

The Leading Facts of English History

D.H.Montgomery

May 30 - June 3, 2018

In a short book you cannot do English history any justice, unless of course you make it into a succinct catalog. In fact the book starts out with a twenty page summary of events and at the end a couple of pages of listing the major constitutional milestones, both of those list are as is the book as a whole, correlated to the list of kings. There are some two hundred pages of narrative, which is terse yet leisurely, addressing the general reader dispensing with any technicalities. The book has a definite didactic purpose, namely to impress on the reader, predominantly an American one, the progress of the English race and culture, seen from the zenith of British dominance and prosperity. In fact the most interesting aspect of the book is that it was written in the 1880's, and as such is of historical interest by itself¹, as history itself has a history. It starts from the beginning with prehistoric tribes, mere savages, through the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons, the intrusions of the Danes and the Norman invasion. You are shown how the power of the kings are being curtailed successively from Magna Carta via the glorious revolution to the full-fledged parliamentary system put in place once Victoria entered the throne.

Although the narrative is organized according to the succession of kings, there is little on the kings per se, apart from some moral comments handed down from antiquity, and thus they do not stick in your mind. An important legacy of the Norman invasion was that England, which initially was thought of as an appendage to French feudal holdings, became a country which had French feudal holdings. As a result we had the Hundred years war, which lasted for more than a century, although not continually so, and whose ultimate outcome it was to shear England of its French possessions, except the symbolic holding of Calais. This war was followed by an internal strife, the famed war between the Roses², that in effect amounted to a suicide of the nobility, and thus the enhanced power of the King. The author notes that very few aristocratic families can boast a lineage going back to Norman times, that most of the present aristocracy was created by the Tudors and the Hanoverians. The extensive destruction of the barons, following upon the reaping of the black death, meant increased power of the simple labor and the gradual effacement of serfdom, although the power of peasant was never equal to that of those of Scandinavia. The first complete parliament, consisting of lords, clergy and commons, assembled and convened in 1295, but there were precedents as early as 1258 under Henry III and seeds of it going back further. The war of the Roses ended at the battle of Bosworth in 1485 with the death of Richard III and the rise of the Tudor dynasty. The Tudor Dynasty boasts three monarchs of importance. Henry VII, Henry VIII and Elizabeth I of which

¹ As a quaint aside it contains some statistical tables, from which you learn that London already then had more than four million inhabitants, and that there were, starting with Liverpool, sixteen other cities with more than a hundred thousand inhabitants.

² White and Red, corresponding to York and Lancaster respectively

Henry VIII is by far the most charismatic, not necessarily in a positive sense. In fact his is the face that is most readily recognized and identified by the British public. His most notable achievement was breaking with the pope and confiscating church property, as well as controlling the parliament becoming in the end a dictator. The break with Rome was a purely political move, the religious ideology of the Protestant movement was secondary, just as in Scandinavia and among predominantly northern German states. As far as the king had any religious feelings they were if anything Catholic. The Protestant dominion was furthered during the brief reign of his ill-fated son Edward, but during the subsequent reign of his older daughter Mary, those policies were reversed, so brutally indeed, that it earned Mary the nickname of 'Bloody Mary'. Policies which were reversed under her sister Elizabeth. The author notes that Mary should rather be pitied than despised, she acted out of conviction, and, one may be tempted to extrapolate, had Catholicism prevailed she would have been a heroine in the eyes of posterity. And, the author notes, both she and her Protestant sister Elizabeth were devotees of the Virgin Mary. With Elizabeth the Tudor line went extinct and the King was imported from Scotland, the son of the great rival, Mary Queen of Scots. James I (James VI in Scotland) is mainly remembered for the translation of the Bible done during his time and named after him, and also for pursuing the idea of the King only being responsible to God owing his power to him and not to the people. While James was an uncouth despicable character, his son was far more refined and interesting, and a truly tragic figure as events would in the end prove. He tried to maintain the absolute power of a monarch and abolish the Parliament which led to a Civil War ³ he would eventually lose ending in his beheading in 1649. For eleven years the country was run as a military dictatorship under Cromwell with a very strong Protestant flavor. Those internal difficulties meant that England was cut off from continental affairs, in particular it played no role in the Thirty Years War. Cromwell was not formally made King, but his office was inherited by his son, who quickly showed himself unequal to the task and a restoration was effected in 1660, something which cannot but puzzle an outside observer (but even the French Monarchy was, if only temporarily, restored after the French Revolution). All wars are ultimately fought for political reasons, in particular not really for religious. Nevertheless the Civil War and the period before it led to an ideologization and radicalization of Protestantism and a vilification of Catholicism. Extreme Protestant sects arose, some of which sought sanctuary as refuges overseas with fateful consequences. The initiating moral force of Protestantism was that of protest and the abolishing of imposed authority, and in that sense paved the way for the Enlightenment, although one should never forget that the core of Protestantism was as bigoted, if not more, than Catholicism, which in spite of the Inquisition, tended to be more tolerant, and hence corrupt, as illustrated by the infamous dealings in indulgences⁴. The restoration only lasted for thirty years. Charles II was a sloth, mostly interested in his own enjoyment, his reign being in certain respects a relief from the austerity of the era of Cromwell, and his brother James II was inept and also too pushy for the reintroduction of Catholicism

³ splitting the country into Round-heads, religious zealots wanting to dispose of him and his Catholic leanings, and loyalists referred to as Cavaliers, with a more traditional outlook. The author fancifully sees them as the precedents of Whigs and Tories.

⁴ Note that all the fundamentalist Christians stem from Protestantism,

which by this time was politically impossible. As a result he was simply deposed and his daughter Mary and her husband and cousin William of Orange were invited to assume the throne. James II fled ignominiously without a shot being fired. The event is referred to as the Glorious Revolution and from then on real power resided with the Parliament, which alone could decide on the succession of the crown, in other words to decide who was the legal inheritor. It did not of course mean that the King (or Queen) was a mere figure head, the power of the monarch would only gradually fade throughout the 18th century, but their political fate was sealed. Britain had always been a peripheral power overshadowed by the Spanish and the French. The influence of Spain was but short lived, really only a century (the end conveniently marked by the debacle of the great armada sent to invade and subjugate England), while France was ascending through the Thirty Years War, its pinnacle reached by the end of the 17th century. England on the other hand was weakened playing second fiddle to the Dutch who had their ascent after the liberation brought about by the Thirty Years War. This would change dramatically during the 18th century, and why?

There is a natural and obvious explanation, namely the sea. The seas were held by the Spanish, and later on by the Dutch, creating huge colonial empires overseas. Britain joined a bit later in the game concentrating on North America and India creating a huge merchant fleet whose activities included state sponsored piracy, principally against the Spanish. During the 18th century, with improved technology, the English stepped up and got the better of their rivals, the Dutch and the French, the latter coming to grief both in Canada and India. Why did the English succeed? In particular against a formidable country like France, with a much larger population and much more extensive resources. At the time of the writing of the book the answer was obvious, in fact so obvious that it had no need to be spelled out, namely the superior character of the English race. Other more mundane explications have been offered, such as the very profitable triangular trade in Slaves, Sugar and Cotton in the Atlantic. Whether colonialism is a profitable business or not has been debated but at the time it must have been. England itself is a small island with little intrinsic wealth compared to nations such as France. And maybe the English got a head start in a profitable direction, note that the colonial wealth reaped by the Spanish and the Portuguese only impoverished their economies concentrated as it was on the formality of precious metals; and this initial advantage of the English increased through an exponential feed-back mechanism. The 18th century was the century of French cultural domination and the age of Enlightenment is very much associated with the French encyclopedists. In England that role had already been laid by the Royal Society under Charles II, and the advent of Newton had heralded the Scientific Revolution, yet the true legacy of Newton took place on the continent rather than in England itself. The real greatness in England was to be found in its liberal political system, at least according to Voltaire, and its intellectual achievements were rather of a social nature than a scientific. One thinks of philosophers such as David Hume and Adam Smith. At the end of the century England suffered a serious set-back by the loss of its North-American colonies⁵, on the other hand it is not clear whether the loss really was more than moral. More

⁵ George III, the first Hanoverian king born in England and one surmises speaking English like a Native, stubbornly opposed the liberation of the American colonies, and can as such be had responsible to

importantly the so called Industrial revolution took place in the last decades of the 18th century ahead of everybody else. There were, as usual, many different things which had to come about to precipitate it. First there had to be technological inventions among which Watts steam engine is the iconic representative. Also in England there was a limit to agricultural expansion and a ready surplus of people, some of whom had already migrated, to be exploited for labor. Finally England was blessed with coal deposits, the energy which would drive the industrial revolution. The country was forested, but supposedly it was all cut down as fuel. The industrial revolution transformed the country solidly. New cities such as Manchester and Leeds grew up entirely industrial so totally different from the old quaint cathedral towns of the past. The countryside was sullied and ugly structures arose billowing with smoke. The painter Constable was well aware of the gradual disappearance of rural life and did his best to preserve the memory of it in his paintings, while Blake decried the uglification of fair Albion. But it went deeper, a laboring class of toiling citizens, including women and children arose eking out a miserable existence. Dickens, above all, expressed his disgust and engendered that of the reading public in his serial 'soaps'. It was the ugly side of capitalism and provoked political protest from the gentle reformatory pragmatism of Owen to the more radical millennial visions and revolutions of Marx and Engels. Communism as such, in the meaning of communal sharing, goes of course further back, and can be found in radical religious sects of the 17th century. England became the dominant manufacturing nation of the world, a country of industry and commerce, but intellectually a backwater, the venerable universities of Oxford and Cambridge could not compete with the French and the German ones, but that did not prevent it from having able engineers crucial to its industrial development⁶. England as an industrial nation outgrew its rural past, which meant that the land holding gentry lost its economic stronghold, further weakened by the repeal of the corn laws in 1846, abolishing the duty on imported grain making the basic staple food cheaper. Its political power dwindled as well as a consequence of the Reform bill, or rather a sequence of Reform bills from 1832, 1867 and 1884 respectively, whose aim was to introduce a fairer representation, some rural precincts with almost no inhabitants were entitled to send representatives to Parliament, while big cities such as Manchester were not⁷.

But the initial advantage of the British was doomed not to last. Industrialization spread around the globe and other countries with more resources such as Germany and the United States were bound to catch up and overtake, and its colonial empire inevitably crumbled. But of that the author had no inkling when he wrote.

June 3-4, 2018 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se

the unnecessary bloodshed. People like Burke opposed him bitterly but on the other hand he must have found support among other members of the Parliament.

⁶ It is symptomatic that many of its most distinguished scientists of the period, such as Faraday did not attend universities.

⁷ The phenomenon of gerrymandering has the opposite goal, to make representation as loop sided as possible.