis Correspondence: Letters Written during the Years 1686, 1687, 1688, and Addressed to John Ellis, Esq., Secretary to Commissioners of His Majesty's Revenue in Ireland . . .*, ed. Hon. G. J. W. Agar-Ellis, Lord Dover (2 vols; London, 1829), 2: 349-357; *A Brief Historical Relation of the State of Affairs from September 1678 to April 1714* by Narcissus Luttrell (6 vols.; Oxford, 1857), 1:485-487. See also *Bishop Burnett's History of His Own Time . . .* (6 vols.; Oxford, 1823), 3: 329-330.

The violence was not confined to the city. The fury spread into most parts of England, especially in the Southern and Midland counties, "where the Catholic houses were generally plunder'd and gutted (as they then termed it) by the neighbouring Rabble." The wording of this in the life of James II (*The Life of James II . . . Collected out of Memoirs Writ of His Own Hand . . . Published from the Original Stuart Mss. in Carlton House*, ed. J. S. Clarke [2 vols.; London, 1816], 2: 257) is significant. The words plundered and gutted referred specifically to the method of destroying the houses without setting them afire and thus endangering neighboring houses. The method we observed in London was the pattern throughout the country. There is specific evidence for riots at Reading, Bristol, Cambridgeshire, Northamptonshire, Norfolk, Suffolk, Kent, Westmorland, and of course Edinburgh. For these see Beloff, *The Life of James II*, and Macaulay.

The population of London in 1688 was approximately 300,000.

escorting their favorite, but amidst shouts for "High Church and Sacheverell" and "The Church is in Danger!" assaulted bystanders who would not doff their hats for the doctor. That night mobs began to pull down Presbyterian meeting houses. The rioting continued the next night. In all, nearly 10 meeting houses plus houses of prominent Dissenters and enemies of the doctor were attacked. The second night the prompt dispatch of the horse guards helped keep the destruction from spreading, and the next morning, March 2, a show of force in the streets—train-bands, horse, and foot—reduced the crowds and restored quiet.

The rioters followed the same pattern as in 1688. Mobs consisting mainly of apprentices, ex-colliers, and men from the artisan class attacked only the buildings of those they hated. Specifically they pulled down the churches, burning the pews, pulpits, cushions, hymn books, doors, window frames, and flooring in the streets. There was no looting. Not by accident did the other houses remain untouched by fire. The mobs were consciously trying to limit their destruction. No evidence supports the assertion of some contemporaries that gentlemen encouraged and directed the mobs. The mob activity was in fact a politically conscious, if bigoted and violent, expression of opinion.¹²

¹² The most complete and accurate accounts of the Sacheverell riots are in Abel Boyer, *The History of the Life and Reign of Queen Anne*, . . . (London, 1722), pp. 416-418; Abel Boyer, *The History of the Reign of Queen Anne Digested into Annals* (11 vols.; London, 1703-1713), 9: 197-202. A long, but confusing, description is in Walter Thornbury, "London Riots: The High Church Riots of Queen Anne's Time (Trial of Dr. Sacheverell)," *The Antiquary* 4 (August 1873): 49 ff. *Bishop Burnet's History of His Own Time*, pp. 425, 430-431, has opinions on the causes, but little on the riots themselves. See also Edmund Calamy, *An Historical Account of My own Life*, . . . 1671-1731 (2 vols.; London, 1829), 2: 227-228. For an extensive account of the entire Sacheverell affair see John Hill Burton, *A History of the Reign of Queen Anne* (3 vols.; Edinburgh, 1880), 3: 179-296.

A committee of the House of Commons reported in 1711 that there were within the cities of London and Westminster and the suburbs thereof 88 meeting houses for Dissenters.

There were no more primary riots directed against Dissenters until the Birmingham riots in 1791, but secondary disorders continued with frequency for at least another six years and appeared occasionally throughout the

century. In the autumn of 1710, High Church mobs turned out to help Harley's new Tory ministry secure a large majority in the general election. Once again Whigs and Dissenters found themselves the objects of attack. Bishop Burnet said the violence went beyond anything he had ever known, and Daniel Defoe wrote of swords and staves as well as stones and brickbats. Even the Civil War, he said, "was not carried on with such a spirit of fury." Serious disturbances occurred at Chester, Marlow, Whitechurch, Coventry, Chippenham, Newark, Southwark, St. Albans, Westminster, London, and elsewhere. For these riots see William Thomas Morgan, "An Eighteenth Century Election in England," *Political Science Quarterly* 37 (December 1922): 585-604. In November of 1714 the coronation of George I sparked further anti-Dissent riots—the ones that brought about the strengthening of the law regarding riots. These were particularly bad at Bristol. Again at the general election in May of 1715 riots were frequent. For these see Beloff, p. 55.

(To be continued)