Chapter Thirty-Eight

THE WORLD UPSIDE DOWN

THE breakdown of government had meant the collapse of censorship. Up until the civil war everything printed had to be passed by the censor, thus ensuring that nothing attacking either the monarchy or the church ever appeared. If it did, it was either printed abroad or came from secret presses. In Elizabeth's reign the Puritans had just such a press, which produced a series of scurrilous attacks on the established church. But these were as nothing compared to the flood from the presses during the 1640s and 1650s. Literally thousands of news-sheets and leaflets poured out, giving voice to the views of sections of society never heard from before, artisans, craftsmen, and ordinary working folk, the normally silent half of the population. These were the views of people who could read and were therefore able to study the scriptures, finding in them a very different world from the one they lived in. The views of the illiterate classes also got into print for the first time. Both groups were in a state of high religious fervour, often ecstasy, believing that the Holy Spirit spoke to them direct. Such visions threw up demands for other forms of society, ones in which neither a king nor an aristocracy or an organised church had any place at all.

When the war ended in 1646 those who had fought for Parliament now formed two broad groups. There were those who still wanted to retain a national church, albeit reformed along Presbyterian lines, and there were those who had abandoned that idea. The latter were known as Independents, men who believed that membership of the state should be separated from membership of the church, and that religion should be free to take any number of forms provided it was neither Catholic nor Episcopalian. Parliament fast dismantled the Church of England as it had existed in 1642. Archbishop Laud was sent to the scaffold in 1645, signalling a long list of ordinances destroying the Anglican Church. The bishops were abolished and forced into exile, loyal clergy were driven from their livings. Cathedrals and churches were subjected to a wave of violent iconoclasm in which much of what was left in the way of stained glass and decoration was wiped out, and any of Laud's

innovations, such as rails dividing off the sanctuary, were smashed to pieces. In 1647 Parliament made the use of the Prayer Book and the celebration of Christmas, Good Friday, Easter and Whitsun a criminal offence.

It is one thing to sweep an institution aside, it is quite another to reach agreement as to what should replace it. Parliament was divided on this. Religious groups were many and various. The members of one, the Independents (later called Congregationalists) formed their own congregations, no longer based on the old parish system but one in which groups spontaneously came together to worship God in the way they saw fit. They believed in predestination, and indeed that those whom God had destined to be saved could be identified now. These chosen people, called the Elect, were alone deemed worthy of receiving communion, the rest of the congregation having to sit and look on. The Elect were regarded as saints and their advent, according to the Bible, was a signal that Christ's Second Coming, when he would reign jointly with them, was imminent.

One group which took such beliefs to their logical conclusion believed that political power now belonged not as of old to king, nobility and gentry, but to the saints. They were called Fifth Monarchists, and saw themselves as living during the last days when the final battle was being fought between the forces of Christ and Antichrist. In such a scheme of things rank and property, the basis of existing society, counted for nothing. The Fifth Monarchists therefore objected to the existing legal system which punished people heavily for offences against property, such as stealing, and demanded instead heavy sentences against any infringement of the moral code.

Another, and more important group, the Levellers, was a movement which attracted yeomen, small businessmen, craftsmen and, most vital of all, it later attracted followers from the rank and file of the New Model Army. They, too, questioned a society based on property-owning, wishing to 'level down' extremes of wealth, and demanding that the right to vote be no longer confined to those who had the right property qualification but extended to include everyone except servants and beggars. They saw themselves as victims of the Norman Conquest when William I had reduced the native English to servitude, in thrall to a foreign nobility. The Levellers also objected to a legal system obsessed with offences against property. They shrewdly realised that it was the law which kept in place the existing structure of society and campaigned for its change and also for the abolition of the House of Lords, the payment of tithes to the clergy, and the hated excise tax. They were asking in fact for many of the things which the middle classes were to get in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Neither of these groups was to survive the 1650s but two others were to go on and

The war unleashed a renewed wave of iconoclasm smashing everything which had not been torn down in the reign of Edward VI and even more demolishing any of Archbishop Laud's innovations. Here the chancel of a church which has been reordered, with communion rails, the communion table sited where the altar used to stand with a cross on it is dismantled.

The execution of William Laud, Archbishop of Canterbury, on Tower Hill on 10 January 1645.

The sacking and burning of the contents of the queen's Catholic chapel at Somerset House, 23 May 1643.

Popular prints capture some of the dramatic events which marked the English Revolution.

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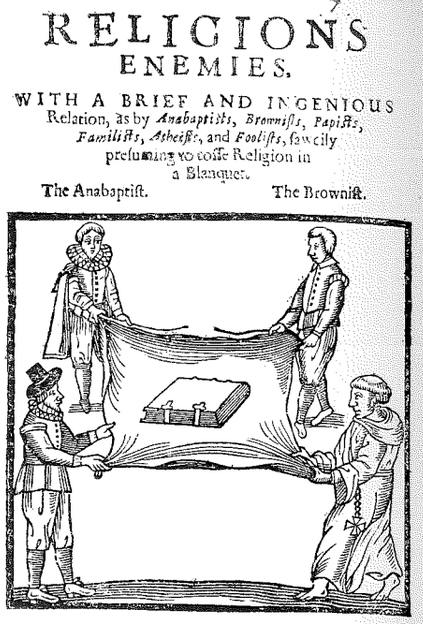
make up the vigorous tradition of dissent and nonconformity allied to social radicalism which carried into the twentieth century. The Baptists saw the church not as an organisation but as a coming together of those who had undergone baptism as a conscious act of commitment. In this way they formed communities scattered through the country. The Quakers also looked to the spirit but in their case, as against that of the Baptists, much more of the social as well as the religious radicalism was to survive, accounting for the appalling persecution which they underwent. They were to deny all civil authority or hierarchy, something expressed by their refusal to take their hats off to anyone.

These were not the only groups. There were in addition Ranters, Diggers, Seekers and Muggletonians, each of which had its own solution for the woes of England. During the years following the end of the war there was an unprecedented overturning, questioning and revaluing of everything which had previously been taken for granted. Old values, old beliefs, and old institutions were called into question as never before. All of this ferment was to run its course until those caught up in it became disillusioned, for Christ did not come with his saints to reign but instead England dissolved into anarchy, dissension and disorder. At the same time there still remained a strong body of opinion which yearned for the return of an established social order.


RELIGIONS
ENEMIES.
WITH A BRIEF AND INGENIOUS
Relation, as by *Anabaptists, Brownists, Papists, Familists, Atheists*, and *Foolists*, fawcily
presuming to coffe Religion in
a Blanquet.
The Anabaptist. The Brownist.

Broadsheet denouncing the independents, characterised here by various religious groups, Catholics, Anabaptists, Brownists and members of the Family of Love.

As if all of this was not enough, the man who held the key to the resolution of the country's problems, the king, remained also with a vision of faith and society from which nothing would budge him. He believed that the Royalists had lost the war as God's punishment of him for breaking his word to Strafford. Both monarchy and church became even more sacrosanct in his eyes, to the extent that he felt absolved and free to embark on any path, however devious, that might lead to their reinstatement.

With such immovable views it is hardly surprising that Parliament got nowhere in trying to formulate some form of peace. The country was in crisis. The army had to be paid. There was widespread depression, price rises and food shortages, as well as the ravages of plague. Heavy rains ruined the harvest and people began to refuse to pay taxes. The equivalent of eighteen pre-war subsidies was now exacted annually. All of

this conspired to produce a profound longing for peace. The period of Charles I's Personal Rule must indeed have seemed now in retrospect not tyranny but Arcadia.

If the rocklike stance of the king was of little help, neither was the split which now opened wide within the ranks of Parliament. There were those who would make peace with the king on the basis of a Presbyterian Church of England and there were those, the Independents, who refused to trust him and demanded that the army be kept in being and that there be liberty of conscience. The resolution of this impasse was to come from a quite new political force which came to fill the vacuum, the New Model Army led by Oliver Cromwell.

That army was quite unlike any other army before or since. In number it was some 22,000: 6,600 cavalry, 1,000 mounted infantry and 14,400 ordinary infantry. It was a massive force to have in existence in peace time, moreover it was not made up of the usual motley crew of mercenaries, soldiers of fortune and conscripts, but the godly. Its generals were devout Puritans. The army lived in an atmosphere of religious fervour and active piety, fired by sermons, given over to regular prayer, fasting and Bible study and ruled by a strict moral code. It cast itself as the instrument of divine providence, sent by God to destroy Antichrist. Its leader, Oliver Cromwell, saw himself as much the agent of the divine will as did the king. Cromwell viewed each event as it unfolded as evidence of God's intent. As he pondered, he began to conclude that there were those in Parliament who were frustrating what he believed was the will of God.

Parliament and the army fell out. Parliament began to make moves to disband the army which, in its turn, seized what they regarded as the key to a settlement, the person of the king. In June 1647 the New Model Army drew up a solemn Engagement stating that it would not disband until such time as justice had been done. Soon after followed another document, the Representation, demanding the removal from Parliament of those regarded as corrupt, calling for parliaments lasting only for fixed periods of time and for liberty of conscience.

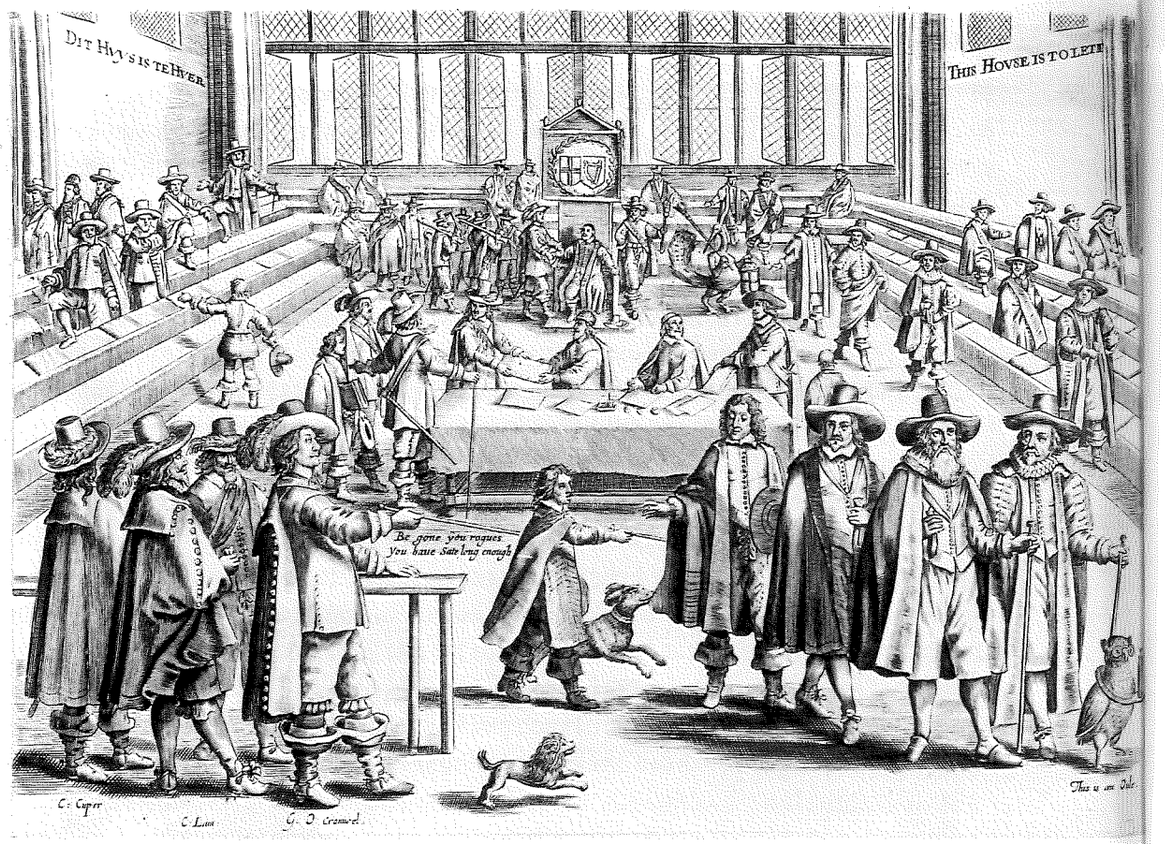
If the year 1647 had been one of progressive chaos, the following year was worse. The king, equally firm in his beliefs, had not hesitated to reach a secret agreement with the Scots. In return for introducing Presbyterianism in England they agreed to invade from the north. That invasion was to be one part of a pattern of widespread unrest that swept the country, uprisings by Royalists frustrated by the failure of what passed as government in London to reach a settlement. These were soon put down by the army which also wiped out the Scots at the Battle of Preston. Cromwell, always vigilant for signs from heaven, saw the victory as an act of God.

Political power now resided in a victorious army which already had its own

programme for action. In the spring a three-day fast had been observed and it was agreed that after the army had finally vanquished its foes it would 'call for Charles Stuart, that man of blood, to account for that blood he had shed and mischief he had done.' This dramatic decision meant that they had rejected the belief that the king was God's viceroy on earth. They believed instead that the king held his power not from God but from the people as a sacred trust, a contract which Charles I had violated. For Oliver Cromwell and the army the king was a tyrant of the type they read about in the Old Testament, one on whom God cried out for vengeance. To Cromwell, Charles was a 'man against whom the Lord hath witnessed.'

To achieve any act of justice, the army needed to remove those whom they classified as corrupt members of Parliament. These included any who would deal with

Oliver Cromwell and officers from the army expelling from Parliament any member opposed to their policies in November 1648. The ninety-six who remained were known as The Rump.



the king, who would disband the army, or who were against liberty of conscience. In November troops from the army surrounded the House and excluded every member opposed to its policies. Only ninety-six members of Parliament were left, and they became known as the Rump. On 29 December, they passed an ordinance for the trial of the king. As the law courts only existed to carry out justice in the king's name, such an act in itself turned the status quo upside down. Now the Commons, or what was left of them, had usurped the role of the monarch. A revolution as to where power lay in society was taking place.

On 6 January 1649 the court met to try the king. Charles naturally refused to recognise that it had any legal status. By now he was a tired, grey-haired, prematurely aged man, but he rose fully to play the role now offered him, for it was his turn to present himself as the champion of the liberty and freedom of the people of England. The outcome of the trial was a foregone conclusion, and on 27 January he was sentenced to death. Only fifty-nine signatories, however, could be found to sign the warrant for his execution.

Three days later the citizens of London were witnesses to an unheard-of spectacle, the execution of a king. For those who believed in the monarchy the act was one of blasphemy, the slaying of the Lord's anointed. For the army and its followers it was one of divine judgment against a tyrant. The scaffold was erected before Inigo Jones's Whitehall Banqueting House, the setting of the stately masques in which Charles had appeared to his court as a deity. Those now seemed but rehearsals for this ultimate apotheosis, his own execution. Fearing public unrest, the scaffold was hemmed in by soldiers. Attended by the Bishop of London, the king stepped out and said 'I go from a corruptible to an incorruptible crown, where no disturbance can be.' To the end he never doubted the righteousness of his cause. In this, the final scene of what was the masque of his own death, he had already cast himself as a martyr ascending to heaven. The terrible groan which went up from the watching crowd as his head fell at one stroke from his body signalled not the end of the monarchy but the inevitability of its return.

The execution of Charles I on 30 January 1649 before the Whitehall Banqueting House. King and executioner face each other across the picture. Below on one side Charles walks to his execution while on the other in its aftermath onlookers dip their handkerchiefs in his blood as relics of the royal martyr.