

field.

If one had to point to any weaknesses in this study, I would say that I sometimes wanted to hear the sources speak more clearly for themselves. I wanted to read, for instance, the words of band members as they appealed to Indian Affairs, or those of self-satisfied Indian agents as they rejected their appeals. More substantively, some might suggest that Brownlie is over ambitious with this project; that one is hard-pressed to cover the history of treaty rights, band politics, the organization of First Nations relief, health care, education, and even Native participation in fairs in some 150 pages.

On the other hand, what might be seen as a limitation might also be this book's unique appeal. What it offers is the "big picture" of a small picture. When I finished it, I felt I could imagine the day-to-day life of an interwar reserve in greater totality than was previously possible. Given most scholars' on-going preference for narrowly defined projects of historical research, this "slice-of-life" study comes as a welcome addition to the historiography. More than this, this is the kind of book you could give to an undergraduate class and have them walk away with a solid understanding of the grievances which underlie modern Aboriginal rights movements. And, in light of Brownlie's own commitment to "dismantl[ing] colonialism in Canada" (154), I would think that broadly educating the next generation would be seen as a most worthy goal.

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¹ For instance, in a 1994 co-authored article, Brownlie took issue with those historians who "go beyond the argument for the recognition of Native agency to one that uses evidence of Native resilience and strength to soften, and at times to deny, the impact of colonialism, and thus, implicitly, to absolve its perpetrators." Clearly Brownlie does not wish to do this here. Robin Brownlie and Mary-Ellen Kelm, "Desperately Seeking Absolution: Native Agency as Colonialist Alibi?" *Canadian Historical Review* 75.4 (Dec 1994): 543-556.

James Holstun, *Ehud's Dagger: Class Struggle in the English Revolution* (London: Verso, 2000).

Ehud's Dagger: Class Struggle in the English Revolution is an engaging and sometimes enraging book. Holstun sets out to prove that the popular praxis of labouring people played a crucial role in shaping the English Civil War. He also attempts to demonstrate that the Civil War constituted the first capitalist and anti-capitalist revolution of the modern period. Finally, Holstun argues that the experiences of radical, lower-class men and women in the 1640s and 1650s can help activists in the twenty-first century better understand their own

struggles. In effect, *Ehud's Dagger* is an attempt to rewrite the history of the seventeenth-century England in terms of modern class conflict.

Holstun admits that this is not a book that most historians will recognize as standard narrative history. His overtly presentist approach to much of the material he discusses is proof enough of that statement. So too is the fact that this account of the English Revolution is very long on historiographical polemic and very short on causal explanation. There is no attempt here to give a new view of the entire course of the Civil War. The first section of the book consists of a defence of a Marxist approach to the history of Stuart and Interregnum England and a scathing critique of what Holstun terms the anti-communist approach of Conrad Russell and his fellow revisionists on the one hand and the new historicists and post-revisionists on the other. In the second section Holstun attempts to rescue five radical "projects in human emancipation" from the scrap heap of neo-conservative historiography. He examines John Felton's assassination of the Duke of Buckingham in 1628, the role played by the Agitators in the New Model Army before and during the Putney Debates of 1647, the strange career of the Fifth Monarchy prophet Anna Trapnel, the diehard republican Edward Sexby and his tyrannicide tract *Killing Noe Murder*, and the communistic ideology and practices of Gerrard Winstanley and the Diggers.

The first part of *Ehud's Dagger* begins with Cornet George Joyce's abduction of Charles I in June 1647 and his dramatic declaration that the authority and power for this action came from the cavalry troop "behind me". For Holstun this episode represents that appeal to the authority of martial praxis that resonated through the rest of the 1640s and 1650s among such diverse groups as the Levellers, Fifth Monarchists and the Diggers in their attacks on the ruling order. Holstun not only uses Cornet Joyce's brief moment of prominence in 1647 to illustrate the agency of lower-class actors in the English Revolution, but also to signal his own disdain for the revisionist, new historicist and post-revisionist approaches to the history of the period. His critique of revisionism is by far the strongest section in the book. Holstun effectively shows up the many theoretical limitations and inconsistencies of Conrad Russell, John Morrill, Mark Kishlansky, Kevin Sharpe and J.C.D. Clark. His analysis of the three-kingdom (or multiple kingdom) explanation for the outbreak of hostilities in England in 1642 is particularly perceptive. Too often, Holstun notes, this paradigm has been used in opposition to a social change explanation of the road to the Civil War. He quite rightly points out that "what looks like a unified and imperial Scots *nation* from the English side of the border probably feels like a complex and divided Scots *society* on the other" (32). Holstun also takes aim at the revisionists' reliance on contingency in order to explain why everything fell apart in the early 1640s, especially in regard to the psychological peculiarities of 'that man of blood' Charles I. Such modes of

argument, Holstun points out, are often based on counterfactuals – if Charles I had not been king, would things have turned out differently? – which tend to “open charmingly oblique prospects on a historian’s fantasy life” (40) but serve little other purpose. He is on less sure ground when he begins to link revisionism to a larger, rather shadowy anti-Marxist, anticommunist and anti-populist conspiracy that will culminate in “a full-scale capitalist assault on British and American public education itself ...” (44). It is a lurid image, but, stated rather than proven, it could very well be as much a fantasy as seventeenth-century England without Charles I. A later counterfactual, this time around the question of land reform and the political stability of the Commonwealth, also demonstrates that Holstun sometimes does not practice what he preaches. His argument in chapter three, that the supporters of the new historicism and post-revisionism tend to ignore questions of economy and class as much as the revisionists, carries more conviction.

Having done a demolition job on the revisionists, post-revisionists, and new historicists, in his fourth chapter Holstun gets to the heart of the matter, arguing that “the English Revolution was a class struggle ... the struggle among various groups that were endeavouring to maintain or transform the relations of production” (87-8). Here he moves onto more controversial ground. He argues that the old Marxist standby of base and superstructure was manifested primarily in the religious discourse of seventeenth-century England. Fears of the middle and upper classes around ‘superstructural’ changes to the ecclesiastical order were linked to fears of the ‘basic’ (economic) changes that would inevitably follow. The Diggers and other radical groups, in contrast, were attempting to transform an oppressive economy and state into an egalitarian Kingdom of God on Earth. In making this argument, Holstun follows and supports the more general thesis first put forward by Brian Manning. Holstun, like Manning, writes that the overall political nature of the English Revolution cannot be understood without serious class analysis. Despite Holstun’s theoretical creativity, however, this argument remains as problematic as the revisionists suggest. Radicals such as John Lilburne, John Wildman, Mary Cary and Thomas Venner certainly fought the good fight for the small producer. Nevertheless, a serious doubt remains as to whether those radicals were at all representative of the English people, outside of the quite exceptional contexts of London sectarianism and the New Model Army. Holstun does not come to grips with this issue in any sustained fashion.

The second part of *Ehud’s Dagger* moves into the realm of history as opposed to historiography. In each of these five chapters Holstun attempts to highlight the role of class and oppositional conflict in the outbreak and course of the Civil War and to prove that, despite the revisionist line, contingency alone cannot explain seventeenth-century England. Working from a close reading of manuscript poems and chap books, chapter five convincingly

demonstrates that John Felton's murder of the Duke of Buckingham was a genuinely ideological act of opposition to the regime of Charles I, or, at least, that it was received and interpreted as such by plebeian poets and writers after the deed was done. In proving his case, Holstun resurrects a world of vaguely and sometimes plainly treasonous talk. In one striking example he describes John Milton's former tutor, Alexander Gill the Younger, in his cups in the cellar of Trinity College, Oxford saying, amongst other things, that Buckingham had gone to hell to meet King James. As Holstun remarks "Star Chamber tried and censured him, threatened a fine and his ears, then dismissed him with temporary loss of liberty and office" (174). This case study is a model of historical and literary analysis. Chapters seven and nine, dealing with Anna Trapnel and the Diggers respectively, also provide much food for thought. Holstun's discussion of Trapnel's effort to integrate female praxis and Fifth Monarchy opposition to Oliver Cromwell's Protectorate and his defense of the Diggers' main spokesman, Gerrard Winstanley, against charges of being an anti-urban, reactionary crank are persuasive exercises in reclamation.

The other two chapters in the second half of the book highlight both the strengths and weaknesses of Holstun's scholarship. Referring to the Agitators of the New Model Army as "New Model Soviets" takes anachronism about as far as it can go and there is very little that historians of the Putney Debates will find particularly new in chapter six. The latter criticism does not apply to Holstun's study of Edward Sexby. Tracking Sexby's efforts to forge an alliance among the remnants of the Leveller movement, the exiled Royalists and the kingdom of Spain, aimed at assassinating Oliver Cromwell and overthrowing the Protectorate, Holstun constructs a spirited and thoroughly documented narrative of the desperate struggle of one ex-Agitator to redeem the 'good old cause' of English republicanism. His analysis of Sexby's tract *Killing Noe Murder* is insightful: here was a pro-republican and anti-tyrannical work that drew not only on that elite, Renaissance discourse studied by J.G.A. Pocock, but also on the more popular language of the Reformation. Following this richly contextualized account of lower-class agency, Holstun's argument that Sexby's plot was doomed from the beginning because he made no plans for a seventeenth-century version of the dictatorship of the proletariat is overly reductionist.

Despite its relatively minor flaws, *Ehud's Dagger* is a welcome correction to the revisionist, post-revisionist and new historicist approaches to the English Civil War. Holstun's many theoretical and historiographical insights and arguments will give scholars of both the Left and the Right much to think about for years to come.

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