

PAMPHLETS AND PROPAGANDA

PARLIAMENT VERSUS THE KING IN THE 1640s

Andrew Hopper

The civil wars of the 1640s were the most heavily reported conflict the British peoples had yet undergone. What historians have termed 'the print explosion' from 1641 played a critical part in circulating information – and mis-information – to a public thirsty for news.



Roundheads and Cavaliers – the popular stereotype. Prince Rupert at the Battle of Edgehill from *The Story of the British Nation*, Harry Payne c. 1920.



The Bloody Prince. Parliamentarian propaganda attacked Prince Rupert after he sacked Birmingham in 1643. Robert Dent, *The Making of Birmingham*, 1894.

Words as Weapons

The weekly serial newsbooks and one-off tracts being published were not merely reporting events, but hoping to shape them. Printed propaganda sought to manipulate public perceptions, secure consent and instil political participation. Its goals included bolstering morale among supporters whilst spreading conflict and disunity among enemies. The promulgation of news became more closely managed in the 1640s: print could be used not only to undermine the enemy, but also rivals among one's own side. Much false news was deliberately propagated to misinform, deflect attention from other matters or stimulate fundraising initiatives.

Parliamentarians and royalists alike posed as the champions of legality, depicting their rivals as violating English liberties. In this way character assassinations and martyrology became important vehicles to communicate the engaging concerns of both sides.

Bloody Prince Rupert

The most striking propaganda image of a West Midlands scene in the 1640s is the woodcut illustration of Prince Rupert (1619–1682) that accompanied the parliamentarian tract *The Bloody Prince, Or A Declaration of the Most Cruell Practices of Prince Rupert*.

This was a full-blown character assassination of the royalist commander, published within three weeks of his sack of Birmingham on 3 April 1643. The image clearly communicated, even to the

illiterate, that this German Prince had little regard for English civilian life, with the fire from his pistol engulfing Birmingham in flames. Rupert was fashioned as a brutal, wicked foreigner, importing fearful continental practices into England, and deliberately firing Birmingham in revenge for its inhabitants' previous support for Parliament.

Rupert's troopers, some of whom were described as 'lascivious and lecherous' Frenchmen, were depicted embarking on a frenzy of slaughter, drunkenness, plunder, rape and 'drinking healths to Prince Ruperts Dog'.

Godly Lord Brooke

Rupert's adversary and Parliament's commander in Warwickshire and Staffordshire, was Robert Greville, Lord Brooke (1607–1643). Appreciating the value of the printed word in mobilising support, he made good use of it to help drum up recruits in February 1643.

His speech given on the day of the election of his officers at Warwick Castle denounced the royalists as papists, Jesuits, murderers and plunderers, those who had sought to triumph over the English people in 1588 and 1605. It was printed as a pamphlet, which set out a vision for a citizen army of volunteers who, with God on their side, would soon win the war for Parliament.

Brooke ordered the petition in favour of Parliament's Militia Ordinance to be read at musters, and volunteers were courted with music, feasting and ringing of the church bells. Hundreds of volunteers came forward, enabling Brooke to march against the royalists occupying Stratford-upon-Avon.

One parliamentarian newsbook reported that about an hour after Stratford was taken, the powder magazine in the Town Hall blew up, which was 'no doubt designed to have surprised my Lord and all his chiefe, presuming they would have sate in councill there.' This story, likening the dastardly royalists to the Gunpowder plotters, was intended to show how divine providence had thwarted their designs and preserved Lord Brooke.

Brooke's next objective was to capture the royalist garrison of Lichfield Cathedral Close. Having concluded his prayer meeting on 2 March 1643, he was preparing to direct the attack when he was shot through the eye by a royalist musketeer in the cathedral's steeple. His death was a catastrophic setback for Parliament, but an opportunity for its propagandists to fashion him as a Godly martyr. Within a week a broadsheet, *Elegie upon the much lamented Death of the Right Honourable, the Lord Brooke* was published. Brooke was endowed with Christ-like qualities to inspire parliamentarians to remain firm in the cause.

An eight-page pamphlet followed, entitled *Englands Losse and Lamentation*. It urged readers not to be discouraged by Brooke's death but to repent of their sins and prepare to avenge him. Brooke was compared to the Swedish king Gustavus Adolphus, liberator of Protestant Germany during the Thirty Years' War, dying in the hour of his triumph. A wave of invective against Lichfield followed as:

the sinke of iniquity, cage of unclean and wicked spirits: ungodly, prophane, and most perfidiously wicked: chief instrument of the Kingdomes misery. Let the remembrance of thee be hatefull; and thy name blotted out from among the Townes of the Provinces.

Royalist Propaganda

Parliament enjoyed a massive advantage in the print war because of its control of London, where the vast majority of England's printing trade was located. At first many royalist leaders were reticent about the idea of appealing to the common people for support. However, the royalists soon proved equally skilful in communicating their message to supporters and potential converts. Their serial newsbook, *Mercurius Aulicus*, was printed in Oxford and had a smaller output than its parliamentarian counterparts, but it was dispersed on a weekly basis by the king's Secretary of State, Sir Edward Nicholas. Copies of it penetrated the West Midlands and were sold in bookshops in provincial towns.

What *Aulicus* lacked in volume, it made up for in the

barbed wit of its editors, Peter Heylyn and Sir John Berkenhead. Heylyn placed a very different spin on Brooke's death, commenting that it had frustrated the rebels' desire to defile Lichfield Cathedral. Brooke's end, shot at extremely long range through the eye, was surely evidence of God's retribution upon him for speaking out against bishops. He was shot by a clergyman's son, *Aulicus* alleged, on St Chad's day, the patron saint of the cathedral. It became the opinion of some royalists that St Chad had directed the bullet. *Aulicus* went on to represent those commissioned by Brooke in Warwickshire as low-born, unnatural officers, unfit to command.

Royalist Character Assassination

Perhaps the best known local example of such royalist character assassination was Colonel John Fox (1610-1650), governor of Edgbaston House. On 18 February 1644 *Aulicus* told the story of how Fox came into his command:

The rebels intending a reformation by the sword will square their church according to their army. And therefore they thrust all trades into the pulpit since their shops were emptied for their colonels and captains. Particularly, one Fox, a tinker of Walsall, in Staffordshire, having got a horse and a hammer for his poleaxe, invited to his society 16 men of his brethren ... This jovial Colonel Tinker with his 16 sweet brethren marched seven miles to Birmingham in Warwickshire near which town they fortified a house called Edgbaston House. But (remembering their trade) they pulled down the church to make their fortifications, and disposed of the bells to their fellows in Birmingham. In this house they have nestled so long that their 16 are swollen up to 200, which rob and pillage very sufficiently.

This royalist image of Fox played upon fears for the social order, linking Fox to the notorious social subversive, the wandering masterless tinker, prone to heavy drinking and seducing other men's wives. A popular ballad featuring the Jovial Tinker had existed since at least 1616, inspiring several spin-off ballads later in the century.

Royalist Martyrs

As well as depicting the parliamentarians as a levelling faction of religious radicals out to destroy all order in church and state, the



Robert Greville, 2nd Lord Brooke, parliamentarian commander and Prince Rupert's adversary, killed at the siege of Lichfield Cathedral Close. Woodburn's Gallery of Rare Portraits, 1816.

royalist press eulogised the noblemen martyrs for its cause.

In March 1643 the royalist tract *The Battaile on Hopton Heath in Staffordshire* reported that the Earl of Northampton fought on valiantly after having been 'unhorsed by the multitude'. Answering that 'he scorned to take quarter from such base rogues & Rebels as they were', he was cut down by a halberd blow to his head. The parliamentarians refused to return Northampton's body to his son, unless it could be exchanged for their lost arms, prisoners and cannon, leading to the royalists condemning them as having behaved worse than the Turks. Ignorant of the laws of war, 'the Commanders of these rebellious Forces are made up of all Religions and Trades... who as they have endeavoured to murder both King and Queene, so labour the ruine of every English Gentleman'.

Surviving Stereotypes

Both sides, in fact, traded in stereotypes which possessed more

than a kernel of credibility to sympathetic observers. Educated contemporaries might fashion themselves as healthily sceptical of the printed news, but craved it nonetheless. Parliamentarian propaganda tended to capitalise upon anti-Catholic and xenophobic prejudices to portray the Cavaliers as violent, libertine plunderers, bent on despoiling the commons of England. The royalists countered with their image of the low-born, socially subversive rebel, intent on levelling all authority and wealth in church and state, which had much in common with elite perceptions of popular rebellion during the previous century.

Aside from nurturing growing sophistication in news management, the enduring legacy of civil war propaganda is that much of both these stereotypes survives today in how people imagine the 'Roundheads' and 'Cavaliers'. ●

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Further Reading

Andrew Hopper, "Tinker Fox" and the politics of garrison warfare in the West Midlands, 1643-50', *Midland History* 1999;24:98-133.

Jason Peacey, *Politicians and Pamphleteers: Propaganda during the English Civil Wars and Interregnum* (Ashgate, 2004).

Mark Stoye, *The Black Legend of Prince Rupert's Dog: Witchcraft and Propaganda during the English Civil War* (Exeter University Press, 2011).

To hear a performance of A Pleasant New Songe of a Jovial Tinker visit the website of the English Broadside Ballad Archive at the University of California, Santa Barbara: ebba.english.ucsb.edu/ballad/20215/recording.