

REMEMBERING THE REBELS

Steven Justice, *Writing and Rebellion: England in 1381*,
(Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996)

In June 1381, the Southern English counties of Essex and Kent erupted in rebellion. Ostensibly, the imposition and extraction of the third Poll Tax had sparked the turmoil, yet few contemporary chroniclers had any sympathy for the rebels. These writers portrayed the participants in the Peasants' Revolt as often little better than animals, mindless rustics bent on horrific destruction and the end of proper society. Indeed, so partisan were they that modern historians have neglected the chronicles. However, Steven Justice in *Writing and Rebellion: England in 1381* argues that while the portraits of the rebels in the chronicles are deeply flawed, with careful analysis they nevertheless may provide an important insight into the motivations and group feeling of the rebels.¹

The first spark lit, the rebels moved through the English countryside, gathering forces to converge upon London. There, they attacked the Savoy, residence of John of Gaunt, as well as the records of the Archbishop of Canterbury and other clergy. Breaching the Tower of London, they extracted and executed Archbishop Sudbury as a "traitor" and finally convened at Mile End and Smithfield to present their demands to the king. As they rampaged through the city, Thomas Walsingham characterized them as being "like madmen"² Without reason, the rustics sought only to destroy. In particular, they destroyed documents: an anathema to the literate clerical chroniclers. Justice argues that chroniclers such as Henry Knighton could not conceive of a literate peasantry, that they expected "to find literacy only under the tonsure."³ Hence, they could not begin to imagine that the rebels had

more deliberate goals in mind when they wrote letters and broadsides and burned manorial and clerical records.

Certainly, the extent of literacy among the rebels remains subject to debate. M.T. Clanchy and Nicholas Orme, for instance, studied the prevalence of rural schools in England to posit a higher than expected literacy level.⁴ L.R. Poos, however, studying the Essex heartland out of which the rebellion emerged, concludes that there was low practical literacy during the period. Nevertheless, he admits that the court records may have underestimated levels of literacy in the vernacular. When literacy was often closely associated with the Lollard "heresy," significant underreporting was likely to occur. Moreover, he also acknowledges the possibility of a higher rate of "document awareness" among the rebels.⁵ Justice expands this concept of document awareness. He maintains that to view literacy as a dichotomy between full literacy and illiteracy is limiting. Rather, there were many levels of literacy among the peasantry and that many rebels showed an acute level of familiarity with the "documentary culture" of England.⁶ In particular, he argues, they were aware that illiteracy was a means the elite used to justify the subordination of the commons. Thus, when the rebels called for rebellion, they used not only speeches but also letters and broadsides. The importance of these documents was not then in the specific content, but in the symbolism of the act of writing itself as a means to claim their part within the body politic.

The mass burnings of documents that characterized the revolt were also acts of powerful symbolism as well as practical responses to the "parchment bureaucracy" of England.⁷ Rather than being actions predicated upon fear

¹ Steven Justice, *Writing and Rebellion: England in 1381*, *The New Historicism: Studies in Cultural Poetics* 27, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 9 and *passim*.

² Thomas Walsingham in R.B. Dobson, *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381* (London: Macmillan, 1970) 169

³ Justice 17.

⁴ *Ibid* 32–33.

⁵ L.R. Poos, *A Rural Society After the Black Death: Essex 1350–1525*, *Cambridge Studies in Population, Economy and Society in Past Times* 18, eds Peter Laslett et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 285, 288.

⁶ Justice, 35.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 44.

and hatred of literacy, Justice avers that the “precise targeting” of material demonstrated a deep understanding of the value of documents within their society.⁸ In particular, charters issued by the Royal Chancery often guaranteed freedoms that the elite had undercut over the course of the fourteenth century. The peasants also retained in their collective memory the efficacy of “plaints” – direct complaints to the king – as a means of limiting lordly depredations.⁹ The burning of documents then was not indiscriminate. The rebels often seized and preserved the older documents while destroying those of more recent origin. Moreover, they demanded that the concessions the king granted be formalized in new charters. This suggests then that rather than attempting to simply destroy the documentary culture, the rebels were attempting to recreate it, to fashion it anew in a manner that served their needs.

Interestingly, the Ciompi revolt in Florence from 1378–1381 shows similar characteristics. Although the anonymous chronicler (tentatively identified as Boninsegni Machiavelli) portrays the Ciompi rebels as “thieves, traitors, robbers, murderers, assassins, gluttons and felons” intent upon tearing down the structure of society and bringing about the destruction of Florence, the decrees of the *Arti Minori* revolutionary government that he himself records suggest that the rebels wanted instead to *recreate* the state to give themselves a political voice.¹⁰ Decrees that attempted to normalize the situation, to maintain business and trade and to reorganize taxes were not acts of destruction but recreation. Moreover, the importance that the Ciompi rebels continued to give to their banners suggests that they remained invested in the established symbolism of the Florentine polity.

Unlike the Ciompi revolt, however, the Peasants’ Revolt was primarily a rural rather than an urban phenomenon. Although the rebels converged upon London and some in London supported them, the rebels actions and

demands were firmly rooted in what Justice calls “the rural idiom.”¹¹ The symbolism of the bonfires of documents, for example, he identifies as an extension and transformation of the traditional Midsummer bonfires in which rural communities protested the lords’ demesne rights to forest resources and through which communities united.¹² Similarly, their appropriation of the festival days of Corpus Christi and its inherent symbolism, Justice maintains was a means of asserting their “corporateness”, the unity and validity of local communities as autonomous political bodies.¹³

In the fourteenth century, life in the countryside was rarely easy. Margins were slim and subsistence a constant concern. Only through the community could peasants hope to exploit fully the meager resources to which they had access. This led to the creation of a “political and ethical imagination by which they kept body and soul together.”¹⁴ In this rural vocabulary, local amity – reinforced through festival – was extremely important, as was surveillance through by-laws and pledging to regulate village relations. Accordingly, within this model, documents, recreated and reinterpreted by the peasantry, were not only desirable but also an essential means to enforce *trewþe* and thus village autonomy against the claims of those that would otherwise exploit them. “*Trewþe*,” Justice notes, a word that occurred in the letters of both Jack Trewman and John Ball that circulated during the Peasants’ Revolt, was a cornerstone of this social lexicon, with its connotations of fidelity and acceptable social behavior within the village community.¹⁵ Its antithesis, “theft”, thus took on concomitant significance. Theft, to the rural peasant, was not merely a crime against an individual, but a betrayal of the trust of a community. When the rebels charged Sudbury with theft, therefore, it is not surprising that they deemed his actions as treasonable against the community of England.¹⁶

⁸ Ibid., 41.

⁹ Ibid.,

¹⁰ Samuel K. Cohn Jr., ed., *Popular Protest in Late Medieval Europe*, Manchester Medieval Sources, Rosemary Horrox and Janet L. Nelson, eds (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 233.

¹¹ Justice, 140.

¹² Ibid., 152.

¹³ Ibid., 164

¹⁴ Ibid., 176.

¹⁵ Ibid, 13, 14.

¹⁶ Ibid., 181.

The rural idiom then emphasized the unity of villages and their ability and right to self-rule. Seen through this lens, therefore, the demands of the rebels in London are not the claims of individuals, nor of an undifferentiated mob, but of communities. When the *Anonimale Chronicle* notes Tyler's insistence "That no lord should have lordship in future, but it should be divided among all men, except for the king's lordship", historians should not interpret that as a call for anarchy, but as rather as a demand for local autonomy.¹⁷ Admittedly, not all historians agree with Justice's conclusions. Poos, analyzing manorial records concerning the Peasants' Revolt within the larger context of Essex anti-authoritarianism, avers that the demands made at Mile End and Smithfield were not a specific "program" for change but rather only one among many essentially local responses to growing economic tensions in the post-Black Death era, albeit one that was of a previously unseen scope.¹⁸ Although he acknowledges that the rebels were politically aware, Poos maintains that they had no "unifying rubric."¹⁹ Unfortunately, this interpretation seems to deny the rebellion a greater meaning. By dismissing the demands made by the rebels in London as symbolic rather than real, he implies that the revolt was little more than a futile gesture, an outpouring of anger and frustration rather than an expression of rural intent.

Other historians, such as Johan Huizinga, have grouped the Peasants' Revolt with other post-Black Death rebellions as a part of the "violent tenor of life."²⁰ Yet, this would seem to do the English rebels a disservice. The chroniclers portray the rebels of the "Jacquerie" French rebellion of 1358 as brutally violent, indulging in murder, robbery, pillaging and rape with wild abandon.²¹ One might argue that the chroniclers were so biased as to include extraneous "facts" to discredit the Jacques, and perhaps that is the case. Yet, if so, why did chroniclers of the Peasants' Revolt – who often came from similar backgrounds as those

of the Jacquerie and one of whom, Jean Froissart, recorded both – not include similar fictions in their accounts? Perhaps as Justice suggests, they considered the destruction of the documents and the death of Sudbury and the other handful of "traitors" monstrous enough.²² Nevertheless, the absence of widespread violence against people, especially women and children during the Peasants' Revolt is in marked contrast to the Jacquerie and as such should set the former apart and suitable for consideration on its own merits. Moreover, the determined and specific nature of the actions of the rebels during the Peasants' Revolt and their clear understanding of the nature of society, speak to an agency among the peasants, a program beyond anger or frustration. The peasants drove the violence rather than being driven by it. Justice maintains that arguing otherwise, ignoring the chronicle evidence, is once again "erasing the memory of the rebels."²³ While historians cannot read the chronicles of the Peasants' Revolt as canonical truth, within these accounts lie a deeper truth. While the authors themselves could not comprehend the "rustics" swarming through London to destroy their world, analysis of their "assumptions and misunderstandings" may allow scholars to better understand the previously forgotten peasants and their rural culture.²⁴

¹⁷ *The Anonimale Chronicle* in Dobson, 164.

¹⁸ Poos, 240.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 261.

²⁰ Johan Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (Mineola: Dover Publications, 1998), Chapter 1, 9–10.

²¹ Cohn, 150 and *passim* 150–177.

²² Justice 260

²³ *Ibid.*, 256.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 257