

A Life's Task

You may execrate the landed gentry and everything they stand for, and yet freely recognize that the present squire's grandfather was adored by his tenants and reared the finest herd of Ayrshires in the county.

H P R Finberg, *The Local Historian and his Theme*, Department of English Local History Occasional Papers No.1 (Leicester University Press, 1952), p.14.

Has it been fulfilled? Finberg's sentence seems to define precisely what I have tried to do. I hope I have done it. That is all there is to say. The rest would be repetition. Or, if I attempted a history of my history writing, elaboration. I think I am too old and weary to make the attempt; I am certainly not energized by the prospect. Besides, I am thoroughly dispirited. The reason is not far to seek. It is to be found in the calamitous decline of respect for history as my teachers at Leicester in the 1950s understood it, as I understood it during thirty years as a university lecturer, and as I continue to understand it.

What is currently understood as history is not that history at all. Not to put too fine a point on it, most of what passes for history these days is not history: it is neither scholarly nor is it instructive. It is written not to illumine but to entertain. It has become, in the cant phrase of our inebriate times, a bit of fun. Current history-making, especially that on film, DVD, and television, rarely takes the past seriously; on the contrary, it usually pokes fun at it. The past being another country, its inhabitants, being foreigners (queer folk not like us), are to be caricatured not studied. It is a variation on Kipling's he who only England knows, knows nothing; he who is ignorant of the past, will never understand the present. A bit of fun, a bit of a laugh: phrases sweet on the ears of the corporate managers, lawyers, social workers and academics doing all in their immense power to undermine the study of history. History (of the former kind) is not in their favour: those who have contemplated the wreckage of the past are able to strip the clothes off the imperialist wreckers of the world, allowing them to be seen for the naked wealth-seekers they have been, are, and always will be. The inanity of instant, round-the-clock television is what they have devised for us, along with instant, round-the clock shopping, to divert us from asking questions about what we have become and why. The discontent engendered by the nihilistic nature of perpetual acquisition is offset by the cloying sentimentality of the 'historical' drama-documnetary, the relentless idiocy of the game show, and the degrading voyeurism of so-called 'reality television', as fraudulent as the daylight robbery of everyday capitalism. Such infantilization plays into the hands of the racketeers who have globalized the economies of

the world, have subordinated politics to economics in South and Central America, Southern Africa, Russia, Israel and China, and have reduced social democracy to a shadow of its once-emergent self in the British Isles, and are dismantling what there was of it in the USA.

If I have execrated the English landed gentry it is because they started it all. I have discussed what they did many times over; in summary, their version of agrarian capitalism was a necessary precursor and facilitator of industrialization, the seedbed of the finance capitalism that now has dominion over us. An ambition to make a profit out of the soil itself (rather than out of the people who worked it) was what transformed feudal farming into capitalist farming. When that happened is crystal clear: between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries. What is opaque is why English landowning gentlemen and their yeoman leasees conspired together to get that profit (from animal husbandry as well as from arable cultivation). What engendered the departure from a feudal satisfaction with the exploitation of peasant tenants to a capitalist desire to exploit the land itself? What were the conditions for so demoralizing a take off? Wasn't Tawney right to detect as crucial to the process a change of attitude stemming from changes in religion? In other words: a change of mind resulting from a change of heart. This does need to be spelled out; I have sought to do the spelling out for more than thirty years. Central to the whole wretched business was the English Reformation, whose economic, consequences have been given less attention since Tawney's time than the religious: in a religiously moribund culture they have been safe to study because they are dead matter. The economic consequences are still lively and remain deadly: they will be the death of the planet.

The Reformation in England came as a great shock to ninety percent of Englishmen and women. It was a shock imposed from above. If we short-handedly define the King in Parliament as the English State then it was an imposition by the State; but if we want to trim Henry VIII to a more realistic size (than the one he occupies in the popular imagination, an imagination pandered to by David Starkey and his fellow 'television historians'), then it is the Commons in Parliament who will balk largest in the shock administered to church and people.

Did Milton Friedman ever describe the English Reformation as the earliest manifestation of a 'shock and awe' strategy on the part of enterprising capitalists? If he did not, he should have done. The shock administered by Thomas Cromwell and his gentry allies was to the Church, a public body that provided what John Bossy might have called 'social services': the mass itself was a social service, and so was everything else the Church provided or encouraged the laity to provide for themselves, parish guilds being pre-eminent among the 'social services' of the later Middle Ages. This attack on a social institution was a full-scale assault which did not stop at stripping it of its landed and liquid assets. Its charities were either abolished or transferred to a secular magistracy consisting of capitalist gentlemen who reduced the

concept of charity from a duty of love to an obligation at law, while the Church's concern for human rights, as demonstrated in church courts, was drastically curtailed by Common Lawyers whose sole concern, they averred, was for law and order, as spurious a phrase then as it is now, for it camouflages the social control they sought to implement.

Moreover, violence was deployed as policy in the same way that it was by Bush and Blair in Iraq. Carthusian monks, for example, were starved, beaten, and tortured; abbots and priors were hanged; priests were hanged, drawn and quartered; Thomas More and John Fisher were beheaded. The 'rebels' (aka terrorists) of the Pilgrimage of Grace were hunted down and executed. Parish churches were ransacked of their treasures. The dead were deemed to be forgotten, the Saints were reckoned superfluous, and the Virgin Mary was decreed to be of no account. Eternal verities were subordinated to present needs, the instant gratification culture we are all now obliged to inhabit having its origins in England in the 1530s. And who were the beneficiaries of this disaster scenario, this smash and grab raid on the Church, this rape and pillage of the English people?

Why, the English gentry of course. They parcelled out the property and power among themselves. In the town in which I am writing, Woodbridge in Suffolk, the gentleman lawyer who got both was Thomas Seckford. Not that he forgot his obligation of care, founding charities that still flourish because the ex-monastic property in London he acquired and set aside to support them is more valuable now than it ever has been. He also built the shire hall in Woodbridge where the town's governors sat in judgement on their social inferiors. There is no indication that they did so in front of one of those painted reminders of the justice they ought to be administering, which medieval magistrates had at their backs in their townhalls, from Siena to Louvain, from Florence to Brussels, from Venice to Lübeck. But then, justice for a capitalist English gentleman had a very different meaning from the one it had for a medieval burgher of Calais. It differed far more than it differs from the meaning it has for a member of the State Department in Washington or a British Home Secretary; in other words, the English Reformation was a watershed where attitudes are concerned. It was a defeat for hearts and minds both. The anti-public ideology of Milton Friedman and his disciples is now triumphant world wide; its first appearance in pragmatic (and successful) form occurred at Westminster in early sixteenth-century England. Let us take note even of the word we use so carelessly to describe that appearance: the Reformation. The greatest demolition job in England's history is designated a reformation, something improving and progressive. It was Thomas More in *Utopia* who pointed out how language is used by those who govern to hide their crimes from the governed. They are still doing it in Iraq and Afghanistan: making progress is their phrase.

Naomi Klein has a fine phrase too (in her case a truthful one) to describe the likes of Thomas Seckford: vulture capitalist. How well

the phrase fits those English gentlemen who made a killing in the property of suppressed monastic houses. Being members of Tudor administrations, they were vultures in high places, places perfectly sited from which to swoop on the juiciest tit-bits. They were the Dick Cheneys and Donald Rumsfeldts of their day. It has been many times remarked that if only Henry VIII's government had held onto the monastic lands it had confiscated the cost of Henry's wars would easily have been met. As would also the cost of his well-advertized programmes of founding new bishoprics, schools, and colleges. How much came to fruition? Far too little according to his humanist critics: it was for them an opportunity wasted. Not so for the greedy gulls in his government: greedy gulls was a contemporary term for vulture capitalists. Thomas Seckford and his colleagues were in charge of the distribution of monastic (and other church) lands; they made sure they got the best morsels and at knock-down prices. If I begin to mix my metaphors it is because I seethe with anger at the truth of all this never being told, but covered-up by Starkey and Co in their bland portrayals of a merry monarch with only domestic and matrimonial problems to occupy him. In reality he was a George W Bush who gave full licence to his ministers and their friends to enrich themselves while effecting a revolution. And what a revolution: the redistribution in landownership alone might be termed that, giving as it did so many farms over to gentlemen whose sons and grandsons saw its exploitable potential, if they themselves did not. But revolution went much further than that.

Shock and awe: the shock has been outlined; what of the awe? The English were awed. They were not cowed: Hodge and his like are never that, but they can be awed, even over-awed. I believe they were by the English Reformation. Their over-awing brought them into a submissive stance towards their social superiors, one that has largely determined English history since the mid-sixteenth century. No medieval peasant touched his forelock to his lord whatever else he might have to have done for him. His was a grudging service and it was bolstered by the teachings of the Church. All souls, male souls at any rate, were equal before God. The parish priest taught a subversive egalitarian doctrine if not from the pulpit then at yearly confession. He for one was no better than his parishioners and showed it daily. In addition the friars, notably the Franciscan friars, preached in market places and town squares on the equality of man, Christian men that is. The English gentry, like their English king, held the diametrically opposed idea of a social hierarchy. Not all members of the body were equal, whatever the Church taught about each member being indispensable to the effective exercise of the whole, whatever was said by the clergy about the Trinity representing the interdependence of one with another. The head ruled the rest and English gentlemen were head and shoulders above the poorer souls whom they sought to over-awe. The last time those poorer souls sought to influence the government at Westminster was in 1536 when the leaders of the Pilgrimage of Grace were hoodwinked into compliance by promises that were never intended to be met: in that respect it was a re-run of

1381. After that what have the English people ever done but be obedient? Or if they have attempted a revolution of their own it has been half-hearted: the General Strike of 1926; the failure to take the chance to make a start on the creation of a Socialist society in 1945.

Remember: this is history of the old-fashioned kind, the kind that attempts to tell the truth, not repeat myths. One of those myths is that of English liberty, nowadays masquerading as populist democracy. I have read recently the journals of the young de la Rochefoucauld brothers visiting England in the mid-1780s. They write a great deal about capitalist farming and applaud it unreservedly; they write also about English Liberty and praise it no less enthusiastically. What do they mean by liberty? They comment on more than one occasion that the improved farming they met with so frequently, for example on the Sandlings of East Suffolk, was dependent not only on investment but also on a freedom that was lacking in their own France, a France the brothers explored as assiduously and observantly as they did England, Wales, and Scotland. Any answer to the question would need to be complex; it would, however, have to include the freedom, I would say the licence, of landlords and their freehold farmers, to exploit both the land itself and the workers on it, no longer peasant tenants (as in France) but landless labourers, hired and fired on a day to day basis. That licence was the gentry's to enjoy because they were the very men who granted it to themselves, being members (or friends and backers of members) of the House of Commons, since 1688 the dominant and domineering partner in a government of King, Lords and Commons.

For the Reformation to have happened there had to have been a seismic shift in cultural values. That might be how Naomi Klein would put it; let me use other words, theological ones. It is clear that self-interest was let loose when the English gentry rifled the English church. This marked the beginning of that long-drawn out decline of other values which has resulted in the idolization of self-interest world-wide. All religions strenuously oppose other values to that of self-interest. In Christianity self-interest is defined as Original Sin, that psychological flaw which has taken root in each one of us and is ineradicable. As it cannot be uprooted, it has to be contained. The medieval church, whatever its disagreements and divisions as to methodology, was single-minded as to its aim: to save men and women from themselves, to put restraints on those seven deadly aspects of self-interest to which each one of them was prone. Other interests, other values, were promoted in order to devalue devotion to self. Judaism's Ten Commandments were close to the core of the campaign, the love of God and of one's neighbour the core itself. The interests of others, whether that Other was God, or was one's brother and sister, or one's neighbour (and his wife, his servants, and his livestock), those other interests had to be taken seriously. There were also one's benefactors, one's friends, even one's enemies to be considered. At the very least they all had to be prayed for, along with all Christian Souls. Here we arrive at the dead, usually one's ancestors, who had to be religiously

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remembered. Prayers for the dead were among the first things to be disappeared at the Reformation. Where was the self-interest, where was the profit in such prayer? And not only those prayers, but those of monks and nuns dedicated to praying for the world: of what earthly use were they? It is in the lock, stock, and barrel dissolution of the monasteries in England that the heart of the matter is to be found. It was an old value, once valued above all others, that was dissolved. Of course, prayer did not disappear overnight: Puritans prayed fervently for the salvation of the world. But this was not communal prayer, not public prayer, not prayer funded out of the purses of men and women who believed in the central role of prayer to keep the world on course. After the Reformation prayer may not have been exactly on the periphery, but it was certainly no longer what it had been: oh Lord let me do well in business is not what monks and nuns had been asking.

If Tawney was not entirely right about Calvinism and Interest, he surely had detected the paradigmatic shift I am trying to describe. The barriers the medieval Church had set up to keep sinfully self-interested men and women in check were breached. The Church before the Reformation was never as successful as was the civil magistracy after it at social management, but that is because the latter made more room for individual self-interest. God and Neighbour were not forgotten; they were, however, relegated to a secondary position; the individual, the self we should say, became the major player. We may wish to say that it had been a long time coming: where indeed are the origins of capitalism to be found? In the Garden of Eden no doubt. Turning points may be seen from a distance; nevertheless, there is no mistaking the turn when it arrives. The English Reformation witnessed the fateful loosening of the bonds in which self-interest had been for so long bound; it is a turning point of great magnitude which has too often been downplayed (if admitted at all) by English historians. Their negligence on that score is understandable: the English Reformation, whatever else it might have been, was English. It was also effective. Historians, if they do not worship success, have to accommodate it. Who would be bold enough to state (categorically) that the English Reformation was a catastrophe, an unmitigated disaster: for England, for what used to be called Western Civilization, and for Planet Earth? I am only doing so now because it has become apparent that one of its consequences, its furthest-reaching consequence, is the ecological burn-up that will be the mightiest paradigm shift of them all. Its inevitability has given us all, especially historians with their wits about them, a clearer vision of the past. By revealing the future, scientists have helped us see the past whole. In these last days, it was predicted that we would go about pursuing our individual interests, our selfish pleasures, our 'bit of fun' with unbridled egotism. And so we are.

In grateful acknowledgement of Naomi Klein, *Shock Doctrine*, 2007.

An Afterthought

What about national interest? Some have interpreted the Englishness of the English Reformation as nationalism. It is true that Henry VIII was propagandized as a great patriot, the Pope as an enemy alien, but those were the exaggerations of a regime keen to demonstrate its populism. It was nothing of the kind, as events proved. The king did displace the papacy from headship of the English Church: it meant very little to most churchgoers. It was the radicalism of the attack on public worship which made the majority of them sit up and take notice, some of them indeed to demonstrate in protest. Popes had conceded power to English kings long before, save in matrimonial causes, where in any case to kings caught in trying circumstances they had shown themselves accommodating: it was an 'accident' of history that when Henry VIII wanted a divorce the pope was not a free enough agent, being in the charge of Henry's wife's nephew, the emperor Charles V. It was not, however, the Royal Divorce that 'made' the English Reformation, it was the desire of England's gentry to be rid of the restrictions the Church imposed on their freedom of action. Or so they maintained. It is usually conceded nowadays that they made it all up. The lawyers among them, and there were a disproportionate number of lawyers in the House of Commons, were particularly contemptuous of the clergy, whom they sought to strip of their legal competence.

The gentry who were not lawyers shared the legal profession's distain for priests, who (if only in theory) had authority to discipline the excesses self-interest led to. The gentry were also jingoistic. They seem to have become so during the previous century. As a result most of the last vestiges of an international culture were smartly seen off during the 1530s, the papacy being one of them. The significance of the Pope's demise was more than symbolic. Thomas More, probably the wisest man in Christendom, pointed that out in no uncertain terms. England, he knew, was well on the way to becoming Little England when its back was turned on Europe. Many historians agree with him.

In that respect it may truthfully be said that the English Reformation was a backward step. It may be true, but it may be anachronistic to say so: in the 1530s the Commons in Parliament believed they were acting in the national interest. Not all of them, but a majority of the more active and most intelligent of them. Or so they maintained. The argument, 'its in the national interest', as even a cursory study of history reveals, is a favourite of scoundrels who have other objectives in mind. We have only to go back to 2003 to discover two such scoundrels. Bush and Blair declared war on Iraq to destroy 'Weapons of Destruction' they knew no longer existed. We did not. A war with other objectives was by the means of that lie made into a war in the national interest. Might the English Reformation be something along similar lines? In addition to the ostensible objective of reforming religion what others did the English gentry have?

The biggest land grab in English history was one of them, though it may have taken them longer than Thomas Cromwell did to see it as a practical possibility. The parallel with contemporary, post-war Iraq is obvious: deconstruction, reconstruction. How many monasteries were destroyed? How many were converted into private houses? How typical was Thomas Seckford of Woodbridge? Thomas built a town house on the site of Woodbridge priory; so far as I am aware no fragment of the priory buildings survived his 'make-over'. It is impossible nowadays even to imagine the priory when one stands in the parish churchyard, though parish church and priory church for eighty years stood only a few feet apart. I am inclined to think Thomas Seckford, childless and therefore well able to be charitable, was as untypical as the squire's grandfather of our epigraph. If he is no longer adored, he is still affectionately remembered. If he was a good man, how much more difficult it is to fathom his participation in the dismantling of Catholic religion. Far easier to think of him as a cynical lawyer and insincere Anglican. Yet one fancies it would be wrong to do so. No doubt he thought he was acting in the best interests of the nation when he pulled down Woodbridge priory and added a family chapel to the parish church next door. Yet, was not Thomas (along with his fellow Tudor gentry), also like Contractors in Iraq, who are making use of government money to reconstruct a privatized nation at an immense profit to themselves, their companies, and the company's shareholders? Are Iraqis being best served? One doubts whether they are any better served than were English men and women by the establishment of the Anglian church, a task that took decades to bring to any recognizable completion. Was England's national interest *really* a consideration of gentlemen like Thomas Seckford? Did they think of England as they watched their new houses going up where once an international brotherhood (or sisterhood) had prayed for the salvation of all men and women, not just English men and women? When Thomas Seckford added a family chapel to his parish church and had his tomb put into it, was he thinking (was he capable of thinking) of a world wider than Woodbridge, Suffolk, England? I doubt it.

I can doubt it because of what happened in Mary's reign. It is all very well to applaud the national feeling of the Commons in Parliament when they sought to limit the role of Mary's husband and his Spanish followers. We would do well also to bear in mind that while the Commons were only lukewarm in resisting Mary's changes in religious practice, they resolutely drew the line at the restoration of monasticism. They were not going to give up property, even if it were in the national interest that they should do so. Patriotism is one thing; property another. When the two clashed, as they might be said to have done in this instance, national interest takes second place to property.

27 August 2009.

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