



Spaeth, D. (2015) Culture wars: religious and cultural conflict in revel, riot and rebellion. *Cultural and Social History*, 12(3), pp. 337-342.  
(doi:[10.1080/14780038.2015.1050892](https://doi.org/10.1080/14780038.2015.1050892))

This is the author's final accepted version.

There may be differences between this version and the published version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/106202/>

Deposited on: 2 May 2016

Enlighten – Research publications by members of the University of Glasgow  
<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk>

## **Culture Wars: Religious and Cultural Conflict in *Revel, Riot and Rebellion***

Donald Spaeth, University of Glasgow, don.spaeth@glasgow.ac.uk

The Version of Record of this manuscript has been published and is available in *Cultural and Social History*, June 2015, <http://www.tandfonline.com/>, DOI 10.1080/14780038.2015.1050892.

One of David Underdown's achievements in *Revel, Riot and Rebellion* was to knit together social, cultural and political change in explaining how the English came to fight a civil war. Culture served as the pivot between society and politics, enabling him to reassert the importance of social change against the revisionist interpretations then in vogue. These argued that there was no political or social 'high road' to civil war, and indeed no English Revolution at all, while acknowledging the central importance of religion.<sup>1</sup> Underdown was convinced, as he declared in his preface, that the Revolution was not an accident, but occurred at the end of a long period of social, political and religious instability.<sup>2</sup> The association between social change, puritanism and revolution had a long pedigree, most famously in the work of Christopher Hill. Other historians, including Keith Wrightson and David Levine, had also associated social change, puritanism and the reformation of manners. Underdown forged this work into a new interpretation, which focused on the importance of religious and cultural conflict to understanding the Civil War. The Civil Wars were not only 'England's wars of religion', to use the phrase coined by John Morrill; they were also wars over culture.<sup>3</sup> This article will explore some of the key issues from Underdown's book, drawing upon more recent research. In particular, it will consider the extent to which the campaign against festive culture helped to define puritan identity, the relative importance of the intensity of puritanism and support for festive culture in explaining popular allegiance, and the potential to learn more about the dynamic relationship between religion and culture through local studies.

*Revel, Riot and Rebellion* contributed to debate over the causes of the English Civil War by asking how ordinary people decided which side to support when war came in 1642. It therefore sought to demonstrate that men on both sides, Parliamentary and Royalist, choose of their free will which army to join. The concept of regional cultures provided the connections between social change, cultural conflict and political allegiance. In a case study of the south-western counties of Dorset, Somerset and Wiltshire, Underdown drew a broad contrast between the cultures and societies of two regions with different patterns of

settlement. In the pastoral ‘cheese country’, where scattered settlement encouraged independent values, puritanism was stronger, and there a godly elite embarked on a moral reform campaign to regulate disorder. In the arable ‘chalk’, a region of nucleated villages, the elite supported traditional customs for longer, because they underpinned traditional values of communal harmony. When war came in 1642, decisions about which side to support reflected these cultural contrasts. This schema of regional cultures has been criticized for being too rigid, and an explanation based on settlement patterns does not work as well elsewhere in England. Like all models, it was a simplification, and there were bound to be exceptions, but it had the advantage of providing a larger framework than the parish study, about which there would always be questions of typicality.

The fundamental dynamic of *Revel, Riot and Rebellion* was the interaction between two cultures, of puritanism and festivities. Underdown made a significant contribution to the re-thinking of puritanism on cultural lines.<sup>4</sup> He defined puritans as the most zealous and rigid protestants; concern about the reformation of the manners was ‘a major preoccupation of godly people across the whole Protestant spectrum.’<sup>5</sup> In this he followed Patrick Collinson, and subsequent studies have argued that sabbatarianism and providentialism, doctrines both associated with the reformation of manners, were part of the mainstream protestant consensus, and were not values restricted to puritans.<sup>6</sup> Underdown argued that the term ‘puritan’ was a useful shorthand for a set of beliefs without which, he suggested, religion in early modern England could not be understood. As he stated forcefully in his case study of Dorchester, *Fire from Heaven*, ‘if there are still people who are doubtful of [puritanism’s] historical validity ... I invite them to read the rest of this book and think again’.<sup>7</sup> The puritans formed a new kind of community, whose mission was to reform society in God’s name:

Confronted by the epidemic of immorality and disorder ... Puritans became the most vigorous exponents of policies of reforming and disciplining the lawless ... Theirs was a world in which the individual Christian was always engaged ... in the eternal struggle between Christ and Antichrist.<sup>8</sup>

But puritanism was more than a negative reform movement, seeking to suppress festive culture; it was also a form of popular culture itself. The godly created a new culture which was consistent with their values, based on sermon-going, bible reading, fasts, the singing of psalms, and family worship. Subsequent research has confirmed the cultural and psychological significance of the campaign to reform the reprobate. For example, Peter Lake

has shown how puritan identity was forged by the conflict between ‘puritans and their enemies’, as the godly watched the ungodly hating them, and in turn watched themselves hating them back. As the godly vicar John Barker told a Northampton crowd in 1637, as he confessed the sins which had brought him to the scaffold, ‘Those that are most religious and have most of the power of godliness in them, those and those only are the best Christians, those which you call puritans and except you become such as they are, ye shall certainly be damned for ever in hell.’<sup>9</sup>

Underdown followed Peter Burke’s argument for the reform of popular culture, a campaign of the clergy and magistrates against traditional culture. Although the bipolar model attributed to Burke has been criticized, one virtue of the concept of regional cultures is that it acknowledges the plurality of popular cultures, something which Burke himself stressed, and which subsequent studies have reinforced.<sup>10</sup> In their influential local study of Terling, Keith Wrightson and David Levine had focused on godly regulation of the poor through prosecution of drinking and illegitimacy.<sup>11</sup> Others noted difficulties in disentangling ideological and economic motivations for disciplining the poor. The fact that there were analogous efforts to regulate moral offences in other periods may suggest that puritanism was not main cause.<sup>12</sup> Underdown turned to forms of festive culture such as church ales, parish revels, and Sunday sports, a major source of conflict in the wake of the Somerset church ales controversy which led Charles I to reissue the Book of Sports in 1633. For their inappropriate associations with the church, encouragement of drunkenness and dancing, and violation of the sabbath, these festivities were natural targets of puritan attack. The puritan campaign against such recreations can be dated back to the reign of Elizabeth, but it was the royal defence of Sunday sports which made them a political issue in the 1630s. Puritan anger can be seen in contemporary publications such as Burton’s *Divine Tragedie Lately Acted*, and later in Parliamentary prosecution of scandalous and malignant clergymen.<sup>13</sup> It is not easy to be precise about the chronology and topography of the campaign against festive culture. References to church ales and revels were relatively rare, and since they are often discovered due to court prosecution, it is difficult to be sure whether we are detecting the regulation or incidence of festive culture. Underdown suggests that ales and revels had largely been suppressed before 1633, although official support allowed some to be reintroduced. Ales and revels were in decline everywhere, but Underdown argues that this was most marked in the ‘cheese’ country. Another form of festive culture, the charivari, was apparently also more common in the more traditional ‘chalk’ region, although they might also be performed in towns. The charivari was a form of popular regulation of sexual offenses common in

England and elsewhere in Europe which once again demonstrated the capacity of ordinary men and women to take ritual (and sometimes violent) action in defence of their communities. In its representation of a world turned upside down, a charivari offered a vocabulary that could also be used in acts of protest and defiance of the authorities, as in Wells in Somerset in 1607, where a church ale was followed by a charivari directed at the puritan John Hole, who had sought to ban the revelry.<sup>14</sup>

According to Underdown, it was the intensity of puritan feeling that helps to explain the division of England into two sides capable of fighting a civil war.<sup>15</sup> Research on the nearby county of Devon has confirmed the regional relationship between puritanism, the campaign for moral reform, and side-taking in the war. Support for the King was greatest in the regions of mid- and East Devon where the resistance to puritanism was the strongest and festive customs survived longest.<sup>16</sup> However, the focus on puritanism raises questions. Were attitudes towards festive culture themselves important or is the vigour of its regulation primarily valuable as an indicator of places where puritan values were most strongly held? Can the religious beliefs of those who supported festive culture be described in a more positive way than anti-puritanism? Underdown has also relatively little to say about other forms of religious commitment. The study of alternatives to puritanism has been one of the fastest growing areas of civil war research over the past thirty years, building on Nicholas Tyacke's initial suggestion that it was anti-Calvinism, not puritanism, that was most radical in the 1630s. This work has revealed the complexities of religion in early Stuart England, which can no longer be described in binary terms as a split between Calvinists and Arminians, although this term itself has gone out of fashion. It has been argued that, alongside puritan and conformist Calvinists, a separate tradition of 'avant-garde conformism' developed into the Laudianism of the 1630s.<sup>17</sup> These theological debates were primarily clerical, but did they have any equivalents in local parishes? Was there any connection between traditional festive culture and traditional religion?

The opposition of puritanism and a traditional culture has parallels in the contrast which the Reformation historian Christopher Haigh draws between Protestantism and residual 'Catholicism'. In the years around 1600 evangelicals were still complaining that most of the population remained ignorant of the essentials of protestantism. The implication is that puritans may have been not only the most zealous, but the only true, protestants. According to this interpretation, the Civil War was fought between those who had embraced the Reformation and those who had not. Local antagonisms over religion made war possible, so that when king and Parliament each sought to raise armies, 'the recruits were there ready'.<sup>18</sup>

Yet the strength of anti-popish feeling in the early seventeenth century suggests that most people believed that they were protestants, even if the godly did not think they were. War was 'fought overwhelmingly between protestants' over the future of English protestantism.<sup>19</sup>

Evidence for local support for religious conformism, whatever form it took, tends to support Underdown's thesis, helping to explain the development of royalism among those below the elite. Could Haigh's 'cold statute protestants' have become lay supporters of Laudianism? There is some evidence of that parishes backed parish initiatives to adorn church chancels with stained glass, paintings and well-furnished altars, suggesting a taste for imagery and ritual that supported Laudian 'beauty of holiness'. On the other hand, Judith Maltby's study of the Prayer Book petitions of 1641-42 suggests widespread support for the church liturgy and episcopacy, but not for Laudian ceremonialism. From detailed study of the petition from Cheshire, she concludes that a broad cross-section of society expressed support for the Established Church, so that hundreds signed, or affixed their mark, not due to social pressure, but of their freewill.<sup>20</sup> There are clearly parallels between this activity and the voluntary choice of sides a few months later.

What are we to make of the attempts to introduce godly rule once the puritans were in power? Most historians have followed Underdown in viewing these as unsuccessful, marked by resistance and later by the celebrations that welcomed the Restoration. The most recent work on *England's Culture Wars* has argued that the puritans enjoyed considerable success in their primary goal of purifying the church, and also some in reforming personal and social behaviour. If they achieved less than they had hoped, they achieved more than historians have believed.<sup>21</sup> Yet one of Underdown's more intriguing findings is that the differences regional cultures which had helped to explain the choice of sides in 1642-1645 started to break down under puritan rule. Traditional culture survived in conservative areas, but it also showed signs of revival in puritan areas where this culture had been suppressed.<sup>22</sup> There is a need, then, for closer examination, a return to micro-studies to see if the dynamics of cultural and religious conflicts before and during the civil war can be re-constructed. This is easier said than done. Before 1642 the surviving records often provide only glimpses, and where particular episodes can be reconstructed it often appears that they have as much to do with personal animosity as principled disagreement, and thereafter the records become patchier.<sup>23</sup> Yet familiar sources such as the autobiography of Richard Baxter, who fled Kidderminster when war broke for fear of 'the fury of the rabble, give some insight into the extent to which the civil war was fought within individual towns and villages. An especially subtle observer of religious and cultural behaviour, Baxter grouped his congregation into twelve sorts,

ranging from precise professors of religion to those who lived in sin due to common drinking, swearing and ribaldry. He noted how the supporters of the King came from ministers and people who supported the Book of Sports, who went church to hear Common Prayer, and enjoyed a sermon critical of the puritans. Yet even sober men might support the King, and they admitted that 'The king hath the better cause, but the parliament hath the better men'.<sup>24</sup>

## REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup> E.g. Conrad Russell, *The Causes of the English Civil War* (Oxford, 1990). For an excellent review of the historiography, see Ann Hughes, *The Causes of the English Civil War* (2d ed., Basingstoke, 1998).
- <sup>2</sup> David Underdown, *Revel, Riot and Rebellion* (Oxford, 1985), p.10.
- <sup>3</sup> John Morrill, 'The Religious Context of the English Civil War', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th ser., 34 (1984), pp. 155-78.
- <sup>4</sup> As in Christopher Durston and Jacqueline Eales (eds.), *The Culture of English Puritanism, 1560-1700* (Basingstoke, 1996).
- <sup>5</sup> David Underdown, "'But the Shows of Their Street": Civic Pageantry and Charivari in a Somerset Town', *Journal of British Studies* 50 (2011), p. 10.
- <sup>6</sup> Alexandra Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 1999); Kenneth Parker, *The English Sabbath* (Cambridge, 1988).
- <sup>7</sup> David Underdown, *Fire from Heaven* (New Haven, 1992), p. 21.
- <sup>8</sup> Underdown, *Fire from Heaven*, pp. 21-22
- <sup>9</sup> Patrick Collinson, 'Elizabethan and Jacobean Puritanism as Forms of Popular Religious Culture', in *The Culture of English Puritanism*, pp. 32-57; Peter Lake, "'A Charitable Christian Hatred": The Godly and their Enemies in the 1630s', in *ibid*, p. 146.
- <sup>10</sup> Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (London, 1978); Tim Harris, ed. *Popular Culture in England, c. 1500-1800* (Houndmills, 1995); Barry Reay, *Popular Cultures in England 1550-1750* (London, 1998).
- <sup>11</sup> Keith Wrightson and David, *Poverty and Piety in an English Village* (New York, 1979).
- <sup>12</sup> Steve Hindle, *The State and Social Change in Early Modern England, c.1550-1640* (London, 2000), ch. 7.
- <sup>13</sup> Henry Burton, *A Divine Tragedie Lately Acted* (London, 1636).
- <sup>14</sup> Underdown, *Revel*, pp. 100-103; Underdown, 'But the Shows'.
- <sup>15</sup> Underdown, *Revel*, p. 130.
- <sup>16</sup> Mark Stoye, *Loyalty and Locality* (Exeter, 1994), pp. 204-226.
- <sup>17</sup> Nicholas Tyacke, 'Puritanism, Arminianism and Counter-Revolution', in Conrad Russell (ed.), *The Origins of the English Civil War* (London, 1973); Julian Davies, *The Caroline Captivity of the Church* (Oxford, 1992); Anthony Milton, *Catholic and Reformed* (Cambridge, 1995).
- <sup>18</sup> Christopher Haigh, *The Plain Man's Pathways to Heaven* (Oxford, 2007), pp. 215-217.



<sup>19</sup> Diarmaid MacCulloch, 'The Impact of the English Reformation', *Historical Journal* 38 (1995), p. 152.

<sup>20</sup> Alexandra Walsham, 'The Parochial Roots of Laudianism Revisited: Catholics, Anti-Calvinists and 'Parish Anglicans' in Early Stuart England', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 49 (1998), pp. 620-51; Kenneth Fincham and Nicholas Tyacke, *Altars Restored* (Oxford, 2007), pp. 253-265; Judith Maltby, *Prayer Book and People in Elizabethan and Early Stuart England* (Cambridge, 1998).

<sup>21</sup> Bernard Capp, *England's Culture Wars* (Oxford, 2012).

<sup>22</sup> Underdown, *Revel*, p. 240.

<sup>23</sup> E.g. Christopher Haigh, 'Dr Temple's Pew: Sex and Clerical Status in the 1630s', *Huntington Library Quarterly* 68 (2005), pp. 497-516.

<sup>24</sup> Richard Baxter, *Confirmation and Restoration* (London, 1658), pp. 157-65; *The Autobiography of Richard Baxter*, abridged by J. M. Lloyd Thomas (London, 1974), p. 35.