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Thomas Scott of Canterbury (1566–1635): Patriot, civic radical, puritan☆

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ABSTRACT

This article sheds new light on the interesting but little-studied figure of Thomas Scott of Canterbury (1566–1635). In presenting Scott's ideas I will modify the interpretation laid out by Peter Clark whose groundbreaking study, 'Thomas Scott and the Growth of Urban Opposition to the Early Stuart Regime', is still the only secondary source that pays detailed attention to Scott and his thought, especially his religious opinions. The necessity to revisit Clark's interpretation of Scott's place within the political and doctrinal debates of early Stuart England stems from the conviction that his political work and his ideological stances deserve more subtle attention. Most importantly, they were part of the emerging reaction against the policies of the first two Stuart Kings which can be labelled 'country patriotism'. Finally, the elucidation of Scott's writings will provide a novel insight into an early configuration of English national identity.

Introduction

In 1978 Peter Clark called attention to the importance of Puritanism in stirring up "urban opposition" to the Stuart Crown in the first three decades of seventeenth-century England.[1] Clark focused on the "important local politician" Thomas Scott of Canterbury (1566–1635) whose "recently discovered diary" proved to be "of considerable interest" to shed light on political and religious activism in the context of provincial towns.[2] Clark showed how the emergence of "provincial unrest" in the 1620s consolidated "national and local agitation" that led "to the eventual dissolution of the old political order in Stuart England."[3] By identifying Scott as representative of a committed godly opposition to the

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[1] Cf. P. Clark, 'Thomas Scott and the Growth of Urban Opposition to the Early Stuart Regime', *Historical Journal*, 21 (1978), 1–26, 1 (hereafter 'Thomas Scott').

[2] Cf. Clark, 'Thomas Scott', 1–2.

[3] Clark, 'Thomas Scott', 1.

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monarchy within "urban politics at this critical time,"[4] Clark gave account of his public career and vicissitudes as a local leading Puritan.

Yet Clark failed to investigate Scott's moral views on citizenship; his political creeds; and his position vis à vis the idea of nation. Clark did not explore Scott's public and private writings as the product of strong political protest informing the disputes of the late Jacobean and early Caroline period. Furthermore, Clark did not connect Scott's considerations on the monarchy with the "threat from popularity"[5] the first two Stuart Kings saw as increasingly dangerous for their power. For this reason, I will concentrate on the ideological framework within which Scott developed his principles so as to unveil the sources of his criticism of royalist opinions. I will then argue that Scott's harsh reaction to the Stuarts' policies was not simply an immediate response to local issues, but that it also expressed an important political and cultural heritage with which he identified. This was the idealised and quasi-mythological image of the 1554 Wyatt Rebellion against Queen Mary, Catholicism and the Spanish marriage affair.

I will thus present Scott's outspoken criticism of absolute monarchy as the articulation of the so-called 'patriot narrative'. This emerging political discourse focused on the dangers of popish influence at court and on the threat Charles I's dismissal of the rule of law posed to the liberties of freeborn Englishmen. Aiming to restore that vital harmony between monarch and subjects which James I and his son had tainted,[6] MPs like Scott identified themselves as 'patriots' whose fundamental task was to act for the benefit of the nation to which they owed their primary allegiance. Modelled on Cicero's ideal of the virtuous citizen actively engaged in the life of the *respublica*, the 'patriot narrative' fostered the service in Parliament of good Englishmen. This entailed firm opposition to the satisfaction of private interests, to the mores of vicious courtiers and to tyranny. The patriot's essential goal was the safeguard of the commonwealth.[7]

Thanks to a new and wider reading of Scott's manuscript material, my article opens up new ground for a thorough discussion of what type of political paradigms were set out to contest the kingly prerogative; defend the importance of constitutional guarantees; protect the English nation; pursue the Protestant Cause and foster the fundamental role of Parliament as the bulwark of freeborn Englishmen's birthrights. Most importantly, I will highlight how Scott's discourse was deeply imbued with the rhetoric of nationhood and the promotion of an ideal 'Protestant England'. Moreover, I will unravel the thread of Scott's strong opposition to tyrannical rulers and the duty of active citizens to change the structure of commonwealth and Church in case of oppression. These views represent the final stage reached by Scott's reflection on political events. My goal is to give account of the developments his thought undertook so as to elucidate what contributed to radicalise his political opinions.

Looming large in Scott's theory was his sharp and caustic rhetoric. By bringing to light the language he employed, I will decipher both the continuity and the novelty of Scott's opinions of the king, ecclesiastical hierarchies, papists, oligarchs and lawyers. In so doing, I will also bypass the often generic assumptions with which historians have hitherto looked at Scott's fierce distrust of the Caroline regime.[8] In conclusion, my study will provide a novel fresco of the political and religious landscape from where stemmed several of the ideas that two decades later will tear down the monarchy.

The life of an active MP and religious radical

Thomas Scott was born around 1566. He attended Canterbury grammar school and then proceeded to university (probably at Cambridge) where he never took a degree. Thomas was the son of Charles Scott, esquire and justice of the peace, and the grandson of Sir Reginald Scott, author of the influential *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584). Thomas was also the grandson of Sir Thomas Wyatt, who in 1554 had led the rebellion against Queen Mary. In 1601 Scott had been Sheriff of Kent. Canterbury was the main stage of his public activity as polemicist and politician. Here he became acquainted with the group of Kentish Puritans who held Sabbatarian doctrines. Most importantly, between the mid-1610s and his death in 1635 he composed a diary where he set forth a forceful stream of outspoken and vitriolic observations which are radical in their rhetoric.

Together with being a very valuable historical source on the first decades of seventeenth-century England, the diary also provides an interesting series of comments on the political and religious situation in Kent and London from the standpoint of an active urban polemicist. Clark refers to the diary as "a collage of correspondence, excursive religious and genealogical memoranda, political comment, and personal jottings—all within the rough framework of a journal."[9] Its narrative form elucidates the interplay of political ideas, doctrinal tenets, and ideological sentiments that coalesced and strengthened "radicals, moderates and even disaffected oligarchs which was the key to the growth of urban opposition to the Crown from the late 1620s."[10] The diary was thus the repository of the products of Scott's mind. It centred on his staunch commitment to godly religion, but it also worked as a vehicle through which he defined his political agenda and established his ideological

[4] Clark, 'Thomas Scott', 2.

[5] R. Cust, 'Charles I and Popularity', in: *Politics, Religion and Popularity in Early Stuart Britain. Essays in Honour of Conrad Russell*, ed. T. Cogswell, R. Cust, P. Lake (Cambridge, 2002), 235–58, 236.

[6] Cf. R. Cust, A. Hughes, 'Introduction: after Revisionism', in: *Conflict in Early Stuart England. Studies in Religion and Politics 1603–1642*, ed. R. Cust, A. Hughes (London and New York, 1989), 1–46, 21.

[7] Cf. R. Cust, 'Patriots and popular spirits: Narratives of Conflict in Early Stuart Politics', unpublished paper presented at the conference '*The English Revolution and Its Legacies*' (London, February 20–21, 2004), 18–9 (hereafter 'Patriots and popular spirits'). I am grateful to Richard Cust for letting me read and quote his paper.

[8] See Conclusions.

[9] Clark, 'Thomas Scott', 2.

[10] Clark, 'Thomas Scott', 26.