FIVE

LETTERS

IN

ANSWER

TO THE

QUESTION

What did the British Civil Wars do for us?

We asked some 17th century historians this question. Here is what they had to say…*Professor Andrew Hopper, Professor of Social and Local History, Oxford University*

The Civil Wars transformed our religious landscape. From an English and Welsh standpoint, the downfall of Charles I’s Church of England unleashed an irreversible new religious plurality much earlier than might otherwise have occurred. The **liberty of conscience and freedom of worship** we enjoy today was fought for, and not just by the Baptists, Congregationalists, Presbyterians and Quakers who would become ‘Dissenters’ after 1660. Yet anti-Catholic prejudice became more hardened and deeply embedded.

We also owe to the Civil Wars the origin of the notion of **state responsibility for the families of those wounded or slain in its wars**. This came through the operation by the Long Parliament of a national military pension scheme, see: [www.civilwarpetitions.ac.uk](http://www.civilwarpetitions.ac.uk).

In Scotland and Ireland it is more difficult to pick out any positive legacies. The legacy of Civil War for the Scots was one of unfinished business, as religious, linguistic and ethnic divisions were prolonged through the Jacobite civil wars that ended at Culloden in 1746. In Ireland, the wars of religion led to a population catastrophe and an obliteration of Gaelic material culture. The conflict brought about an enormous transfer of land away from native Catholic ownership, and a land settlement that underpinned the Protestant ascendancy and Ireland’s subjugated, colonial status for centuries thereafter

The Civil Wars did so much to forge identities among the peoples of Britain and Ireland. Deeper understanding of these conflicts is now more important than ever as relations between the English, Welsh, Scots and Irish face renewed challenges in the form of managing our emergence from a worldwide pandemic into an uncertain post-Brexit future. **Perhaps a stronger appreciation of the differing Civil-War experiences of our forebears might help us build a stronger future together**.

*Dr Sara Read, Senior Lecturer, Loughborough University and author of The Gossips’ Choice*

The wars have left us with ample **evidence of women of all ranks acting with considerable fortitude in times of adversity**. Focusing just on the summer of 1643 alone, we have examples of women on both sides of the political divide stepping into the fray in remarkable ways. In August 1643, a group of several hundred women gathered outside the Houses of Parliament in a peace protest. They were dismayed that the House of Lords had narrowly voted down proposals for peace talks with Charles I. At the end of the first day, the women were given some verbal reassurances and dispersed. These women were not noble or privileged, but according to newspaper reports at the time, were mostly the wives of soldiers away at war. Not convinced by these assurances, the women returned the next day with a petition and even blockaded parliament for a few hours. In response, Sir William Waller’s horse regiment was drafted to suppress the protesters, which they did violently. One young seamstress was shot and killed by a soldier. He was later acquitted of any wrongdoing when his claim that his gun discharged by accident was accepted.

At the same time, in Herefordshire, Brilliana, Lady Harley was courageously defending her besieged home from attack by cannon fire by Royalist troops. Brampton Bryan Castle was surrounded on 26 July 1643 by Sir William Vavasour with cavalry and around 700 soldiers.With her husband away in London for the whole time, Lady Harley defended her home with just 50 soldiers and her household. Even when ordered by the King himself, Lady Harley refused to surrender her home. The siege lasted until 9 September when the Royalist troops were called away. What the Civil Wars have done for us then is to provide invaluable evidence of **the extraordinary responses of women to the national crisis**.

*Dr Jonathon Fitzgibbons, Senior Lecturer in Early Modern History, University of Lincoln*

In many ways, Britain’s Civil Wars offer a clear case of **the law of unintended consequences**. Few went to war in 1642 demanding the death of Charles I, much less the abolition of kingship. Yet, by 1649 both had been obliterated. The experience of the Civil Wars and their aftermath demonstrated that monarchy was not Britain’s destiny. Alternative constitutional models could, and did, work. The trial and execution of King Charles I was a shock to many, even among former parliamentarians, but most people settled down surprisingly quickly under kingless rule once the deed was done. What followed was a decade that was as exhilarating as it was unnerving for contemporaries, as a plethora of novel and exotic constitutional models and forms were experimented with, including Britain’s first (and to date only) written constitutions under the Protectorate of Oliver Cromwell. For the first time, the rules of government were set out clearly, including provisions for the regular meeting of British parliaments and for safeguarding religious toleration.

More significantly, the Civil Wars also **transformed political ideas and cultures**. The trial of the king, as well as the republican regimes that followed it, amplified many key principles that would endure in Britain and beyond: that all political power derives from the people; that only those who rule according to the laws, made by the people’s representatives in parliament, could govern in the public interest; that even rulers are subject to the law and should be brought to account if they break it. The persistence of these principles, coupled with the traumatic memories of the tumultuous events of the Civil War era, ensured that, even when Stuart monarchy was restored in 1660, things would never be the same again.

*Dr Catie Gill, Senior Lecturer in Early Modern Writing, Loughborough University*

During the early 1640s, print culture developed rapidly. Booksellers and printers were active in larger numbers than ever before: therefore, the reading public had more works to consume. Technical inventiveness since Guttenberg’s invention of the press was a factor in the rise of print; but, for Britain, the war gave the social impetus to expand the market.

Communication matters. The fact that in British history there was a truly popular press meant that, from the 1640s onwards, **information was being shared like never before**. One bookseller from the late 1640s is an especially good illustration of the power of print.

 Giles Calvert was involved in the London book trade: in today’s language, we would describe him as well networked. People gathered at his shop, at the sign of the Black Spread Eagle, St Paul’s. In the 1640s, his bookshop sold the works of Gerrard Winstanley both before and during the social experiment in Surrey when Winstanley and fellow ‘Diggers’ farmed and grazed their animals on the common land. Winstanley’s approach inflamed some local residents – especially landowners who believed they had a better claim to the land than Winstanley’s commoners – but he inspired others. Very soon, there were Digger colonies erected around England. It is difficult to imagine how this could have happened so quickly, without the presses publishing the Diggers’ manifesto, and the newsbooks picking up the story. Winstanley and Calvert would go on to be linked to the Quaker movement: conducting their religious affairs in print during the 1650s, Quakers quickly achieved prominence. **Print, in other words, was able to drive the pace of change**.

*Dr Rachel Hammersley, Senior Lecturer in Intellectual History, Newcastle University*

The civil wars - and the regicide that resulted from them - were devastating events in British history, the brutality of which cannot be underestimated. Yet, more positively, **they opened up the government of the country to scrutiny** in ways that had never happened before. Debates about the purpose of government, about whose interests it was supposed to serve, and about what would be the best form for it to take, were common in the pamphlet literature of those years, with a wide range of people participating. The idea that **sovereignty should lie with the people** rather than the monarch was articulated perhaps for the first time in the midst of this conflict.

Furthermore, while republican government had been instituted before the mid-seventeenth century in small city-states and in federations like that of the Dutch, the 1650s saw the first theoretical and practical attempts to construct a republic in a large nation state. The concept of democratic government, which had been rejected since ancient times, began to be explored and even advocated. Charles II was, of course, restored to the throne in May 1660, and the monarchy has remained in place ever since. However, the question of constitutional form had been opened up and could not be suppressed. The debates about the nature of government that took place in the mid-seventeenth century have shaped the politics of this country ever since.

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What did the British Civil Wars do for us?

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