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## RICHARD BAXTER: A PURITAN IN THE PROVINCES

ENGLISH LITERATURE AND HISTORY differ in their treatment of provincial England. Many great works of English literature have dealt with life in the provinces, but in the best English historical writing this subject has been relatively neglected, and the best historians have usually concentrated their attention on London or on the nation as a whole.

The histories of the English Civil War that have been written by persons contemporary to it conform to this rule. The provinces are poorly represented in the major works, only one of which has an extended portrait of the Civil War as seen by provincial eyes from deep in the provinces: the *Reliquiae Baxterianae*, or autobiography, of the great Puritan leader Richard Baxter.<sup>1</sup> The other historians of major works who described events in the war as they appeared from some particular place in the countryside were not, unlike Baxter, provincials themselves and sharers in the life of the provinces. The famous Mrs. Lucy Hutchinson, for example, described the war as seen from Nottingham, where her husband was governor for the Parliament. Yet in the pages of the *Hutchinson Memoirs*, one finds only the opinions of a southerner and semi-cosmopolitan, struggling with the inanities of local opinion. The north, says Mrs. Hutchinson, was "a formidable name"<sup>2</sup> to the London ladies that she knew in her youth, and the *Hutchinson Memoirs* show little evidence that she ever absorbed any of its particular outlook. If one leaves aside the question of provincial or non-provincial outlook, and merely tries to find a contemporary work on the Civil War that has intellectual value equal to Baxter's, that is as resolutely provincial in flavour, one must turn to a work of literature. Samuel Butler's *Hudibras* is set in the provinces, "in western clime", its hero, "the learned knight" Hudibras, is a "bumpkin"<sup>3</sup> and rustic eccentric, and it mirrors, like Baxter's work, the rough disorderly countryside of bear-baitings and other plebeian celebrations. But the attitude of the two works is so different that one realizes only with a sense of strain how much their social material has in common. Disrespectful in his treatment of the provinces, Butler regarded the Puritan cause with outright hatred. In his eyes, it was a subject fit for re-

morseless satire. He is a writer of the anti-Puritan reaction, of the intellectual "mop-up" after the Restoration had sealed the great historical failure of Puritanism in the Civil War and the Cromwellian experiment. Baxter is a figure of the Puritan attack.

The origins of Baxter's provincial outlook are illustrated in his life history. He was born in a village in Shropshire. His father was "a mean freeholder (called a Gentleman for his ancestors' sake, but of a small estate, though sufficient)."<sup>4</sup> This elder Baxter, like his father before him, addicted himself to gambling. This amusement injured the family estate, but Richard's father recovered from his vice in time to be a good influence on his son and to win the mockery of local members of the ungodly for his piety. Though this man was fully conformable to the Established Church, "he was reviled commonly by the Name of *Puritan*, *Precisian* and *Hypocrite*" (*Reliquiae Baxterianae*, Part I, 3). One gets the impression of a family that was succeeding, somewhat uneasily, in holding itself by brute force and the Puritan virtues from slipping into the poverty, illiteracy, and brutality of its neighbours. Baxter's education included, surprisingly enough, a year and a half at Ludlow Castle, which was an important administrative centre, and one short month at the Court. At the Court, the prevailing bias against Puritanism disgusted him. When the Long Parliament met, he was back in his rural retreats, serving as assistant to a Puritan clergyman. In 1641 he began his famous ministry at Kidderminster.<sup>5</sup> This ministry has been so fully discussed and praised by his admirers that the reader may be assumed to know as much about it as is necessary for illuminating the narrative of his life. One may only add that Baxter's success as a pastor at Kidderminster suggests that he had a skill in dealing with the common people and a charismatic personality that one would not suspect from the more learned and polemical of his books. There, fussiness and mandarin attitudes mingle with his extraordinary intellectual acuteness.

As a chaplain in the Parliamentary army, he began to experience a wider world. During the Interregnum, his writings and his activities in organizing his fellow moderates among the Puritan clergy brought him national reputation.<sup>6</sup> Just before the Restoration he came to London; this migration marks the breaking of his roots in provincial England, for he was never able to resume his pastorate at Kidderminster, and henceforth made his home in or close to London. He assisted in the Restoration of Charles II, though with some misgivings. By his own account, he realized that the Puritan ministers would be persecuted by the restored monarchy (*R.B.*, I, 71, 136; II, 207, 216).

He refused the offer of a bishopric, failed in his efforts to persuade the restored Anglican Church to make concessions to the scruples of the more moderate and reasonable Puritans, and took up his role as a member of an oppressed minority. The legal net of the Clarendon Code, enacted to suppress religious factionalism, was progressively extended over himself and his fellow Nonconformist clergy.

At the same time, the intellectual reaction was running strongly against the characteristic doctrines and attitudes of Puritanism. The intellectual currents that had run so strongly for Puritanism in the 1630s were now running in the opposite direction. *Hudibras*, Hobbes's *Behemoth*, and the cult of the Martyr King are all a part of this reaction. The significance of this reaction for Baxter is that he becomes a man of the past. Provincial before the Restoration, or at least until the end of the Cromwellian regime, he becomes anachronistic afterwards. But when he wrote his autobiography, in successive stages throughout the reign of Charles II, this anachronistic quality of his mind and position preserved, with especial clarity, the provincial viewpoint from which he had observed the Civil War and which he now commemorated on paper. A man who shared more fully in the forward movement of his times might have been more tempted to tamper with his memories, to adulterate them with ideas more recently acquired and therefore less provincial.

In the *Reliquiae Baxterianae*, Baxter paints a dismal picture of the clergy among whom he grew up, and of whom some were his earliest teachers. In the village in which he spent his first ten years "there was four Readers successively in Six years time, ignorant Men, and two of them immoral in their lives" (*R.B.*, I, 1). In the village where he next lived, the incumbent, who was about eighty years old,

never preached, and had two Churches about Twenty miles distant: His Eyesight failing him, he said Common-Prayer without Book; but for the Reading of the Psalms and Chapters, he got a Common Thresher and Day-Labourer one year, and a Taylor another year: (for the Clerk could not read well): And at last he had a Kinsman of his own, (the excellentest Stage-player in all the Country, and a good Gamester and good Fellow) that got Orders and supplied one of his Places! . . . (*R.B.*, I, 1).

And so Baxter goes on, recollecting the failings of the local clergy. One clergyman, a "Neighbour's Son", being inspired to go beyond the limitations of his fellows, "ventur'd to preach", and got a living in Staffordshire. Despite this advance over those of his professional colleagues who found preparing and

delivering sermons beyond their energy or capacities, his clerical career ended unhappily. It was discovered that his orders had been forged by the above mentioned stage-player (*R.B.*, I, 1). Baxter makes it clear, too, that many of the clergy shared the prevailing vice of drunkenness. This vice is mentioned so many times in the *Reliquiae Baxterianae* that one would suspect that Baxter had an obsession on this subject, were not the prevalence of drunkenness in the countryside also revealed in the clergyman Richard Gough's entertaining account of his seventeenth-century parish, *Human Nature Displayed in the History of Myddle*.<sup>7</sup>

Two questions arise about Baxter's picture of the clergy. First, were such conditions prevalent throughout England as well as in the district that young Baxter knew? And, secondly, did Baxter exaggerate the badness of conditions even in that limited territory? As to the first question, one cannot be at all confident that this district, as described by Baxter, was or was not typical of most. Contemporary evidence as to the state of the clergy is voluminous and incomplete, and is capable of many interpretations. One may only add in passing, as a piece of evidence particularly relevant to a decision, that the biographies and other records of the time do describe many well educated, competent individuals among the established clergy, though they may have been few enough when spread out over the whole face of England. As to the next question of exaggeration, Baxter certainly shows in his writings the double weakness of gullibility and a readiness to believe ill of groups and forces of which he disapproved. In this case, however, he is speaking of facts which must have come under his own observation, and probably the suspicions as to his possible exaggeration must be dismissed as inapplicable. Leaving open, then, the question of how far the picture he has drawn may be extended to other parts of England, we may at least assume—apart, perhaps, from such minor and unimportant details as the memory normally distorts over a period of years—that it was true for his native district. It stands, then, as an interesting piece, of large or small dimensions, of the ecclesiastical background to the conflict of Puritan and Anglican, Roundhead and Cavalier.

Baxter's account of the political and religious events that led up to the outbreak of rebellion against Charles I is confused, but this confusion is itself highly revealing. It gives us a glimpse of how public events appeared when seen from the provinces. Baxter's account is confused because he is recollecting events as they appeared to a young and obscure student and clergyman who was far from the centres of power and decision, ill supplied with accurate—

much less first-hand—information, and in circumstances that must have provided him with little incentive to turn from his books and attempt to inform himself of the state of the kingdom. In the sphere in which Baxter moved after leaving the Court in 1634, state policy, even in religious matters, can hardly have been a common topic of conversation or thought. He pinpoints an important event in his awakening to the year 1640. Then the famous “Etcetera Oath” was imposed on the clergy by the Laudian, anti-Puritan rulers of the church, in which the clergy were required to swear to preserve church government by bishops, archbishops, and other church dignitaries defined in a list ending with an ambiguous “Etcetera”. This oath, Baxter says, was the chief thing that alienated himself “and many others” from the English system of episcopacy. Their “drowsie mindlesness” on the subject of episcopacy was disturbed by the bishops’ “violence”, so that “we that thought it best to follow our business, and live in quietness, and let the Bishops alone, were rowzed by the terrours of an Oath to look about us, and understand what we did” (*R.B.*, I, 16). Rather vaguely, Baxter observes that “it fell out that at the same time when we were thus rowzed up in *England*, or a little before, the *Scots* were also awakened in *Scotland*” (*R.B.*, I, 16). In fact, the Scottish Rebellion predated the resistance to the Etcetera Oath by three years. And with similar vagueness, after describing the tumults in Scotland and the formation of the National Covenant, Baxter says “It fell out unhappily that at the same time while the *Scots* were thus discontented, the King had imposed a Tax here, called *Ship-money*, as for the strengthening of the Navy” (*R.B.*, I, 16). In fact, the imposition of this objectionable tax in England predated the Scottish troubles by two years and the resistance to the Etcetera Oath by five.

The most lucid and important part of Baxter’s description of the background of the Civil War is his careful and detailed explanation of the rise and meaning of the difficult and tendentious word “Puritan”. He explains that this word was originally promoted by the bishops and their partisans, but was adopted by the ungodly and the rabble to be used in a wider and looser sense to abuse all godly persons. As the rabble appear in the *Reliquiae Baxterianae* as a prominent feature of Baxter’s countryside and the object of his scorn and fear, it may be assumed that in formulating the explanation he drew upon his own provincial experience (*R.B.*, I, 32-33).

Baxter tells us in the following anecdote that he suffered a nearly fatal conflict with the rabble in 1642. At this time, the peace of England was dissolving into Civil War. The Long Parliament had ordered the destruction of

Popish statues and images still surviving in and about the churches. The churchwarden of Baxter's church in Kidderminster, "an honest, sober, quiet Man", set to work to remove a crucifix in the churchyard. Finding his ladder too short, he went in search of another; while he was gone, "a Crew of the drunken riotous Party of the Town (poor Journey-men and Servants)" formed to defend their threatened artifacts. Baxter was at this time walking almost a mile out of town. Otherwise, he supposed, "I had there ended my days", for the mob went hunting for him, thinking him responsible for the threatened destruction. Whether Baxter's danger was as great as he imagined is an interesting subject of speculation. Baxter was most courageous throughout his life in resisting unjust authority, whether Cromwellian or Stuart, but he was nervous and timid in facing dangers of a more conjectural sort. Whenever he could see a danger clearly, he was unafraid, but otherwise his imagination constantly made a coward of him. But perhaps in this case the danger was real enough. Though both he and the churchwarden missed the mob, it injured two of his friends. Returning from his walk after the dispersal of the mob, and still unaware of the danger he had undergone, Baxter heard "the People Cursing at me in their Doors". On the following Sunday he publicly reproved his erring parishioners and offered to leave them if they wished. By now repentant, they wished him to stay. But the growing tensions of the country continued to be felt in the streets of Kidderminster, and before the end of the year Baxter had twice escaped from the town to avoid the "Fury of the Rabble", egged on, as they were, by their Royalist superiors (*R.B.*, I, 40, 42-43).<sup>8</sup>

The rabble, Baxter finds, were similarly active throughout the nation. He describes how a kind of Royalist *jacquerie*, a rising of "the debauched Rabble" assisted by the common soldiers of the King's army, took place against the godly in the early part of the Civil War. By refusing to leave the religious people in peace, the rabble and soldiers drove them into active adherence to the Parliament (*R.B.*, I, 44). He supposes that the King must be exempted from personal responsibility for the doings of his plebeian followers. In the isolation of leadership, doubtless the truth was concealed from him (*R.B.*, I, 44). In Baxter's own Kidderminster, the belligerency of the anti-Puritan rabble had a fitting conclusion. Most of the worst of them, he says, went into the King's army and were killed (*R.B.*, I, 42, 86).

The hostility that Baxter describes is in no way paradoxical. Pre-war Puritanism may have had concealed democratic assumptions, but it was cer-

tainly not professedly democratic in either its political or its social ideas. Baxter does not even regard the rabble as ungrateful. Indeed, there appears to have been no occasion for them to be ungrateful, for Baxter's persecuted godly were apparently neither doing nor professing to do anything for them. Baxter represents the persecuted godly, by implication if not overtly, as a privately motivated, strictly non-political group before the outbreak of fighting. If Baxter had represented them instead as a political group professing Parliamentary doctrines, he would then have been able to hold that the rabble were ungrateful, for then the godly would be espousing the rabble's political liberties. Thus the Parliamentary Bulstrode Whitelocke, a London lawyer, was dismayed to find himself insulted by the rabble at Oxford while acting as a commissioner sent from the Parliament to the Royalist headquarters. Whitelocke noted unhappily that his revilers were "part of that Body for whom we underwent so many Hazards of our Lives and Fortunes, to preserve them in their Rights and Liberties, and from Slavery and Popery, which some about the King (as was believed) endeavoured to bring upon them."<sup>9</sup> Whitelocke was personally aloof and aristocratic, but perhaps he was misled into a unrealistic view of the relationship between the Parliament and the rabble by his experience of London, where the rabble was Parliamentary and political opinions suffused the lower and middle classes far more than they seem to have done in Baxter's territory. Baxter's picture of the hostility of the rabble for the godly finds relatively few corroborating passages in the other histories of the time, probably because the writers of these histories were not, like Baxter, in intimate contact with the life of any part of the provinces.

As his reflections on the rabble suggest, Baxter was aware of class divisions and of class conflicts in the Civil War. Class analyses of historical events are far from being the exclusively modern preoccupation that we sometimes imagine. They appear in numerous seventeenth-century historians and theorists.<sup>10</sup> Baxter noted that when England divided for war the King was supported by a combination of part of the nobility and gentry and "most of the poorest of the People", whom the Parliamentarians called "the Rabble". Parliament had its share of the nobility and gentry "and the greatest part of the Tradesmen, and Free-holders, and the middle sort of Men; especially in those Corporations and Countries [i.e., counties] which depend on Cloathing and such Manufactures." He seems to find much of the reason for this allegiance on the part of the middling sort of people in their religious convictions, which, in turn, in some modern-sounding and tantalizingly inconclusive re-

marks, he comes close to regarding as appropriate to their social and economic rank (*R.B.*, I, 30-31, 94).

Baxter's account of subsequent events in the Civil War is punctuated by insights gained from experience of a wider world than that of his familiar countryside, but it is still deeply coloured by his provincialism. London looms less large in his book than in many similar works, presumably because he had, at the time of these events, relatively little experience of the capital. The Parliamentary army, which he knew much better, looms especially large. To countrymen in a vigorous and prolonged Civil War, armies are likely to be of much more concern than remote, and stationary, capitals.

By seeing the *Reliquiae Baxterianae* as a work of provincial outlook, we are enabled to re-interpret more favourably some passages which, at first sight, seem to be little to the credit of his judgement. Among these are some passages in which he reveals his exaggeratedly high opinion of the importance of the Puritan clergy in the England of the Interregnum. Thus when he relates the fate of the Presbyterian clergyman Christopher Love, executed in 1651 for intriguing against the republic, he says that "This Blow sunk deeper towards the Root of the New Commonwealth, than will easily be believed", and that it made the leaders of the republic "grow odious to almost the Religious Party in the Land, except the Sectaries" (*R.B.*, I, 67). Similarly, when he speaks of the army officers who overthrew the Protector Richard Cromwell, he reveals not only his high opinion of the actual importance of the Puritan clergy, but his high opinion of the importance they deserved to enjoy. He complains that these officers "should so proudly despise not only the Parliament, but all the Ministers of *London* and of the Land, as to do this, not only without advising with, and against their Judgments; but in a factious Envy against them, lest they should be too much countenanced . . ." (*R.B.*, I, 101). The strangest example of this attitude to the clergy comes when he explains how the Restoration happened. While paying lip service to the usual contemporary formula about the Restoration being an act of the divine will, he also includes a pedantic analysis of the mechanics of the Restoration. He attributes it to the efforts of "The Ministers of *England* and *Scotland*, and all the sober People who regarded them", in reviving, through their opposition to the Cromwellian usurpation, the overwhelmed strength of Cavaliers, Scots, and army. It appears from the context that the English branch of these clergy and followers was Puritan (*R.B.*, I, 65). In this way Baxter gives an extraordinary importance to his own clerical group in bringing about the Restoration. These passages



may of course be interpreted simply by saying that Baxter had an extraordinary amount of professional vanity and self-delusion. It is here suggested, however, that an interpretation more in keeping with the known sobriety of Baxter's character is that these passages derive in considerable part from his geographically limited experience. At Kidderminster and its immediately adjacent territories during the Interregnum, the Puritan clergy seem to have been prominent, and rival forces muted, in a way that was unrepresentative of the political and social structure of England as a whole.

What Baxter does not give us in the *Reliquiae Baxterianae* is, of course, an intimate look into the daily round and individual lives of the small people of the town and countryside. Practically no contemporary historians did.<sup>11</sup> Even today, the lives of ordinary people are still not the familiar stuff of history. Baxter had the further excuse that his main concerns in the *Reliquiae Baxterianae* were religious, historical, self-justificatory, and polemical, rather than sociological. Yet Baxter could presumably have drawn an intimate picture of the humble if he had wanted to. The last or almost the last of his writings, a tract not published until 1926,<sup>12</sup> shows how well he knew the economic plight of the poor countryman and how much he sympathized with it. Yet one wonders whether Baxter would have thought individual lives much worth recording unless they contained material that served the unmistakably didactic purpose of inculcating morality, piety, wise conduct in life, or the like.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, his dominating tendency of thought was to think in terms of broad categories, not of individuals. He loved to assemble people in groups in his writings, and to divide and subdivide the groups, identifying each fragment by a refined analysis of its tenets and interests. While he was able to overcome this tendency sufficiently to be deeply concerned with individuals in his pastorate and practical writings, it certainly places him among those historians, today chiefly of economic orientation, who see history as an accounting of abstractions rather than of individuals of flesh and bone.

#### NOTES

1. *Reliquiae Baxterianae: or, Mr. Richard Baxter's Narrative of The Most Memorable Passages of His Life and Times*, ed. Matthew Sylvester (London, 1696).
2. Mrs. Lucy Hutchinson, *Memoirs of the Life of Colonel Hutchinson*, ed. C. H. Firth (London, 1906), p. 54.
3. *Hudibras*, ed. John Wilders (Oxford, 1967), pp. 20, 166, 13. I have modernized the spelling and capitalization.
4. Richard Baxter, *Richard Baxter and Margaret Charlton . . . Being the Bre-*

- viate of the Life of Margaret Baxter*, ed. John T. Wilkinson (London, 1928), p. 67.
5. Kidderminster, a cloth-weaving town, had a population of a little over 2,000 in Baxter's time there. F. J. Powicke, *A Life of the Reverend Richard Baxter 1615-1691* (London, 1924), pp. 38n., 43, 43n.
  6. Important studies of Baxter during the Interregnum may be found in Richard Sch'atter's introduction to his volume of Baxter selections, *Richard Baxter & Puritan Politics* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1957) and George R. Abernathy, Jr., "Richard Baxter and the Cromwellian Church," *The Huntington Library Quarterly*, XXIV (1961), pp. 215-231.
  7. Fontwell, Sussex, 1968. See the introduction by W. G. Hoskins, pp. 5-6.
  8. In his *A Holy Commonwealth* (London, 1659), p. 457, he says of Kidderminster that "The Warre was begun in our streets before the King or Parliament had any Armies."
  9. Bulstrode Whitelocke, *Memorials of the English Affairs: . . . King Charles the First, to King Charles the Second* (London, 1732), p. 112.
  10. Among the contemporary historians of the Civil War, they are found, for example, in Clarendon and in an intimate associate of Baxter, John Corbet, the historian of the siege of Gloucester.
  11. Gough in his *History of Myddle* is an exception, unless one argues that Gough was a sociologist or even gossip-writer rather than historian. Hoskins in his introduction aptly says (p. 5) that this work is "Aubrey's *Brief Lives* on a lower social level, giving us the lives of seventeenth-century men and women who would otherwise be nothing but names and dates in a parish register."
  12. "The Reverend Richard Baxter's Last Treatise," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, X(1926), pp. 163-218. This remarkable work is comparable in interest and insight to Engels' famous treatise on the working class in Manchester.
  13. The didactic function of biography was much stressed by contemporary writers. See, for example, Baxter's "Compassionate Counsel to All Young Men," in his *Practical Works*, 23 vols. (London, 1830), XV, 388-389, and his preface to Samuel Clarke, *The Lives Of sundry Eminent Persons* (London, 1683).