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'Could it just possibly be?' Revel, Riot and Rebellion at Thirty

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Has it been thirty years? I ask this because my relationship to David Underdown's *Revel Riot and Rebellion* is more than academic.¹ When I entered graduate school at Brown University in 1976 he was finishing 'The Chalk and the Cheese' - so the questions and theories about allegiance and regional cultures that were at the center of the book were always part of my experience of him.² As my own work developed, and particularly as I was doing research for my dissertation, we shared ideas and interpretations as we both sought to understand early modern communities. These were rich exchanges, by letter or in person. There were a number of times when we were both working in the old P.R.O. on Chancery Lane, and spent lunches, or teas at the Institute of Historical Research making sense of Star Chamber cases he was reading, or Assize cases I was reading. He noted that conversation in the acknowledgments, as well as in the dedication of the book. What he did not say was that the book and the ideas in it were the intellectual soundtrack of our courtship; it was published soon after we were married. So the book itself played an important role in my life, intellectually and personally.

Re-reading the book after thirty years to reflect on its ongoing impact, I am struck by three things. First, it was an idiosyncratic project, going against the tide of then fashionable historiography. Underdown was following his nose, the internal logic of his research and reading. The early 1980s were the heyday of Revisionism, which not only rejected the notion that there were long term causes of the Civil War and Revolution - something Underdown offers as a governing assumption on p. x - but also focused on elite politics, primarily at Court or sometimes in Parliament. When he reviewed the book in the *London Review of Books* alongside a book by David Starkey, Conrad Russell was plainly bemused that while, 'If Dr Starkey wishes

to understand an event in a period of which he has previously known nothing, he will ask who was Groom of the Stool: Professor Underdown, faced with the same task, will ask who was constable of Batcombe.³ The work of the post-revisionists soon provided cogent critiques of the revisionist consensus, but it did so within the context of elite politics as usually understood.⁴ *Revel* was so far from the mainstream that when Glenn Burgess reviewed work on early Stuart politics from the 1970s and 1980s, he did not even cite it.⁵ The fact that it is now standard reading is a reminder that what is fashionable is not always most lasting.

A second striking aspect of the book is the enormous respect and affection it has for the ordinary people of early modern England. Underdown saw himself as a country boy and he liked to quote Sir Roger Burgoyne, 'I have been taken for a country fellow, but never a courtier'; he saw the people he wrote about as related to him.⁶ He eschewed determinism, material, religious, or social. He assumed that ordinary people had political and religious opinions, and that those opinions could not be reduced to any of the frameworks available. The concept of regional cultures allowed him to understand allegiance in relation to a range of issues, including economic activity (dairying, or the cloth industry), religion, local elites, and historical experience. Ecology was one part of that, but never the whole story. He admitted that the West Country region that he studied had distinctive characteristics: anyone who has stood on Eggardon Hill and looked from the chalk downlands toward the west Dorset pastureland understands that the contrasts were particularly visible there. Because he never thought either ecology or economy told the whole story, he was never surprised that the relationship between economic regions and allegiance differed in other parts of England. As I frequently reminded him, they certainly did not work in Norfolk. On the other hand, having undertaken detailed studies of church patronage by MPs for *Pride's Purge*, he was equally convinced that elite

commitments were inadequate for explaining local allegiance or even religious orientation.⁷ Ordinary people, he argued, had their own opinions, and those opinions were, if not entirely freely chosen, fairly independent of gentry and even clergy opinion.

The third and most striking thing about *Revel, Riot and Rebellion*, however, is its intellectual range and vitality.⁸ I cannot think of another historian living or dead who managed to range as Underdown did from high politics to local cultural worlds, and make them connect.⁹ What is astonishing looking back on the book today is how many strands of scholarship contribute to it, and would contribute to any rethinking or refining of its argument. Underdown was unique in the 1980s for his attention to the intersections of gender and politics. Research by the likes of Laura Gowing, Garthine Walker, Alexandra Shepard and I (among many others) on issues of gender more broadly has since confirmed if slightly shifted his focus on the control of women, but also forced us to think about how different men related to models of patriarchal masculinity. Ann Hughes has taken up the challenge of gendering the Civil War, but otherwise precious little work on early Stuart politics engages fully with theories of gender.¹⁰ Much of Underdown's research on local cultures depended on the workings of local government, but he did not make the connections – made by Steve Hindle and Michael Braddick in the late 1990s and early 2000s – to the rise of state institutions.¹¹ The area that has seen the greatest expansion has been the area of popular politics; from the popular uprisings of the early Jacobean period to popular memory, this has been a remarkably rich area of research.¹² Those who have taken up the challenge of examining regional cultures have found that other regions have different intersections of ecology, economy, social organization and political allegiance, but have confirmed Underdown's contention that culture and political allegiance are important variables,

not reducible to other criteria.¹³ This summary can only suggest the range of work that has picked up on, developed, or would reflect back on *Revel, Riot, and Rebellion*.

Revel, Riot, and Rebellions's signature contribution was to place these different strands of research in conversation. Thirty years on, there is still remarkably little conversation across these areas of research: each proceeds on its own trajectory, with limited engagement with other areas; most of us cross at best between two or three areas of study. I can move fairly easily between social and cultural history, but even to write this short essay, I have worked to figure out what has happened in areas of political history that have been tangential to my interests. Yet Underdown moved easily between high politics, local governance, culture, social practice, gender, and military history: this breadth of interest marked all his later work. His Ford Lectures, *A Freeborn People*, were explicitly directed at bridging the intellectual silos in which most of us live. It connected high and popular politics by paying attention to underlying assumptions about those politics, particularly in ideas about the ancient constitution, gender, and particularly gender inversion.¹⁴ When he died, he was following the trail of inversion further, using the idea to link politics, popular culture, and popular literature in the period before and during the Civil War. As I am now finishing that book, I am particularly aware both of the richness of working across these many areas, and of the challenges it presents. So the thirtieth anniversary of the publication of *Revel, Riot, and Rebellion* seems a good time to reflect on the advantages of stepping outside our intellectual ruts.

Until the mid-1970s, it would have been difficult to distinguish David Underdown's historical approach from that of most other political historians. There were glimmers, however. One of *Pride's Purge's* greatest contributions had been to link the high politics narrative of events in Parliament with the then vigorous tradition of studies of the county community.¹⁵ So

Underdown had already tried to widen the lens, understanding the politics of the 1640s as partly an interaction between national and local issues. When he turned to popular allegiance, however, he broadened his vision considerably. And here he demonstrated two particular virtues. First, he was willing to take risks, to make a rash assertion and then try to prove it. The Preface to *Revel, Riot, and Rebellion* recounts a conversation with John Morrill where Underdown argued that allegiance followed regional cultures, and Morrill 'sensibly asked for some evidence'. I am quite certain that he had no clue during that conversation in the Institute for Historical Research tea room where finding 'some evidence' would take him. But he was willing to go there.¹⁶ Second, he was endlessly curious. At a pub lunch at Stoke-sub-Hamdon, Somerset, he got interested in the fives wall in the garden, and proceeded to trace the history of fives: originally played against the wall of the church, when the game moved to pubs, the fives wall was shaped like the wall of a church. What could have been merely a curious factoid ended up shaping his understanding of the history of sport.¹⁷ He rarely took stories at face value; he had the countryman's mistrust of metropolitan elites. He assumed there was a back story, and he kept digging for it. Sometimes it led nowhere, or did not turn out to be significant. For instance, the question of the fives wall was interesting, but not particularly important. But without asking the questions, he would not have written what he did.

In the summer of 1979, while I was off in Norwich beginning my dissertation research, and he was working through antiquarian volumes on punishment, he wrote to me:

Could it just possibly be that charivari becomes directed at women who defy patriarchal norms in the 16th and 17th centuries in these particular areas because these are precisely the ones in which women's economic role... is becoming more important and hence threatening? ... There's so much I don't know - about the use of the cucking stool in punishing scolds, for instance.¹⁸

That question – ‘could it just possibly be?’ – eventually led to his essay ‘The Taming of the Scold’, and shaped his portrait of regional cultures in *Revel*. If Underdown had an intellectual motto, ‘Could it just possibly be?’ comes as close as any. There was no way to answer the question except by exploring a whole new set of archives and theoretical models.

To write *Revel, Riot and Rebellion*, Underdown gained familiarity with entirely new classes of records, from church courts to local sessions. Star Chamber records became a particular favorite, especially as he realized that ‘the memory of man runneth not to the contrary’ – a common phrase – also explained resistance to change in academic settings! Anyone who has moved between archive collections is aware of the time it takes to understand a new class of records as a genre, to grasp their intricacies, their limitations, and their possibilities. But exploring new records raised new questions, from gender to the history of sport. The grace of his writing masks the work involved in learning, and the risks of such an approach. While my interest in the subject might have alerted him to gender as a category of analysis, he never would have integrated it into his scholarship had he not started reading local court records; he would not have connected the history of sport to politics had he not read church court records. Whether every one of those ideas was right, or useful, is less important than that taken together, they helped open up a wide range of questions for further exploration.

I have always thought there is another story to *Revel, Riot and Rebellion*. Underdown wrote the history of a revolution in the late 1960s, and it is not surprising that in the 1970s he turned to trying to understand popular conservatism. Just as the radical movements of the 1960s fed a conservative backlash in the U.S., the radical revolution of 1649-51 never really took hold. Yet the way he did that was anything but conservative. Now, the world is very different from that of the 1970s. Neo-liberalism and its cultures of mostly bogus accountability – from the Research Effectiveness Framework to various forms of assessment -- have taken over the

academy. All these forms and assessment tempt us to avoid risks, to stay in the familiar path. *Revel, Riot and Rebellion* asks us to pose the question, 'could it just possibly be?' about any number of other aspects of British society and politics in the seventeenth century that we do not quite get. In answering that question, about whatever subject, we will almost inevitably take risks and move out of our intellectual comfort zones. The books that will be honoured with a retrospective thirty years from now are likely, however, to be works that do just that.

Endnotes

1. David Underdown, *Revel, Riot and Rebellion: Popular Culture in England, 1603-1660* (Oxford, 1985): all references to the text that follow are to this first edition.
2. David Underdown, 'The Chalk and the Cheese: Contrasts among the English Clubmen', *Past and Present* 85 (1979) pp. 25-48.
- 3 Conrad Russell, 'Real Power', *London Review of Books* 7 Aug 1986, p. 20
(<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v08/n14/conrad-russell/real-power>, accessed 9/29/14)
4. Richard Cust, *The Forced Loan and English Politics, 1626-1628*(Oxford, 1987); Richard Cust and Ann Hughes, ed., *Conflict in Early Stuart England: Studies in Religion and Politics 1603-1642* (London and New York, 1989); Thomas Cogswell, *The Blessed Revolution: English Politics and the Coming of War, 1621-1624* (Cambridge, 1989).
5. Glenn Burgess, 'On Revisionism: An Analysis of Early Stuart Historiography in the 1970s and 1980s' *Historical Journal* 33:3 (1990) pp. 609-27: apparently neither the journal's editors, nor any of the reviewers for the journal, saw this as noteworthy.
6. *Pride's Purge: Politics in the Puritan Revolution* (Oxford, 1971), quoted on p. 55.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 234-5, where he notes that 'patrons were often influenced by other factors than the minister's theological complexion', and only occasionally displays a clear theological pattern; see also David Underdown, "A Reply", *Journal of British Studies* 26:4 (1987) pp. 474-5.
8. In what follows, I offering suggestive references rather than a complete review; a far more thorough recent assessment is Ann Hughes, 'The "Chalk" and the "Cheese": David Underdown, Regional Cultures and Popular Allegiance in the English Revolution', *History Compass* 11:5 (2013) 373-380.

9. An obvious comparison is Anthony Fletcher, but Fletcher pursued gender as an entirely separate category, and his works on politics and gender are not in intellectual conversation with each other.

10. Laura Gowing, *Domestic Dangers: Women, Words, and Sex in Early Modern London* (Oxford, 1996); Garthine Walker, *Crime, Gender and Social Order in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2003); Alexandra Shepard, *Meanings of Manhood in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2003); Susan D. Amussen, *An Ordered Society: Gender and Class in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 1988); Ann Hughes, *Gender and the English Revolution* (London, 2012); one work in the earlier period which does use gender, but less centrally than might have been possible, is Alastair Bellany, *The Politics of Court Scandal in Early Modern England: News Culture and the Overbury Affair, 1603-1660* (Cambridge, 2002); for the later period, see Rachel Weil, *Political Passions: Gender, the Family, and Political Argument in England, 1680-1714* (Manchester, 1999).

11. See e.g. Steve Hindle, *The State and Social Change in Early Modern England, c. 1550-1640* (Basingstoke, 2000); Michael Braddick, *State Formation in Early Modern England c. 1550-1700* (Cambridge, 2000).

12. John Walter, *Understanding Popular Violence in the English Revolution: The Colchester Plunderers* (Cambridge, 1999); Steve Hindle, 'Imagining Insurrection in Seventeenth-Century England: Representations of the Midland Rising of 1607' *History Workshop Journal* 66:1 (2008) pp. 21-61; Andy Wood, *The Memory of the People: Custom and Popular Senses of the Past in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2013); David Rollison, *A Commonwealth of the People: Popular Politics and England's Long Social Revolution 1066-1649* (Cambridge, 2010).

13. Mark Stoyle, *Loyalty and Locality: Popular Allegiance in Devon in the English Civil War* (Exeter, 1994); Andy Wood, *The Politics of Social Conflict: The Peak District 1520-1770* (Cambridge, 1999).

14. David Underdown, *A Freeborn People: Politics and the Nation in Seventeenth-Century England* (Oxford, 1996).
15. Alan Everitt, *The Community of Kent and the Great Rebellion, 1640-1660* (Leicester, 1973); Clive Holmes, *Seventeenth Century Lincolnshire* (Lincoln, 1980); Anthony Fletcher, *A County Community in Peace and War: Sussex, 1600-1660* (London, 1975); J. S. Morrill, *Cheshire 1630-1660: county government and society during the English revolution* (Oxford, 1974).
16. The conversation is cited in *Revel, Riot, and Rebellion* p. vii; also John Morrill, 'The Ecology of Allegiance in the English Civil War', *Journal of British Studies* 26:4 (1987), p. 451.
17. David Underdown, 'Regional Cultures? Local Variations in Popular Culture during the Early Modern Period' in *Popular Culture in England, c. 1500-1850* ed. Tim Harris (New York, 1995), pp. 28-47, esp. 39-41, and p. 225, n. 36.
18. David Underdown to Susan Amussen, 16 July 1979 (personal papers).