

REFLECTIONS ON THE CIVIL WAR

John Milton (1608–1674)

1670

This third book, having to tell of accidents as various and exemplary as the intermission or change of government has anywhere brought forth, may deserve attention more than common and re-pay it with like benefit to them who can judiciously read. Considering especially that the late civil broils had cast us into a condition not much unlike to what the Britons then were in when the imperial *jurisdiction* departing hence left them to the sway of their own councils; which times by comparing seriously with these later, and that confused anarchy with this inter-reign, we may be able from two such remarkable turns of state, producing like events among us, to raise a knowledge of ourselves both great and weighty by judging hence what kind of men the Britons generally are in matters of so high enterprise; how by nature, industry, or custom fitted to attempt or undergo matters of so main consequence. For if it be a high point of wisdom in every private man, much more is it in a nation to know itself rather than puffed up with vulgar flatteries and encomiums for want of self-knowledge, to enterprise rashly and come off miserably in great undertakings.

Of these who swayed most in the late troubles, few words as to this point may suffice. They had arms, leaders, and successes to their wish, but to make use of so great an advantage was not their skill.

To other causes therefore, and not to the want of force or warlike manhood in the Britons, both those and these lately, we must impute the ill husbanding of those fair opportunities which might seem to have put liberty, so long desired, like a bridle into their hands. Of which other causes equally belonging to ruler, priest, and people above have been related. Which, as they brought those ancient natives to misery and ruin, by liberty, which, rightly used, might have made them happy, so brought they these of late, after many labours, much bloodshed, and vast expence, to ridiculous frustration. In whom the like defects, the like miscarriages notoriously appeared with vices not less hateful or inexcusable.

For a Parliament being called to redress many things, as 'twas thought, the people, with great courage and expectation to be eased of what discontented them, chose to their behoof in Parliament such as they thought best affected to the public good, and some indeed men of wisdom and integrity. The rest (to be sure, the greater part), whom wealth or ample possessions, or bold and active ambition (rather than merit) had commended to the same place.

But when once the superficial zeal and popular fumes that acted their new magistracy were cooled and spent in them, straight every one betook himself (setting the Commonwealth behind, his private ends before) to do as his own profit or ambition led him. Then was justice delayed, and soon after denied. Spite and favour determined all. Hence faction, thence treachery, both at home and in the field. Everywhere wrong and oppression. Foul and horrid deeds committed daily, or maintained in secret or in open. Some who had been called from shops and warehouses, without other merit, to sit in supreme councils and committees (as their breeding was) fell to huckster the Commonwealth. Others did thereafter as men could sooth and humour them best, so he who would give most, or under covert of hypocritical zeal insinuate basest, enjoyed unworthily the rewards of learning and fidelity or escaped the punishment of his crimes and misdeeds. Their votes and ordinances, which men looked should have contained the repealing of bad laws and the immediate constitution of better, resounded with nothing else but new impositions, taxes, excises; yearly, monthly, weekly. Not to reckon the offices, gifts, and preferments bestowed and shared among themselves.

They, in the meanwhile, who were ever faithfullest to this cause and freely aided them in person or with their substance, when they durst not compel either, slighted and bereaved after, of their just debts by greedy sequestrations were tossed up and down after miserable attendance from one committee to another with petitions in their hands, yet either missed the obtaining of their suit or though it were at length granted (mere

shame and reason oft-times extorting from them at least a show of justice), yet by their sequestrators and sub-committees abroad, men for the most part of insatiable hands and noted dis-loyalty, those orders were commonly disobeyed. Which for certain durst not have been without secret compliance, if not compact with some superiors able to bear them out. Thus were their friends confiscate in their enemies, while they forfeited their debtors to the state, as they called it, but indeed to the ravening seizure of innumerable thieves in office. Yet were withal no less burdened in all extraordinary assessments and oppressions than those whom they took to be dis-affected. Nor were we happier creditors to what we called the state than to them who were sequestered as the state's enemies.

For that faith which ought to have been kept as sacred and inviolable as anything holy, the public faith, after infinite sums received and all the wealth of the Church not better employed, but swallowed up into a private gulf, was not 'ere long ashamed to confess bankrupt. And now besides the sweetness of bribery and other gain with the love of rule, their own guiltiness and the dreaded name of just account, which the people had long called for, discovered plainly that there were of their own number who secretly contrived and fomented those troubles and combustions in the land, which openly they sat to remedy, and would continually find such work as should keep them from being ever brought to terrible stand of laying down their authority for lack of new business, or not drawing it out to any length of time, though upon the ruin of a whole nation.

And if the state were in this plight, religion was not in much better. To reform which a certain number of divines were called, neither chosen by any rule or custom ecclesiastical, nor eminent for either piety or knowledge above others left out; only as each Member of Parliament in his private fancy thought fit, so elected one by one. The most part of them were such as had preached and cried down, with great show of zeal, the avarice and pluralities of bishops and prelates; that one cure of souls was a full employment for one spiritual pastor how able soever, if not a charge rather above human strength. Yet these conscientious men ('ere any part of the work done for which they came together, and that on the public salary) wanted not boldness, to the ignominy and scandal of their pastor-like profession, and especially of their boasted reformation, to seize into their hands, or not unwillingly to accept (besides one, sometimes two or more of the best livings) collegiate masterships in the universities, rich lectures in the city, setting sail to all winds that might blow gain into their covetous bosoms. By which means these great rebukers of non-residence among so many distant cures were not ashamed to be seen so quickly pluralists and non-residents themselves, to a fearful condemnation doubtless by their own mouths.

And yet the main doctrine for which they took such pay and insisted upon with more vehemence than Gospel, was but to tell us in effect that their doctrine was worth nothing and the spiritual power of their ministry less available than bodily compulsion; persuading the magistrate to use it as a stronger means to subdue and bring in conscience than evangelical persuasion. Distrusting the virtue of their own spiritual weapons, which were given them, if they be rightly called, with full warrant of sufficiency to pull down all thoughts and imaginations that exalt themselves against God. But while they taught compulsion without convincement, which not long before they complained of as executed un-Christianly against themselves; these intents are clear to have been no better than Anti-Christian: setting up a spiritual tyranny by a secular power, to the advancing of their own authority above the magistrate, whom they would have made their executioner to punish church delinquencies whereof civil laws have no cognizance.

And well did their disciples manifest themselves to be no better principled than their teachers, trusted with committeeships and other gainful offices upon their commendations for zealous (and as they stuck not to term them) Godly men, but executing their places like children of the Devil, unfaithfully, unjustly, unmercifully, and, where not corruptly, stupidly. So that between them, the teachers and these the disciples, there has not been a more ignominious and mortal wound to faith, to piety, to the work of reformation, nor more cause of blaspheming given to the enemies of God and truth, since the first preaching of reformation.

The people therefore looking one while on the statist, whom they beheld without constancy or firmness, labouring doubtfully beneath the weight of their own too-high undertakings, busiest in petty things, trifling in the main, deluded and quite alienated, expressed diverse ways their disaffection, some despising whom before they honoured, some deserting, some inveighing, some conspiring against them. Then looking on the churchmen whom they saw under subtle hypocrisy to have preached their own follies, most of them not the Gospel, time-servers, covetous, illiterate persecutors, not lovers of the truth, like in most things whereof they accused their predecessors. Looking on all this, the people which had been kept warm a while with the counterfeit zeal of their pulpits, after a false heat became more cold and obdurate than before, some turning to lewdness, some to flat atheism, put beside their old religion and foully scandalized in what they expected should be new.

Thus they who of late were extolled as our greatest deliverers and had the people wholly at their devotion, by so discharging their trust as we see did not only weaken and unfit themselves to be dispensers of what liberty they pretended, but unfitted also the people, now grown worse and more disordinate, to receive or to digest any liberty at all. For stories teach us that liberty sought out of season, in a corrupt and degenerate age, brought Rome itself into a further slavery.

For liberty has a sharp and double edge, fit only to be handled by just and virtuous men; to bad and dissolute it becomes a mischief unwieldy in their own hands. Neither is it completely given but by them who have the happy skill to know what is grievance and unjust to a people and how to remove it wisely, what good laws are wanting and how to frame them substantially, that good men may enjoy the freedom which they merit and the bad the curb which they need.

But to do this, and to know these exquisite proportions, the heroic wisdom which is required surmounted far the principles of these narrow politicians. What wonder then if they sunk as these unfortunate Britons before them, entangled and oppressed with things too hard and generous above their strain and temper? For Britain, to speak a truth not often spoken, as it is a land fruitful enough of men stout and courageous in war, so is it naturally not over-fertile of men able to govern justly and prudently in peace, trusting only in their mother-wit; who consider not justly that Civility, prudence, and love of the public good, more than of money or vain honour, are to this soil in a manner outlandish, grow not here but in minds well implanted with solid and elaborate breeding, too impolitic else and rude, if not headstrong and intractable to the industry and virtue either of executing or understanding true civil government. Valiant indeed, and prosperous to win a field, but to know the end and reason of winning, injudicious and unwise. In good or bad success alike unteachable.

For the sun which we want ripens wits as well as fruits, and as wine and oil are imported to us from abroad, so must ripe understanding and many civil virtues be imported into our minds from foreign writings and examples of best ages, we shall else miscarry still and come short in the attempts of any great enterprise. Hence did their victories prove as fruitless as their losses dangerous, and left them still conquering under the same grievances that men suffer conquered. Which was indeed unlikely to go otherwise, unless men more than vulgar bred up, as few of them were, in the knowledge of ancient and illustrious deeds, invincible against many and vain titles, impartial to friendships and relations, had conducted their affairs. But then from the chapman to the retailer, many whose ignorance was more audacious than the rest were admitted with all their sordid rudiments to bear no mean sway among them, both in church and state.

From the confluence of all their errors, mischiefs, and misdemeanours, what in the eyes of man could be expected but what befell those ancient inhabitants whom they so much resembled, confusion in the end?

“The History of Britain” in *A Complete Collection of the Historical, Political, and Miscellaneous Works of John Milton* (London: A. Millar, 1738), II:39–42. [modernized]