

Revisionism: What's in a Name?

Cynthia Herrup

The focus of this special issue is historiographical and methodological. Its purpose is to survey the state of play across subspecialities rather than to highlight research on any single subject. Taken together, the articles and review essays in this volume touch on several centuries and several topics—from the 1600s to the 1900s, from political and religious thought, to economics and popular culture. But the diversity of the materials also accentuates what unites them—that is, the attempt to explore the many-faceted historiographical phenomenon known as revisionism. As Richard Price observes in his essay in this volume, “It is important and healthy for historians to hold up their epistemologies for scrutiny once in a while” (p. 234). British historians are usually more comfortable discussing the meat of history than the techniques of butchering, but our professed innocence of the abattoir does not lessen its contribution to the packaged product (nor does it make its methods any the less bloody). I welcome Price’s laudable openness to methodological rumination, and I hope that this special issue will help to make British historians more at ease with such inquiries.

As a formal intervention in English history, what we call revisionism dates from the 1970s, although, as Nancy Curtin ably illustrates in her article, a similar shift had emerged among Irish historians as early as the 1930s. As Curtin explains, the Irish revisionists positioned themselves against teleological assumptions and political biases. They saw themselves as scholars who hoped to replace “nationalist mythology” with a more scientific approach to the past. They wanted to explore the past “with skepticism and neutrality and let it speak to the present for itself” (p. 197). Despite the very different moments and circumstances of their origins, the similarities between these goals and those of later English revisionists are quite striking. Like their counterparts in Ireland, English revisionists saw themselves as recentering deduction in historical reasoning and as counterbalancing a

CYNTHIA HERRUP is editor of the *Journal of British Studies* and a professor of history and law at Duke University.

weakness for determinisms of various sorts with a renewed attentiveness to detail, contingency, and context. They argued for the importance of continuity rather than contention as a central focus of historical investigation. They reinvigorated historical interest in the world of high politics as an arena of faction, bureaucracy, and personality. They downplayed the effective influence of variables such as popular opinion, principles, and class for studying past societies. Revisionism in England arose in a series of works by individual scholars who, apparently innocent of Irish developments, drew strength from a very similar critique of the standing literature.¹

In England, the critical issue for revisionism was not national identity but a dissatisfaction with the prevailing explanations of the English Civil War. According to J. H. Hexter, the publishing of Conrad Russell's "Parliamentary History in Perspective, 1604–1629" in 1976 produced "a convulsion" among early modern scholars. With no organized school, no single founding moment, no deliberately coordinated method, there were and still are almost as many revisionisms as there are scholars identified with the label. Yet, as Russell has recently observed, "all versions of revisionism, like all brands of whisky, enjoyed certain broad similarities."² The theoretical interventions of revision-

¹ The most complete introduction to the concept as it has come to be used in the historiography of seventeenth-century England can be found in the work of two friendly critics, Richard Cust and Ann Hughes, "Introduction: After Revisionism," in *Conflict in Early Stuart England: Studies in Religion and Politics, 1603–1642*, ed. Richard Cust and Ann Hughes (London, 1989), pp. 1–46. See also the earlier summary by J. H. Hexter, "The Early Stuarts and Parliament: Old Hat and the Nouvelle Vague," *Parliamentary History* 1 (1983): 181–216; as well as critiques by J. H. Hexter, "Power Struggle, Parliament, and Liberty in Early Stuart England," and Derek Hirst, "Unanimity in the Commons, Aristocratic Intrigue, and the Origin of the English Civil War," both in the *Journal of Modern History* 50 (1980): 1–50, 51–71; and by Theodore Rabb, "Revisionism Revisited: The Role of the Commons," Derek Hirst, "Revisionism Revisited: The Place of Principle," and Christopher Hill, "Parliament and People in Seventeenth-Century England," all in *Past and Present*, no. 92 (August 1981), pp. 55–78, 79–99, 100–124. For a sample of early work by the revisionists themselves, see Conrad Russell, *Unrevolutionary England, 1603–1642* (London, 1990); Kevin Sharpe, ed., *Faction and Parliament: Essays on Early Stuart History* (London, 1978; reprinted with a new introduction, London, 1985); and the special issue on the English Revolution in the *Journal of Modern History*, vol. 49 (1977).

² Hexter, "The Early Stuarts and Parliament," p. 181; Russell, p. ix. Russell now appears willing to talk about revisionism as an "historiographical creed" (see his "Introduction," in *ibid.*); cf. Kevin Sharpe, "Revisionism Revisited," in Sharpe, ed., p. xvi, for a less happy embrace of the label. Russell's essay, "Parliamentary History in Perspective, 1604–1629," originally appeared in *History* 61 (1976): 1–27, and is reprinted in his *Unrevolutionary England*. Most scholars would add to the 1976 "convulsion" at least one prescient tremor caused by G. R. Elton with his essay, "A High Road to Civil War?" in *From the Renaissance to the Counter-Reformation: Essays in Honor of Garrett Mattingly*, ed. C. H. Carter (New York, 1965), pp. 325–47.

ism were, in fact, mostly salient reminders of standards acceptable to all empirical historians. As Nicholas Tyacke notes in his article, in a different context, however, historical interpretations can “acquire lives of their own” (p. 137). Helped in no small measure by the overreaction of their critics, revisionism became more than an interpretation of a particular time and place in history; it laid claim to a way of doing history. And it is as a methodological agenda rather than as a particular version of events that revisionism has enjoyed the greatest influence. In that guise, its reach has extended geographically, chronologically, and topically far beyond its authors’ original ambitions.³ To some scholars the immediacy of its acceptance illustrates an inherent force intellectually and epistemologically; to others it reveals only an unfortunate narrowing of our horizons, an abandoning of confidence in our abilities, possibilities, and goals.

When some brave soul undertakes a history of the popularity of revisionism in the late twentieth century, he or she might begin by considering the appeal implicit in the word itself. Revising is reformulating. It suggests newness. It intimates authority. It hints at improvement and (somewhat ironically) at repeated possibilities. Whether or not one accepts the particular insights of the current incarnation of revisionism in English history (either its proponents’ views on history or its claims to methodological distinctiveness), the general concept of revisionism is appealing. It affirms not only that historians serve a useful function but also that we still have important work to do. In this sense, it seems unsurprising that revisionism has proven to be both invigorating and infuriating.

The essays here illustrate the continuing influence of revisionism in the 1990s. Two of them, Nicholas Tyacke’s “Anglican Attitudes” and Johann Sommerville’s “Revisionism and Political Principles,” return to the original sites of the debate in England, to questions relating to the outbreak of the English Civil War.

Tyacke and Sommerville directly challenge revisionist claims that, until late in the 1630s, the Caroline church and state had the full support of England’s governing elite. They trace significant continuities in the story of the early Stuarts that revisionists—Tyacke and Sommerville argue—are unwilling to acknowledge: parallels between English and Continental views on calvinism and absolutism, and longstanding ideological differences among the English elites. Neither

³ For its extension into earlier and later centuries of English history, respectively, see, most prominently, the work of Christopher Haigh (whose most recent book, *English Reformations*, is reviewed in this issue); and J. C. D. Clark.

Tyacke nor Sommerville is convinced by the revisionist reading of the evidence for consensus, and neither is persuaded that the crisis of 1642 can be understood as a by-product of the immediately preceding years.

If Tyacke and Sommerville engage with revisionism on its own terms, Nancy Curtin and Richard Price approach it from the outside, using their essays to assess its broader influence. In "Varieties of Irishness," Curtin recounts the history of revisionism as an Irish historiography, offering an elegant rebuttal to those who would argue for the marginalization of Ireland within the British context. Not the least accomplishment of her article is to illustrate yet another context in which isolating the Irish from the English is myopic. The themes and dilemmas Curtin traces are parallel to those more recently rehearsed in English history. But more important, Curtin's narrative may be instructive for those in English history. She shows how a new generation of Irish scholars is moving beyond revisionism to produce a history that is more sophisticated, yet more inclusive. Richard Price's "Historiography, Narrative, and the Nineteenth Century" is an ambitious attempt to advance that process in the English context. Dissecting the assumptions of revisionists about temporal change, social structures, and methodology, Price proposes a new periodization that would unite the late seventeenth and the late nineteenth centuries. This reconceptualization would dissolve the current polarity between continuity and change into a more subtle framework that concentrates on the interaction between them. Focusing on the priorities rather than the particularities of revisionist scholarship, Curtin and Price are more concerned with finding a way to refine the accomplishments of revisionism than with refuting its specific shortcomings. They seek to move the discussion away from empirical disagreements and toward epistemology. Both of them stake their faith in the possibility of a history big enough to study power and to problematize it, bold enough to see the long view and the details, and broad enough to explain and to inspire.

Not everyone will agree with the arguments of these essays or with the characterization of revisionism outlined here. That is a given in historiographical engagement. The review essays as well as the articles in this issue suggest the continued vigor and productivity of these disagreements. But this issue is intended to open windows rather than to close them, to provoke comment rather than to silence it. Broadening the terms of our debates, these contributions encourage us to continue our revising.