

Steve Poole and Nicholas Rogers, *Bristol from Below: law, authority and protest in a Georgian city* (Woodbridge, Boydell Press 2017). xi + 387pp., 15 ill. Hardback, £70.00 [ISBN: 9781783272440]. **Reviewed 11.2017**

*Bristol from Below* is a vigorous account, from a particular standpoint, of its subject of “Law, Authority and Protest in a Georgian City”. In a number of respects, however, it should be treated with caution by the historian.

To begin with the positive, we have here a grab-bag of true stories, some darkly comic, some tragic, nearly all highly dramatic. After an opening chapter setting the social and economic scene, we learn of processions to the gallows, hangings that went wrong and charivaris in which the populace aped the forms of law to shame those who had incurred their displeasure. We hear the tale of two young women, one clearly more street-wise than the other, allegedly abducted by a rich merchant and his army officer friend for their sexual gratification. There are riots and lesser disturbances in favour of cheap food, against turnpike tolls and the cost of the new Bristol Bridge, and others more overtly political, culminating of course in the Queen Square “reform” riots and the firing of much of the City in the autumn of 1831. The style is generally readable. Good use is made of the primary sources of newspaper reports and public and private papers. The illustrations are apt and not hackneyed.

The most rewarding chapters are those dealing with “bread and butter” issues. We learn that the municipal authorities were by no means unconcerned about ensuring adequate food supplies in time of shortage, but that the question became complicated as the traditional “moral economy” came into conflict with growing *laissez-faire* thinking. The chapter on naval impressment portrays a complex relationship between the Admiralty, Bristol’s mercantile class and the seamen involved.

*Bristol from Below* is part of a series of academic studies, so readers are assumed to be familiar with terms of art like “non-clergyable” and “potwalloper”, among many more. It would however have assisted if the national figures mentioned in the text, the Duke of Newcastle, Lord Melbourne and others, could have been introduced by reference to the offices they held. On page 74, we meet (apparently) two men, Addington and Sidmouth, not previously introduced. They were in fact one: Henry Addington, Viscount Sidmouth, Home Secretary 1812-22. In the course of the same paragraph, an Irish soldier called Edward Irwin mysteriously changes his surname to Swain. The publisher’s proof-readers should have spotted this, likewise “to lay [lie] low” (p.3) and the “principle streets” (p.79).

The authors’ sympathies are clearly with those “below”. This is not a stricture, for historians without sympathies of some kind would be either more or less than human. There are however occasions when zeal outruns discretion. The criminal activities of those opposing the turnpikes are described with a *sang-froid* which will not appeal to all- as are those of the Bristol Firemen, a sordid protection racket (which may not even have come from “below”- its instigators were never laid to heel). Nor need a youthful aristocratic parliamentary candidate be called a “pipsqueak”. If disorders were frequently dealt with “clumsily and bloodily”, often by the use of part-time troops or special constables, account should have been taken of the limited options available to Authority in an age before modern policing. Eyebrows will also be raised by the suggestion that the main reason for contemporaries distinguishing lawful boycotting of traders from food rioting and robbery with menaces was “class prejudice”.

*Bristol from Below* obviously owes something to E.P. Thompson's *Making of the English Working Class* (1963), an iconic work whose thesis - that the English "working class" was somehow "made" during the latter part of the long eighteenth century - has been controversial among later historians. Poole and Rogers, indeed, show doubt at various points, notably when they suggest that Bristol artisans "opted for the politics of interest over class" in the by-election of 1781. Much more might have been made of this; according to the Bristol Poll Books, those associated with maritime trades, for example, formed a voting *bloc* distinct from other artisans, well into the mid-nineteenth century.

When it comes to national political issues, *Bristol from Below* suffers from three, related, defects common to histories of this kind. Firstly, the focus on the people "below" obscures the extent to which political movements had upper class leadership and followers among the middling sort and lower orders- were, in other words, vertical rather than horizontal. To take an obvious example, popular Jacobitism sharply declined after 1746. Less obviously, Earl Grey wrote in the mid-1820s that he did not expect parliamentary reform to come in his lifetime, or his son-in-law's. That popular "reform fever" gripped Bristol (and other places) in 1831, was due to high political developments in London, notably the break-up of the old Pittite Tory party and the opportunity thus offered to Grey's aristocratic Whigs. The national political elite, in short, tended to make the political weather.

Secondly, because the writers of this sort of history are frequently of the liberal-left, popular protest which is conservative in inspiration is downplayed. This sort of thing has long been a problem for parts of the intelligensia; think of the flutterings in certain dovecotes which attended the rise of Enoch Powell in the late 1960s, or the Brexit vote in 2016. For his part, your reviewer cannot see why conservative movements are not as worthy of study as the radical variety.

And many of the movements of this period *were* conservative. The wellspring of Jacobite ideology was the divine hereditary right of Kings; insofar as the issue between Stuart and Hanoverian supporters was dynastic, neither side would have seen themselves as "progressive", and no republican voice can be heard, on either side, in Poole's and Rogers' chapter on popular Jacobitism. Loyalist and Tory crowds make appearances in the chapters on the years 1790-1820 but no attempt is made to analyse their motivation or ideology. Nor is any mention made of the largest popular gathering in early nineteenth century Bristol, when up to 20,000 assembled in Queen Square in February 1829 to protest against the Catholic Relief Bill - a meeting which gave rise to a petition of considerably more signatures than any of those for parliamentary reform. (It is by no means fanciful to see the passing of Catholic Emancipation as one factor leading to popular disillusionment with the unreformed parliamentary system.)

Lastly, the influence of religion is underestimated. We meet a number of radical Dissenters, such as the Baptist Caleb Evans, but nothing is said of religious issues as a political catalyst- which they certainly were, as London's Gordon Riots of 1780 testify. As to Bristol, the speeches at the Queen Square meeting in 1829 pre-suppose a sound grasp on the part of their hearers of the questions involved in the battle for what has come to be called the English Confessional State.

The above points are not new. They have been part of the currency of historical debate since the publication in 1980 of Jonathan Clark's *English Society, 1688-1832*. Clark's work was described by two eminent reviewers on its first appearance as "breaking the mould", but

surprisingly, it is neither listed in the bibliography, nor engaged with in the text, of *Bristol from Below*.

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