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# Book review: A Commonwealth of the People: Popular Politics and England's Long Social Revolution, 1066–1649 by David Rollison

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**A Commonwealth of the People: Popular Politics and England's Long Social Revolution, 1066–1649.** By *David Rollison*.

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. Pp. xvi+474. \$99.00 (cloth); \$39.99 (paper).

This book embarks on a Frazerian voyage for the golden bough of “commonwealth” in collective memory, from debates in contemporary Australia—“arguably the most ‘common’ of the English settler-societies” (9)—to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century sources, back deep into the medieval world in search of a common tradition. David Rollison, author of an innovative if polemical work on early modern Gloucestershire (*The Local Origins of Modern Society* [London, 1992]), discovers that England’s preciosity arose in large part because the nonelite helped shape its imagined community.

Rollison’s “long social revolution” (151)—from 1381 (or earlier) to 1649—stretches thin the mere historian’s distinctions between continuity and change. Rollison revels in the Braudelian *longue durée*. Like pioneering work by Andy Wood on sixteenth-century rebellions, Rollison seeks to unearth a hidden transcript of the commonalty. Early modern “archives of everyday life” (4), indeed the new social history, depend on the English state’s expanding ability to record and preserve detailed information regarding the populace. Thus Rollison’s search for “the germ of the revolution of the commonalty” (99) must rely more on imaginative reading of fewer texts the further back he searches before 1485, or at least before 1381. He discovers in the twelfth-century political philosophy of John of Salisbury hints of the commonwealth era; the “feet” (of the organic body politic) speak, at least through others.

The first chapters assert the importance of landscape and “trafike” to national identity, even during the two centuries before the Black Death. Normans reorganized the constitutional landscape on an emerging commercial framework. The centralizing state thrived because of commerce but could not control the resulting “energies” (77) and faced emergent resistance theories. Rollison insists that resistance theory dates from much earlier and from groups further removed from the elite than the sixteenth-century theorists usually heralded. Rollison can draw upon medievalists such as D. A. Carpenter to show that the thirteenth-century political nation, the community of the realm, extended far beyond the barons. Plebeian participation in armies over the next two centuries, the “infantry revolution” (103), changed the polity, because pikemen and bowmen required monies and even a new commonweal discourse. Most of these connections are probable and historiographically grounded. But why force half a millennium into a two-class model using E. P. Thompson’s “field of force metaphor” (n 27), which claims that patrician hegemonic culture and plebeian resistance to it formed poles by which everyone in between aligned and that Thompson claimed for eighteenth-century society alone? If early vernacular writers can be ascribed to an emerging gentry, Rollison merges them with a “middle rank” (106) and ties use of a “common language” to a nonelite commonalty. The native tongue, Middle English “was the linguistic form of a social revolution” (125). Rollison suggests that anonymous poets, William Langland, and even mystic Julian of Norwich engaged in a linguistic battle as voices of the commonalty against those of reaction (read, the Church). Several rhetorical assertions (“Whan the comuynes began to ryse,” anonymous, ca. 1400, quoted 145, 236) are telling. But, when Rollison muses that “it is hard to imagine that heretical whisperings were never uttered, heard and passed on” (170), interpretation outruns the sources. The chapter concludes by contrasting “traditional populist” (188) William Tyndale with reactionary Sir Thomas More, although Tyndale hardly would have been seen as such by Prayer Book rebel commoners during the

“commocion tyme” of 1549 (Eamon Duffy, *The Voices of Morebath* [New Haven, CT, 2001], 127).

Part 2 consists of two chapters on fourteenth- through sixteenth-century popular demands. Defining the pre-1381 discussion, “popular” remains free-floating, based in part on (metaphorical? joking?) assertions such as “hermits and anchorites were the proletarians of the medieval Church” (217). Rollison’s Derridean “specter” becomes more tangible, the argument more concrete, by the late medieval/early modern era. But by then, another set of more traditional historiographical models also exist to explain the same evidence. Rollison usefully examines the language of orders and sorts, the 1381 Revolt (for Rollison, not a Peasants’ but a “Commons rebellion,” 250), Jack Sharpe’s Rising of 1431 (not Lollard, but for “alle comyns of the re[al]me,” 268), Jack Cade’s Rebellion of 1450, and that of 1549 (Norfolk, not Prayer Book). If previous rebellions were initiated from above, now they were initiated from below, and commonweal discourse arose. One need not take sides on the old Roland Mousnier/Boris Porchnev debate regarding who controlled rebellions, in order to allow the possibility of lines of authority being worked simultaneously from above and below (see David Sabean, *Power in the Blood* [Cambridge, 1984]). Lords, gentry, even rebel captains such as Robert Kett have walk-on parts in Rollison’s drama; isn’t it likely that the good common people were “played” from above more than once? And, when they failed, weren’t recriminations likely to split any commune?

Part 2 turns to what others have termed the “industrious revolution,” an increase in production 1500–1750 more dramatic than that of 1750–1850. Not for Rollison a European-wide revolution, nor Kenneth Pomeranz’s questioning of *The Great Divergence* (Princeton, NJ, 2000) altogether, this was an “English explosion,” resulting from the “commoning of English culture” (296) and the triumph of an industrial consciousness. This section uses clothworking “trafike” to suggest how there emerged a national consciousness from local revolts, and modern economic thought out of small, East Anglian clothworking towns. This commoner-instigated trade is linked to imperial reach. Commoner livelihoods depended on imperial sales.

And then as the commoners triumph, a new type of governmentality, brought with it new chains, or at least minute social distinctions. The final part 4, “The Empowered Community,” examines ideas of disorder and revolt circa 1600 through the work of William Shakespeare (specifically the social politics of *Coriolanus*) and, in the final chapter, the English revolution of the 1640s and its link with what had gone before. Readers of this journal likely will find the final chapter on the modernity of the 1640s disappointingly brief. It attacks revisionist “court-centred history” (427), considers Thomas Hobbes’s understanding of earlier commonwealth ideas, and finally adumbrates the commoner contribution to the revolutionary public sphere. Class language “hardened” (454) in the mid-seventeenth century. The commonweal, now composed of property holders, was divorced from commoners, who began a rhetorical descent to the *mobile vulgus*.

Grasping this book in its entirety is difficult, both because of its discursive style (facts and quotes are repeated; lengthy epigraphs pile up) and because it lays its footpath to the public across the hedgerows and gates that academics have carefully nurtured between specialties and periods and genres. This sweeping argument should be read by those interested in the relation between the early modern state and people, or in the origins of modernity, if only to (re)discover one’s own assumptions about the premodern world.

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