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What news?

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*The Pilgrimage of Grace and the Politics of the 1530s* by R.W. Hoyle

The crisis, the most severe to hit the regime since it had come into office, began in Lincolnshire. Columns of smoke rose above the English countryside. At one point the nation’s leader was tempted to take personal charge of the management of the crisis. But when the Lincolnshire problem proved to be shortlived, he unwisely wound the preventative operation down, persuading himself that the crisis was under control, even over. But at that very moment it spread to Yorkshire, into the pastoral uplands of Richmondshire, on towards Skipton and the Lake District, and down the Ribble valley into north Lancashire. It is a question whether these new outbreaks were independent and spontaneous, or deliberately propagated from the original flashpoints. But there is no doubt that they were accompanied and fed by rumours and fear. The Government in London was itself a victim of the rumour mill. ‘This matter hangeth yet like a fever, one day good, one day bad.’ The result of the crisis and of its mismanagement was personal ruin for many and the end of a way of life in the North Country, symbolised by the monasteries, now facing wholesale dissolution.

The last sentence gives the game away. The smoke rose from the burning roofs of monasteries, not from animal funeral pyres; the crisis was not foot and mouth but rebellion. The Pilgrimage of Grace, as the convulsions came to be known, was the largest and most menacing of a succession of ‘Tudor Rebellions’, to quote the title of a seasoned classic by Anthony Fletcher (1968), recently revised by Diarmaid MacCulloch and reissued (1997). But in the perception of the actors this was not rebellion at all, and when they found themselves described as rebels in intercepted government bulletins, their fury almost turned them into what they were sure they were not. The events of 1536-37, a watershed in the history of the North of England and regarded by R.W. Hoyle as England’s War of Religion (albeit a war in which almost no shots were fired), were in the perception of the time ‘commotions’, ‘tumults’, and this is how historians, too, can best understand them.

The commotions themselves were all contained within less than six months, and lasted under a fortnight in the case of the original explosion in north-east Lincolnshire. So, as bare
narrative, the story is quickly told and occupies only eight of Hoyle’s 487 pages. The summer of 1536 had seen the adoption of a series of alarmingly radical alterations in religion, new things for the clergy to know and do, new demands on their pockets, the threatened loss of the rich treasures of the parish churches. The smaller monasteries were being dissolved. Where would all this end? Were the churches themselves safe? And this was happening in the midst of a major political crisis at the centre: the old and discarded queen (Catherine of Aragon) dead, the new one (Anne Boleyn) decapitated, an indecently hasty third royal marriage, the Princess Mary and her conservative supporters neatly sidestepped. Since the King could not be directly blamed for these upsets, those who disliked them (most people?) pointed the finger at his upstart ministers, and above all at Thomas Cromwell, whose personal role in ‘all this’ is still debated.

The way in which the commotions began tends to support the view of, among others, Abraham Lincoln and Harold Macmillan that events are the motors of history, not policy decisions, or, according to Hoyle, the deeper underlying structures, the slowly shifting tectonic plates preferred by Braudel and his school. The unfortunately coincidental presence in north-east Lincolnshire in early October 1536 of three sets of commissioners – one to oversee the dissolution of the lesser monasteries, an ecclesiastical visitation mostly bearing on the clergy and a gathering of the gentry to deal with matters of taxation – allowed a local riot in the market town of Louth to spread rapidly into an insurrection which engulfed much of the county, put the gentry at the mercy of the insurgents and occupied Lincoln itself.

What appears to have lit this fuse was fear that the church goods of Louth, and of other towns, were about to be confiscated. The question remains whether the igniting spark was instinctive, as instinctive as the cry of one of the male choristers as the men of Louth followed a great silver cross in procession: ‘Go we follow the crosses for and if they are taken from us, we will follow them no more.’ The evidence against spontaneity concerns, in part, the role of the clergy, who had gathered in numbers for a visitation which appeared to endanger their professional interests. Within days as many as twenty thousand men were ‘up’, which is to say, up in arms, and sworn to a vaguely worded oath, which they enforced on the gentry. But within as many days, with no promise to meet their demands, the Lincolnshire men were persuaded to go home. Their movement had fizzled out. Any credit belonged to the Lincolnshire gentry, who had regained control.

So Henry VIII ordered the disbandment of an Army Royal, also numbering about twenty thousand, which had mustered in Bedfordshire to confront the insurgents if they advanced on London, and, if necessary, to move into Lincolnshire to solve the problem by brute force. This proved to be an expensive mistake, since as things quietened down in Lincolnshire, the movement crossed the Humber into the East Riding of Yorkshire. This was initially a copycat rising, prompted by the same fears about the supposed threat to traditional religion. What made it different was the leadership of the lawyer Robert Aske, leadership of a kind which had been lacking in Lincolnshire. For Aske had charisma and, it appears, boundless personal
ambition. It was Aske who invented the logo ‘Pilgrimage of Grace’, declaring himself ‘chief captain’ of the Pilgrimage, and Aske who had the vision to define it as a movement for the defence of the Church and the defenestration of the King’s heretical councillors, especially Cromwell and Archbishop Cranmer.

The disturbances which soon followed, in Richmondshire and beyond, were not totally disconnected, but under a shadowy leadership calling itself ‘Captain Poverty’ the concerns were different, a series of ‘local bushfires’ taking their colour from local preoccupations: there was no single, co-ordinated Pilgrimage. The further to the north-west the disturbances spread, the greater the resentment against landlords and their renting and leasing policies. At Kirkby Stephen the main grievance seems to have been London’s inexplicable abolition of the annual St Luke’s Day holiday, putting paid to the local fair which went with it. There was a kind of climax in the siege of Pontefract Castle, one of the few defensible places remaining in loyal hands, the ostensibly loyal hands of the veteran soldier, Lord Darcy, a scenario reminiscent of *Ivanhoe*. (Had the Middle Ages ended?) According to his own muster book, Darcy could raise only 260 fighting men to confront the many thousand Pilgrims now occupying York. Without help from further afield Darcy had little choice but to surrender Pontefract, and thereafter, from perhaps a mixture of motives, to work with rather than against the Pilgrims. This, at least, is Hoyle’s opinion, which is not universally shared.

There followed a standoff at Doncaster, where there might have been a battle had it not been for the bad weather. But the military situation was grossly unequal, and at this point the Pilgrims were in possession of the field. They had nine regional armies, perhaps fifty thousand armed men. They occupied York and every other major town. The whole of England north of the Trent was in their hands and the only weapon in the hands of the Royal Commander, the heavily outnumbered Duke of Norfolk, was smooth talk. Exceeding his instructions, Norfolk negotiated a truce, pending an answer from the King to the Pilgrims’ inchoate demands.

This might have been a replay of what had happened in Lincolnshire. The Pilgrims began to disperse, and the gentry now had the opportunity to ditch Aske, regain control, and allow individuals to make what terms they could with the Government. But the Government was Henry VIII, who was not interested in any conciliatory settlement. Expressing incomprehension that his regality should be challenged by ‘a rebellion attempted for matters of weddings, christenings, churches, eating white bread’, the King took time to respond, then demanded unqualified submission, which, given the military situation, was, Hoyle tells us, ‘nonsense’.

Henry VIII had complained that the Pilgrims’ articles were ‘dark, general and obscure’. The North responded with the precision of the Pontefract Articles of 6 December, which, accompanied by articles from the clergy, demanded many things, including the reversal in its entirety of the Henrician Reformation. There could have been no settlement on that basis –
nor was there. In a second round of Doncaster negotiations, the Pilgrimage was effectively wound up on the promise of a pardon and of a parliament to meet in the North, and some concessions in respect of the monasteries. The pardon, for what it was worth, took effect. It was issued over the Great Seal and applied to everyone without exception, the only occasion in Henry VIII’s reign when traitors were so indulged. This was, Hoyle says, quite literally a gentlemen’s agreement. ‘To say that events at Doncaster were anticlimactic is an understatement.’

Aske’s ego seems to have allowed him to be taken in (he was the King’s household guest over Christmas), but many of his troopers were not deceived. Their justified suspicions contributed to the abortive, secondary episodes which occurred in the new year. The only outcome of this ‘mad, inept, ill-prepared rising’, led by the maverick Sir Francis Bigod, was to give the King the excuse he needed to take his revenge. Now, while the rank and file of the Pilgrimage melted back into their natural obscurity, Henry proceeded to execute the bigger names, including not only Aske but Darcy, who went to the scaffold protesting that the King had never lost a truer servant and subject. Up in Cumberland, the Earl of Sussex, less squeamish than Norfolk, ‘had no hesitation about hanging people’. Of course, the parliament promised at Doncaster never happened; while most of the insults to traditional religion which were a matter of unjustified rumour at Louth in October 1536 were duly enforced in the reigns of Henry VIII’s children Edward and Elizabeth.

So much for the events. But it is the interpretation of the events which has generated a small shelf’s worth of books and articles on the subject of the Pilgrimage of Grace, of which Hoyle’s is only the latest, if the most accessible. There are two clusters of questions to which historians have given their various answers. Was the underlying motivation of the Pilgrimage religious or secular? And was this a genuinely ‘popular’ rising (and what would it mean to call it that?), or were the commons manipulated by their social betters, the ruling gentry and nobility, with a supporting cast of self-interested clergy?

The first question has been in many ways badly framed. For one thing, the Pilgrimage was not a monolith. The articulated grievances of Richmondshire and Westmorland had to do with rents and entry fines; the issues in Lincolnshire fell within a category which we ought to regard as religious; and Aske specifically denied that his Pilgrimage was ‘for the Commonwealth’. But the religious/secular dichotomy is modern and anachronistic, tending to overlook the threefold role of religion in movements of this kind: precipitation, bonding and legitimation, functions emphasised by C.S.L. Davies and by S.M. Harrison in his account of the supposedly religionless rising in the Lake Counties. To restrict ‘religion’ in the 16th century to matters ‘spiritual’ and to ‘Catholic idealism’, even to exclude the preservation of monasteries as a ‘religious’ cause, as the late A.G. Dickens seems to have done in an essay on ‘Secular and Religious Motivation’, is myopic and misses the point.

The questions, popular or aristocratic, spontaneous or politically motivated, have more
mileage in them, and these are the ones Hoyle is most interested in pursuing. All historical interpretation tends to reflect its own times and circumstances. This is true even of the massive two-volume study of the Pilgrimage published in 1915 by the sisters Madeleine Hope Dodds and Ruth Dodds, which, rather like Samuel Rawson Gardiner’s account of the 17th century, has tended to stand above controversy as a massively well-documented, impeccable narrative, a quarry for all subsequent historians of the subject; in the Dodds’ own perception, ‘scientific history’; in G.R. Elton’s judgment, ‘beyond challenge’. But Hoyle puts his finger on the Dodds’ predicament. As liberal, Whiggish historians (which goes for Gardiner, too), they wanted to celebrate the Pilgrimage as a noble episode in the struggle between liberty and despotism. Aske was their idealised hero. But the Pilgrims were on the wrong side. They were Catholics, which meant they could not really be progressive. So the Doddses over-emphasised the non-religious factors in the movement, and perhaps drew after them Dickens who, fifty years after the publication of their book, corresponded with the sisters while composing his own piece on ‘Secular and Religious Motivation’.

Mervyn James, a leading historian of the Tudor North whose interests made him sympathetic to Darcy’s question ‘what is a man but his promise?’, favoured aristocratic explanations. The most extreme version of the Pilgrimage, however, was contributed by Elton. Since he took little interest in any history which did not concern national politics, Elton was bound to interpret the Pilgrimage in those terms, as a desperate last throw by a Court faction loyal to the dead Catherine of Aragon and to the due place in the legitimate succession of Catherine’s daughter, the Princess Mary. Elton robustly dismissed all suggestions that the risings were, or even could have been, spontaneous. The cast of thousands were a rent-a-mob. Confronted by the self-justificatory pleas of the gentry, from Darcy downwards, that they had been coerced into participation, he asked them to pull the other one. And he claimed ‘plain evidence’ of high-level conspiracy, specifically on the part of Darcy and two other key figures, Lord Hussey of Lincolnshire and Sir Robert Constable of the East Riding, who were to share Darcy’s fate as traitors. ‘The northern risings represent the effort of a defeated Court faction to create a powerbase in the country for the purpose of achieving a political victory at Court.’

But the evidence is not all that plain. Certainly, Darcy and Hussey had dabbled in conspiracy in the past, when they had tried to draw the Imperial Ambassador Eustache Chapuys into their schemes. Elton asks how it was that thousands of badges displaying the five wounds of Christ, Darcy’s personal emblem, suddenly became available as the strip (as it were) of the Pilgrims. Could that possibly have been spontaneous? It is a tricky question, which Darcy’s interrogators put to him in 14 different ways. But Hoyle suspects that the badges may have been prepared against an abortive rebellion planned for 1534, and there is in fact little or no hard evidence of high-level conspiracy in 1536.

Of course Hoyle is not uniquely immune from what he calls the disposition of historians to see the past through the prism of their own times. Some of the best history is currently being written from the bottom up, and this is, admittedly, a fashion. Steve Hindle is probing ever
deeper into the politics of the parish. One thinks of Andy Wood’s *The Politics of Social Conflict* (1999), its subject the illiterate but well-informed and litigious lead miners of the Peak Country; or of John Walter’s *Understanding Popular Violence in the English Revolution* (1999) which, without being able to put a single name to any of the Colchester plunderers of 1642 (the historian of the Pilgrimage of Grace is very much better off), deciphers the popular politics of attacks on the property of Catholics and crypto-Catholics on the eve of the Civil War. What these studies have in common is respect for the informed agency of the common people of early modern England. They knew what they wanted, even if what they wanted was often beyond their grasp.

As for Hoyle’s populist and ‘religious’ account of the Pilgrimage, it has been anticipated, in many of its elements, by Michael Bush’s *The Pilgrimage of Grace* (1996) and *The Defeat of the Pilgrimage of Grace* (1999), which he wrote with David Bownes. But to say that Hoyle shares with other historians what Bishop Sheppard of Liverpool called a bias, if not towards the poor then towards the people, a trendy bias, is not to say that he is wrong, or even that his history is prejudicial. On the contrary, what he is offering is not unsubstantiated opinion but a meticulous evaluation of the examinations and testimonies of the participants, going behind the printed Calendar to that mine of information which is the State Papers themselves, in the Public Record Office, and an unrivalled knowledge of the grass-roots politics of Northern England. There will never be a definitive history of the Pilgrimage. But this is as close to it as we may hope to get.

There are two contentious matters for Hoyle to explore. Were the common people sufficiently well-informed and organised to have a politics of their own, to launch on their own volition something on the scale of the Lincolnshire Rebellion and the Pilgrimage of Grace? And how did their objectives and initiatives interrelate and interact with the interests of their social betters, the nobility and gentry who constituted the upper echelons of local and regional government in Tudor England? To be specific, was Elton right to be sceptical about the claims of the gentry to have been coerced, even terrorised, into assuming leadership of these commotions? Beyond these questions lies another: what was the nature of the relationships which bound the social orders into a commonwealth which only occasionally, as in 1536, became dysfunctional?

Hoyle is in no doubt about the capacity of the commons to be informed, even if often ill-informed, about matters beyond their immediate parochial horizons, and to act on their knowledge. They were ‘avid devourers of news and gossip’, and the distinction between gossip and news is as arbitrary and false for the 16th century as it is for this age of the tabloids. When a high-ranking Government official arrived in Darlington in January 1537, the street outside his inn filled with people who demanded ‘what news?’ When told that Sir Ralph Sadler was an Ambassador on his way to Scotland, one of them said that that could not be so, since the King of Scots was at that moment in France; which was true. Hoyle believes that the commons knew a great deal about the events of the day and were able to read them in a
political fashion.

But ‘the commons’ is too crude a category. As these events developed, there was evidence, as we should expect, of tensions between the poorer people, the ‘lighter sort’, who were the most volatile, and the more responsible ‘honest men’, who at base level were the natural leaders of their communities. Both sorts were most visible, as potentially antagonistic parties, in the towns, which played a larger part in the commotions than has been allowed. Historians of the so-called Peasants’ Revolt of 1381 have already come to similar conclusions.

On the second question, Hoyle presents overwhelming evidence of intimidation. When the insurgent commons threatened to cut off heads and to despoil gentry property, they were believed, or at least their bluff was not called. (No heads were cut off, although the Chancellor of Lincoln diocese was bludgeoned to death by his own clergy.) Perhaps the gentry had little choice but to play the part demanded of them and to assume a role of leadership in the rebellion which, if we do not understand the nature of 16th-century society and politics, may seem inexplicable. A good case for the defence is presented even on behalf of Lord Darcy, who may have sympathised with the Pilgrims but whose reasons for surrendering Pontefract had most to do with the failure of the Government to supply him with what he called ‘furniture’. Was he supposed to play the part of General Gordon in Khartoum in 1884? Hoyle believes that Darcy has been misunderstood. It must be said, however, that the gentry were at best neutral, and that when neutrality was no longer possible they neither raised forces against the rebels nor, with few exceptions, chose to flee into the safe hands of the King, although it is also true that logistics denied many of them those options.

But why were the commons prepared to surrender their revolt to the gentry, why indeed did they make it their main objective to get the gentry on side? There is much that we can never know about the commons as a political culture. They were very busy in riding around the country ‘swearing’ their social betters. But what lies behind this enthusiasm for oath-taking we cannot tell, since only in the eventful context of these rebellions do we have evidence of the practice. (Although everyone had been required to swear oaths to Henry VIII’s new deal in 1534.) And what about the apparently instinctive search for the leadership of ‘captains’? Apart from generalisations about the militarised nature of Northern society, we are once again bound to say ‘pass’. To answer some of these questions we need an anthropologist or two and a time machine.

The capacity of the commons for organised, sustained leadership was weak, which was where the gentry came in, often taking the initiative in dividing the people by wapentakes and calling on them to appoint their own subaltern leaders. The main reason the victories won in Lincolnshire, and a few months later in Yorkshire, were wasted was that the commons had no idea what to do with them, and were inhibited from marching on London, when there was very little to stand in their way. But the gentry knew what they wanted. By taking charge of the insurrection they recovered their natural role of leadership on terms by which they could
not be bound. And their leadership was exercised to secure their own interest. That could have been the reversal of the unacceptable revolution which had just taken place (it was the ‘rebels’ who were the conservatives in all this), but, when it became clear that this was not practical politics, it was to restore the status quo. Damage limitation was the name of the game. Everyone, even Henry VIII, knew that, but it did not save the skins of those perceived to be ringleaders.

Hoyle concludes with the big question: ‘Was it possible for the gentry in Lincolnshire and Yorkshire to take at least some control of the commons because the temper of social relations allowed it?’ Let us grossly oversimplify very complex events and circumstances by putting on the board three players: commons, gentry and national, royal government (excluding, which perhaps we should not, the Church and its clergy). In 1536-37, the outcome of the contest was an inconclusive stalemate. There were losses but also gains for two of the players, but only losses for the commons, except that most simply resumed the obscurity of their ordinary lives. In 1549, in East Anglia, in what we call Kett’s Rebellion, it was different. The Government sided with the commons against the gentry in something rather closer to class war, and the result was that the Government (the Government of the Protector Somerset) fell. Oh, and by the way, three thousand Norfolk farmers were slaughtered. Losses all round. A generation or two on, neither the gentry nor the more ‘honest’ and substantial of the commons had the slightest interest in fighting each other, nor in rebelling against the Government. But then came what Clarendon would call the Great Rebellion, in truth a rebellion in reverse, and the Civil War made the Pilgrimage of Grace look like a picnic which had got a little out of hand.