



The English Civil War: A Military History by Peter Gaunt.

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A new military history of the English Civil War might get lost in the tide of books marking the centenary of the First World War. While the human toll of the Great War dwarfs that of the seventeenth-century conflict, historian Peter Gaunt¹ (Univ. of Chester) notes that the struggle that divided England in 1642–46 caused some 200,000 deaths; as a percentage of total population, that is on par with deaths in the First World War and far larger than those of any other English or British war. Gaunt cannot refrain from observing that, when the Civil War began, “for a time it looked as though [it] might be concluded quickly, over by Christmas” (84).

The author examines the “dangers, dislocation, horrors and impact” (12) of the struggle between Royalists and Parliamentarians. Drawing on the voices of contemporary men and women touched by this violence, he demonstrates that, despite the militarization of much of the English and Welsh countryside, the rhythms of everyday life went on, noting that certain regions, like London and parts of East Anglia, were lucky to avoid the conflict, while others, like the Midlands and the West Country, saw much fighting. A leitmotif of the book is the bloody nature of the war, not only on the battlefield, but also in towns and villages that fell prey to marauding soldiers of both armies. Deaths in combat were accompanied by a “much sharper mortality crisis amongst the whole population” (235), owing to violence, disease, and deprivation.

Gaunt states that *The English Civil War*

concentrates upon the conflict and upon the soldiers, politicians and administrators who waged, directed and maintained it, as well as upon those directly caught up in the fighting, it is important to remember the wider population and the—limited or extensive—impact which the civil war had upon them. At appropriate points, this account explores that aspect of the war. (13)

The author is fully conversant with the complex modern scholarship on both military² and social aspects³ of the English Civil War, as well as relevant archival materials, the Thomason tracts, and the diaries of well known contemporary observers and participants like the Norfolk landowner Thomas Knyvett, the Essex vicar Ralph Josselin, and the Royalist soldier Richard Symonds. Gaunt’s use of vignettes enlivens his narrative and conveys a “distinct flavor of the time and the realities of war” (15). Over sixty black-and-white illustrations and thirty color plates depict key participants and sites across

1. He is the author of *Oliver Cromwell* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996), *The Cromwellian Gazetteer: An Illustrated Guide to Britain in the Civil War and Commonwealth* (Gloucester, UK: A. Sutton, 1987), *The British Wars, 1637–1651* (NY: Routledge, 1997), and *A Nation under Siege: The Civil War in Wales, 1642–48* (London: HMSO, 1991). Gaunt has also been president of the Cromwell Association and editor of its journal, *Cromwelliana*.

2. E.g., Alfred H. Burne and Peter Young, *The Great Civil War: A Military History of the First Civil War, 1642–45* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1959); John Kenyon, *The Civil Wars of England* (NY: Knopf, 1988); Malcolm Wanklyn and Frank Jones, *A Military History of the English Civil War, 1642–1646: Strategy and Tactics* (NY: Longman/Pearson, 2005).

3. E.g., Charles Carlton, *Going to the Wars: The English Experience of the British Civil Wars, 1638–1651* (NY: Routledge, 1992); Diane Purkiss, *The English Civil War: Papists, Gentlewomen, Soldiers, and Witchfinders in the Birth of Modern Britain* (NY: Basic Books, 2006); Mark Stoyle, *Soldiers and Strangers: An Ethnic History of the English Civil War* (New Haven: Yale U Pr, 2005).

England and Wales. Five maps somewhat clarify the territorial shifts of the war, but, unfortunately, are nearly devoid of place-names! A good map of English and Welsh counties would have assisted readers new to the terrain.

Gaunt jettisons the “Three Kingdoms” approach to the war and concentrates on campaigns in England and Wales; he mentions the fighting in Ireland and Scotland only in passing. This reflects his conviction that the English war was “semi-detached” from the conflicts across the Irish Sea or north of the Tweed. However, this ignores the effect that fighting on the peripheries may have had on the (particularly Royalist) war effort in England. Similarly glossed over is the quality of the English, Scots, and Welsh soldiery who had borne arms in the Thirty Years’ War and returned home to provide their expertise to the Parliamentary and Royalist armies.

The book comprises six chapters: the first two focus on the war’s origins and the first year of fighting. The second concerns the “nuts and bolts” of war-making—recruitment, equipment, garrisoning troops—and outlines infantry and cavalry tactics. Aware of the growing interest in environmental history, Gaunt also assesses the impact of weather on soldiers, citing their complaints about the hot, the cold, and, of course, the rain. Chapters 3–6 are a “chronologically based account of the main national and regional campaigns” (15).

The book opens with Bulstrode Whitelocke’s parliamentary speech (July 1642) describing the slide into war as “one unexpected accident after another, as waves of the seas” (18). Gaunt locates the roots of the conflict in the “structural weaknesses” of the late Elizabethan/early Stuart state, the difficulties of governing the three kingdoms, and England’s failure to solve its financial and religious problems. Though he partly blames Charles I’s predecessors for the war, he recognizes that the king was “vengeful, prickly and hypersensitive” and “dangerously overconfident” (24–25). He is impressed that Charles overcame these personality flaws and garnered enough support to raise an army to oppose Parliament—no mean feat in light of the dismal showing of the English army during the Bishops’ Wars (1639–45).

The author sees the heightened tensions that led to the militarization of the English state in 1642 as the product of the struggle to control the militia and of the anti-Catholicism that spawned panics and violence in some communities. Parliament’s Militia Ordinance and the Crown’s Commissions of Array in early summer 1642 militarized the political struggle and turned a pamphlet war into a real war. Though the early fighting was sporadic, there were “mass gatherings, flare-ups and confrontations that saw men and women killed” (60) well before the Battle of Edgehill (Oct. 1642). Based on a Parliamentary account of the Royalist occupation of Brentford soon after Edgehill, Gaunt describes the king’s soldiers as having

plundered the town bare, taking everything they could find of value or use, leaving scarce one piece of bread or meat in all the town, and deliberately destroying other items, such as “nurseries of fruit trees” which were of no use to them. They harassed the inhabitants, threatening to cut off their noses and pull out their eyes, calling them parliament dogs, round-headed rogues, beating and wounding some of them and carrying off many townsmen as prisoners. (81)

Gaunt’s snapshot-vignettes often force us to look away and call to mind one contemporary’s reflection that “war is a womb big with many miseries” (123). The author often reminds the reader that civil wars have an especially vicious history of mayhem.

The book recounts a war that grew from a series of small-scale regional struggles to consume more and more of the country. Arguing against the idea of Charles’s triple-advance strategy, Gaunt contends that the war’s first two years were marked not by cohesion but by fragmentation. Compact armies containing soldiers numbering in the thousands fought in the early regional conflicts that were the “most

complex and confusing of the war” (123). However, these were the stages on which the war’s major actors—the Fairfaxes, Newcastle, Waller, Rupert, Goring, Essex, and eventually Cromwell—made their names and honed their skills. Because both sides initially fielded inexperienced, badly outfitted and supplied troops, neither could win a decisive victory, and “something approaching balance or stalemate” (169) ensued. To sustain their armies, both sides brought larger and larger areas under military control, burdening civilians with taxes, “contributions,” and constant threats of plunder. The balance reached in 1643 continued into 1644. Though a truce with the Irish rebels freed ten thousand Royalists to return to the mainland, this was offset by the arrival of the Scots to shore up the Parliamentary cause. Although both sides missed opportunities—in Yorkshire, the Midlands, and in the South and West—by the end of 1644, Gaunt concludes, Parliament had gained the upper hand, despite the blundering of its leading commanders, Waller and Essex.

Parliament’s ultimate victory was the result of several causes and was linked to resources. Its decision in early 1645 to reorganize its armies and leadership paid off immediately with the victory at Naseby. But it was Parliament’s domination of the seas, control of London and the hinterland, and greater access to men and matériel from “the most populous, most productive and richest parts of England” (226) that determined the outcome of the sanguinary conflict.

In sketching the historiography of the Parliamentary victory, Gaunt identifies issues like the superior motivation of the Roundheads and both sides’ operational decisions (or lack thereof) as needing further study. He suggests, too, that “fuller investigation of campaigns, military operations and operational factors” (229) would yield a better, more comprehensive understanding of Parliamentary success and Royalist failure.

Both serious students and general audiences will find in *The English Civil War* a crisp, accessible military and social history of the war. No mere “drums and trumpets” account, it judiciously combines discussions of strategy and tactics with the perspectives of grandees, common soldiers, and noncombatants. In its final chapter, on the impact of the war, we see soldiers returning home, some whole, some maimed, some nursing deep emotional scars. Citizens labored to rebuild towns and villages across the country, many lamenting lost homes, churches, and possessions. Like the Great War, Peter Gaunt’s book reminds us, the Great Rebellion inflicted wounds felt by generations of English and Welsh long after the shooting stopped.