

John Locke Institute - 2016 History Essay Prize

Were the Cavaliers ‘wrong but wromantic’ and the Roundheads ‘right but repulsive’?

After briefly summarising the Cavaliers simply as ‘wrong but wromantic’ and the Roundheads as ‘right but repulsive’, Sellar and Yeatman go on to introduce the reader of *1066 and All That* to their subsequent conflict in a similarly striking manner: “Charles I was a Cavalier King and therefore had...gay attire. The Roundheads, on the other hand...wore...sombre garments. Under these circumstances a Civil War was inevitable.”¹ With two clever mnemonic devices and an impressionable struggle between clothing trends, this particular interpretation of the Civil Wars is understandably not what a student might expect of a history textbook. Yet surprisingly, while the two writers for *Punch* may not have had serious academic intentions of simplifying the Cavaliers and Roundheads to succinct two-word descriptions and a war into a petty feud, there certainly were contemporaries who did write history books of the same whimsical tone as that found in *1066 and All That*. The history taught to schoolchildren during the early twentieth-century, the time during which *1066 and All That* was published, was no less whimsical or romanticised. It comprised a chronology of memorable parts in English history: the kings, battles, and struggles which made Britain a global power. The labels ‘wrong but wromantic’ and ‘right but repulsive’ seem ludicrous now, but they were very much the kind of description and language used in early twentieth-century schools. However, this memorable conclusion about the Cavaliers and the Roundheads suffers from — or rather, epitomises — two historiographical problems which were prevalent in early twentieth century schoolbooks: first, the chronological, political, and anglocentric storyline which swept complex factors and circumstances into broad generalisations; and second, the moralist history, which unfairly divided historical actors into those for or against progress.

The way of teaching history to schoolchildren was, in early twentieth-century England, the same as it had been for a long time: a chronological framework or timeline of major political events. It was in the wake of post-war Britain that this method began to fall under question. With the support of Lloyd George, H.A.L. Fisher, president of the Board of Education, envisioned a national system of public education which fostered genuine scholarly interest rather than classroom banalities. His plan for reform was, however, cut short by the Geddes Axe, and Fisher’s successors failed to infuse schools with the “broader appreciation of the development of human civilisation” that Fisher hoped to see.² Emphasis on facts, dates, and chronology in historical education would remain on the Board of Education’s official agenda. The Hadow Report, *The Primary School*, published nearly a decade later in 1931, at last departed from the traditional chronology-style of history and urged that schoolchildren should learn by engagement instead of factual storage.³ It also suggested teachers should instil interest by telling stories of

¹ W. C. Sellar and R. J. Yeatman, *1066 and All That: a Memorable History of England, comprising all the parts you can remember, including 103 Good Things, 5 Bad Kings and 2 Genuine Dates*, (London: Methuen and Co., 1930), 63.

² D. Cannadine, *The Right Kind of History: Teaching the Past in Twentieth-Century England*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 62.

³ Cannadine, *Right Kind of History*, 72.

romantic heroes in Britain's past. Since few attended secondary school and many would lose their historical knowledge as they approached adulthood, it was important that the romanticised episodes of history be memorable and "driven home at every opportunity".⁴ To appeal to children and their future memory, schoolbooks contained simplified narratives and caricatures similar to, but not as exaggerated as, *1066 and All That*. The descriptions 'wrong but wromantic' and 'right but repulsive' answered the pedagogical need to simplify and make memorable.

The tendency to romanticise stories to appeal to children was coupled with the tendency to tell stories only of English history. It might be expected that after the First World War, history should take a more global perspective, but in reality this was hard to accomplish. In 1923, Fisher, who had resigned his presidency the year earlier, and several HMIs put together *Report on the Teaching of History* to urge for tuition of European and classical history in schools, albeit 'ancillary' to the study of British history.⁵ Even then, however, schoolbooks told much more of England than of Ireland or Scotland. Moreover, broader study of 'world history' was similarly focussed on Britain and was intended to help students understand the contemporary state of British politics and international relations. The newly-created League of Nations might have provided prospects for world history and economic history in the classroom, but neither were ever to assume a 'disproportionate importance' over Britain's political history, as the 1831 Hadow Report suggested.⁶ It was this Anglocentric purpose of history that Sellar and Yeatman parodied as they ended *1066 and All That*: "America was thus clearly top nation, and History came to a [full stop]."⁷ Only in 1938 with the Spens Report did world, economic, and additionally modern history become definitive perspectives of study in the British curriculum.⁸

The predominantly Anglocentric version of history poses dangers because it lays all responsibility on one group of people and ignores factors which may have influenced them. In many instances, the product is unfair judgment. Describing the Cavaliers as 'wrong but wromantic' and the Roundheads as 'right but repulsive' was one such of these judgments. Charles I, the most wrong of Cavaliers and whose story is the most romantic to tell, appears in a very different light when given a European context. Worden, putting the reign of Charles I within "a calamitous decade for European Protestantism", challenges the view that the king's character defects alone caused the Civil War, calling the conclusion "trivialising" and "insufficient".⁹ The Roundhead and his ally the nineteenth century Whig blamed Charles' depravity for civil strife in England, but civil strife was also raging across the continent with aristocratic rebellion in France, religious protest in Spain, and bloodshed in the Netherlands. Yet there are few that would denounce Louis XIV 'wrong' for putting down the Frondes or criticise Ferdinand II for causing war. Admittedly, Charles' personality was a disastrous combination of

⁴ Ibid., 75.

⁵ Ibid., 74.

⁶ Ibid., 75.

⁷ Sellar and Yeatman, *1066 and All That*, 113. This was also mentioned in the preface: 'History is now at an end (see p. 113); this History is therefore final.'

⁸ Cannadine, *Right Kind of History*, 76.

⁹ Blair Worden, *The English Civil Wars: 1640-1660*, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2009), 6.

being ambitious, imprudent, and untrustworthy, but he is undeserving of being simply labelled 'wrong'.¹⁰

In addition to limiting breadth of perspective and geography, the history taught in early twentieth century schools also reflected the problems of Whig historical moralism. Acton, whose legacy formed a basis for the pioneers of educational reform, championed moralism in history, declaring History an 'arbiter of controversy' which ruled over historical progress. "To develop and perfect and arm conscience," he told students in *Lectures on the Study of History*, "is the great achievement of history."¹¹ The Board of Education's first edition of *Suggestions* in 1905 echoed Acton's conception of History's moral purpose, urging that children should learn a history of Britain illustrative of "principles of conduct and qualities of character which promote the welfare of the individual and society".¹² Since the early twentieth century, however, Whig moralism and its 'inevitable progress' have been fallen into discredit, precisely because these ideas led to one-sided interpretations. Acton had astutely anticipated criticism for being first a moralist, then a historian, and attempted to defend his view: "Better be unjust to dead men, than to give currency to loose ideas on questions of morals."¹³ Butterfield criticises this "fundamental thesis" of moral judgment in history as a *reductio ad absurdum* argument.¹⁴ As with all difficulties in writing history, bias encounters the problem of selection; the Whig moralist bias dictates which evidence the historian selects from a pool of facts and tells the historian that he must judge the evidence on its moral value. Ultimately, as Butterfield suggests, the Whig bias invites the historian to become a moralist and "run perilously near to the thesis: 'Better be unhistorical than do anything that may lower the moral dignity of history.'"¹⁵

The problem that arises from using the four words 'wrong', 'romantic', 'right', and 'repulsive' is analogous to Butterfield's criticisms of the Whig bias. If one accepts that the Cavaliers were 'wrong' and the Roundheads were 'right', one can conclude that the Cavaliers were 'bad', and the Roundheads, 'good'. If what separated them was their support for either kingly power or parliamentary right, then one can reason that defending the king was therefore 'bad', and aiding parliament was 'good'. But what of their noble or cruel deeds in private? Can the Cavalier who fought against the ideals of republicanism be scrutinised for simply proving his loyalty to his king? Can history exonerate the Roundhead who sacked churches and destroyed villages all because his goals were for the better? In response to this they are given an additional description: the Cavaliers were wrong, but they were also romantic for their noble allegiance to a doomed monarch; the Roundheads were right for deposing tyranny, but they were repulsive for disturbing Britain beyond Charles' alarming measures. This is the problem with cyclical bias in moralist history, a method of selecting parts of the past that illustrate progress and using progress to determine which parts of history to select. What remains is a dichotomy between the

¹⁰ Ibid., 7.

¹¹ Quoted in H. Butterfield, *Whig Interpretation*, (114

¹² Cannadine, *Right Kind of History*, 24.

¹³ Quoted in Butterfield, *Whig Interpretation*, 116.

¹⁴ Butterfield, *Whig Interpretation*, 116-117.

¹⁵ Ibid.

progressive and reactionary, the new and old, the good and bad. It is an unnecessary and false dichotomy if one considers that progress came from both sides, not just one.

Furthermore, the imposition of Victorian moralism on the people who lived two centuries prior unfairly neglects the variety of opinion and interpretation present in those times. Those who watched England become a republic and return to a monarchy would have fervently contested the labels ‘wrong but wromantic’ and ‘right but repulsive’. The varied public perception of Oliver Cromwell from 1640s to the Restoration can serve as an example of vastly contrasting opinion towards the Roundheads. Celebrated as the champion of civil and religious liberties, the man who overthrew tyranny was the man who “presided over one of the great iconoclasms of English history...equal to if not greater than that of the early Reformation, and the man who butchered the Irish and launched an unequalled assault on the rights of the native inhabitants of Ireland.”¹⁶ In his own time, Cromwell’s supporters exalted his ‘repulsive’ measures, justifying persecution and purges as means to desirable ends.¹⁷ There were those who then left his side and abhorred him for replacing a tyranny with another tyranny when he made himself Lord Protector.¹⁸ As for his opponents, they decried him as a regicide and usurper. Perception of the Cavaliers varied similarly: the Irish might have loathed and rebelled against Charles’ religious policies, but their plight at the hands of Cromwell and the Roundheads was far worse. These are the complexities lost in generalising the Cavaliers and the Roundheads respectively as ‘wrong but wromantic’ and ‘right but repulsive’.

In conclusion, the Cavaliers were not ‘wrong but wromantic’ nor were the Roundheads ‘right but repulsive’. Certainly, there are reasons to accept these descriptions as appropriate; but those reasons tread the thin line between historical interpretation and gross generalisation. There are two major implicit problems with labelling the Cavaliers ‘wrong but wromantic’ and the Roundheads ‘right but repulsive’. First, chronological, political, and anglocentric stories with romanticised historical characters ignore complexities of context and social, economic, and religious causes. Second, the moral dichotomy implied in calling one wrong and the other right leads to a troubling and severe ‘Whig’ bias. The historian’s duty is not to condemn or exonerate; that is a judgment for the moralist. Instead, the historian should describe and understand his own observations, and simultaneously avoid the danger of generalisation. It is, all in all, unwise to think that ‘wrong but wromantic’ and ‘right but repulsive’ are fair judgments, and the same could be said even if the original proposition were switched so that the Cavaliers were ‘right but repulsive’ and the Roundheads were ‘wrong but wromantic’.

1894 words

¹⁶ J. Morrill, *Oliver Cromwell and the English Revolution*, (London: Longman, 1990), 1.

¹⁷ Ibid., 274.

¹⁸ Ibid., 268.

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