

Is Civil War ever Civil?

David G. Edmundson

March 20, 2017

Tonight my subject is civil war. Not The Civil War. Tonight no remembrance of Gettysburg or Antietam, no rehash of justifications for secession or suppression, no encomiums to Robert E. Lee or U.S. Grant. For those who care about such things, your opinions are likely firm and resistant to persuasion. It is a subject you all know well and could present with as much clarity and purpose as I. The civil war I intend to discuss, among other things, has been labeled the War of the Three Kingdoms, the Parliamentary War, and more simply the English Civil War.

Here is a good place to discuss terms and begin to answer the question in the title. What exactly does civil mean and then what is civil war? The OED, offers a starting point. Among the twenty-plus options are, “Of or pertaining to the whole body of citizens...the internal affairs of the body politic or state,” and, “troubles such as occur among fellow citizens or within the limits of one community.” That’s straight-forward enough. But definitions 8 and 9 strike a distinct note of personal and moral development; “...not barbarous; civilized, advanced in the arts of life,” and, “Educated; well-bred; refined, polished, ‘polite’.” Here are the makings of a very English opportunity for word play and confusion. Can one be said to be “not barbarous” while haggling the life out of a fellow countryman on a field of battle? In the civil war the civilian uncivilly caused the decease of his fellow citizen.

But here perhaps I am haggling the life out of a narrative that displays the first seeds of what became us, the U.S., with all our historically justified explanations of what has lately become a very un-civil national discourse. For many years now I have been fascinated by what most call the English Civil War. Not just because of the proto-American ideas and aspirations expressed during that tumultuous time, and not just because the religions of protestant America were founded or forged when men were wont to fight and kill or die for religion's sake, and not just because of colorful characters involved in extraordinary drama. Because of all this and the emergence into documented history of William Edmundson, apostle of the Quakers to Ireland and North America.

His descendants are my ancestors and me. From County Westmoreland to Ireland to the Eastern Shore of Maryland to Jay County, Indiana, the long line of striving farmers who are my people kept some of this remarkable man alive. I am aware that other people's ancestors can make for dull listening and will do my best to keep things lively and interesting. If anything I say seems boastful, please forgive me; it is not my claim that because my remote great grandsire did something worthy of note that I should get any of the credit. But reading William Edmundson's journal sparked my curiosity and helped cement my amateurish fascination with history in general and the English 17th century in particular.

Where to start? With the struggle between nascent capitalism and the Stuart court? Or the swelling passion for religion growing from Luther's and Henry the 8th's defiance of Catholic hegemony? Or the decay of feudalism and the struggle to put something else in

its place? Or the spark to imagination caused by the early colonization of and expansion into the North American continent? Or all of these fueled and informed by the lust for independence of the English people, an independence they believed to have been stolen by the Norman Conquest and which many believed was a birthright to be reclaimed? These threads run through the story of the English Civil War, and I believe have had and continue to have a primal influence on the American character, running through our founding and development as a nation.

A quick look at the reign of Charles I will answer most of these questions and position these contending explanations in a narrative that runs from saintliness to sanctimony, from 'to the manor born' to nascent capitalism, from divine right to regicide. It was this unhappy man's lot to reign for 20-plus years in relative poverty, vying with Parliament over issues of royal privilege and money, galled by his belief in his divine rights in which none could say him no. But Parliament did say him no, so he sent them home and collected taxes by a sort of executive order, which did him no good in the sympathies of his subjects. And so the first 15 years of his reign.

Charles came to a throne funded primarily by the ancient incomes inherited from the Plantagenets and modified slightly by the Tudors. These were adequate in their way for the limited role and responsibilities of feudal kings, but Charles was also susceptible to the siren call from France of the God-given right of kings to do as they thought best without the necessity of seeking anyone's approval but their own. And what with the inflationary effect of all that Mexican and Peruvian bullion, a king just couldn't keep up

appearances and conduct a vigorous foreign policy and generously reward his loyal servants and hangers-on with his own money and so he needed Parliament to grant him taxes. They said they would if he would redress certain grievances first. Charles bridled at this assertion of Parliamentary power at the expense of his own, and as noted earlier, prorogued the session and collected taxes anyway. Additionally he sold offices and monopolies for such things as salt, wine, beer, window glass, and trading privileges, among others. This did not sit well with the up-and-coming capitalists of the channel counties who had learned a thing or two from their Dutch and Flemish rivals just across the narrow seas. All of this and forced loans from the merchants of London left him with very little support in the areas near the city.

These were also the areas most open to the call of Puritanism. Charles was badly served by his ministers, but none did him as much harm as Bishop Laud who held notions about religion compatible with Charles' ideas about kingship. Laud confronted the variety of religious sects then growing in the kingdom, most notably those who held that each congregation was sufficient unto itself, with harsh and inflexible decrees and punishments. Laud made an insightful and possibly prophetic statement which summed up his attitude and illuminated Charles' loyalty. "No bishop, no king," he said. And by the time of Charles' execution, Laud had preceded him to the block. He meantime managed to reassert Episcopal control throughout most of England with only resentment and secret deviance from uniform worship, but when in 1637 he attempted to impose the Book of Common Prayer on the Scottish Kirk, quiet resistance became open rebellion.

Open rebellion required stern, even military response, but armies cost money and Charles had none. When a Scottish army came across the border and occupied Newcastle, Charles felt he had no choice but to summon a new Parliament, the first in 12 years. If he thought their sense of patriotism would override past animosities, he was sadly mistaken. While the Scots waited in the north, Charles and the Puritan-dominated Parliament did battle at Westminster over the usual bones of contention.

Now we come to the messy part of this story. Royal-Parliamentary relations deteriorated to a state of civil war by 1642. Two thirds of the nobility, half the gentry, and most of the rural, Celtic, traditionalist north and west supported the king. Most of the south and east, Puritan, commercial, urban, tradesmen and capitalists supported the Parliament. Charles decamped from hostile London, eventually to Oxford, and set about subduing his enemies. Charles' nephew, Prince Rupert of the Rhine, led the Cavaliers to early successes, particularly by means of his flamboyant cavalry tactics. By 1643 Oliver Cromwell had emerged as the ablest general among the Parliamentary forces, first creating and then deploying what became the New Model Army with his Ironsides cavalry units. After a series of inconclusive battles, the Roundheads drove Charles army from the field in 1645 at the battles of Naseby and Langport. By then many of Parliament's early supporters had switched sides, but the concentration of population, commerce, and productive capacity in the southeast gave the Parliamentary army the numbers, wealth and materiel to continue in the field of battle. Charles sought support with a Presbyterian army in Nottinghamshire who handed him over to his enemies. And thus ended the first phase of the English Civil War.

I feel as if I am cheating you of the color, the Sturm und Drang, the lore of these encounters of cavalier and roundhead. The tales of Charles' escapes and captures, his confinements, trial, and beheading have filled the bookshelves of Britain for centuries. These stories usually reveal the sympathies of the tellers more than shed much light on what was essentially the English revolution against the arbitrary power of the king. And even though historians disagree about the fundamental causes of the transition from dissatisfaction to open defiance and civil war, there can be no dispute that the organizing principle, the factor that determined which side one took, was religion.

Ever since the break with Rome under Henry VIII, the English had been in a ferment of religious activity. Once the Pope was subtracted, many of the new Protestant sects added the Bible to complete their notions of authority. The Bible had the advantages of neither relying on political expedience and graft nor representing a remote foreign monarch in its resolution of doctrinal disputes. On the other hand it proved useful in supporting mutually contradictory conclusions, used, one could say with world-class irony, Jesuitically in proving whatever was desired to be proven, a practice that continues down to the present day.

In any event, the Bible-reading, hymn-singing, sermonizing Puritans largely supported the Parliament and the more rural, traditional, Catholic-leaning population took the field in support of their barons, bishops and king. And while the war played out in Parliament's favor, the Baptists, Quakers, Levelers, and Diggers, among many other

religious seekers, emerged on the British stage to claim their places in the vacuum left in the wake of reformation and civil war. Of the Baptists and Quakers you have no doubt heard, but the Levelers and Diggers are to most Americans certainly more obscure.

Briefly, the Levelers repudiated the notion that some men were entitled to noble status while others must defer to them, that the wealthy, landed aristocracy were in any significant way superior to the tenants and farmers whose labor enriched them. “When Adam delved and Eve span, who was then the gentleman?” was their watchword and many of Cromwell’s soldiers held fervently to this belief that their service on behalf of the Commons entitled them to equal status with the nobility, most of whom they had bested on the field of battle. They quite perceptively pointed out that the nobility had acquired their status at the point of a sword, and so had now lost it.

The Diggers were also of the opinion that nobility should be abolished, but went the further step of denying the validity of private property. The process of enclosure had proceeded for centuries in which the lords had taken what had been commons and fenced or enclosed it for their private uses. This left the cottagers of any village so enclosed poorer and hungrier than they had ever been. Digger principles held that so long as any lacked food they had the moral and hence legal right to cultivate any idle land for their own sustenance. They established at least three communities and tried to persuade the public of the rightness of their cause through broadside ballads and pamphlets. That most of you have never heard of them is a fair measure of their success. There was one who found them instructive. One can imagine Karl Marx, standing boil-ridden at the mantle,

marveling at the sudden outpouring of new ideas about how to order society, how to distribute property.

Remember Archbishop Laud had said, “No bishop, no king.” It would have been more accurate to have said, “No king, no bishop.” Once the power of the monarchy was negated, Brits of all sorts came forth with new ideas about what it meant to be godly and how the godly should act and whose authority to obey.

Which brings me at last to the Quakers. Out of the disruption and dislocation of these years arose a diverse group whose unifying characteristic was the belief that each person could be in direct communion with God without need of clergy or complicated theology. Since many, in the intensity of this communion, quivered with religious fervor, they came to be known as Quakers. The public’s assessment of these quivering ecstasies was that here, after years of public disorder and social uncertainty, was simply more confusion and that of a particularly offensive and deranged sort. Remember, that by the framing of our constitution, religious freedom and democracy stood for progress. At the end of the English Civil War however, they represented chaos and anarchy. These zealots refused, they said on God’s behalf, to conform to any of the norms of what had been until recently a very clearly ordered and hierarchical society. They refused that courtesy to their betters, for which they were abused, assaulted and imprisoned. They believed that women had as much humanity and therefore access to divinity as men. When much attention was paid to dressing in accordance with one’s social and occupational status, women would strip naked in church to show that there was nothing between them and God and perhaps to be

as disruptive of “corrupt” worship as possible. It was only after George Fox, Margaret Fell and others had established the system of monthly (local) and quarterly (regional) meetings for internal discipline that the Society of Friends began to grow into what it has been for the last three and a half centuries an important, albeit non-conformist, branch of the Christian faith.

Come with me now to the village of Crosby Garret, complete with its Norman church set among the treeless moors of what was then Westmorelandshire to the east of Keswick and the Lake Country, a few miles from Kirkby Steven, on the western slopes of the Penines, then and now among the least populous regions of England. Here, since the Viking invasions a thousand years past had dwelt the Edmundsons, and it is to one of these, William by name, that we turn our attention. Much of what I shall relate comes from his journal, published after his death in 1712 and reissued several times.

There are surely others who could personify the pivot of England from European to Atlantic power better and with more distinction than this farmer’s son, but William will do as well as many. He was born in 1627 in Little Musgrove parish and orphaned at age eight with the passing of his father. Given to the care of his uncle, who he says used him “hardly,” he was in time apprenticed to a carpenter/joiner in York. He relates that like many of his countrymen he was afflicted with uneasiness concerning the manner of his life and his salvation, what one biographer calls “religious melancholy,” and in that unsettled state joined Cromwell’s army and saw action at the civil War’s final battle at

Worcester in 1651. When mustered out he married and went with his wife and a load of trade goods to join his brother in Ireland in 1652.

I should like here to do discuss, for the sake of my affection for of my Irish friends, the awful reputation of Cromwell's army and William's role as an English immigrant to Ireland. Briefly the story of Cromwell in Ireland entails the reconquest of the island subsequent to the rebellion against English rule in 1641, which entailed brutal treatment of Protestants in Ulster. By 1649, the Irish/Royalists held the entire island save Dublin. The native forces, the Irish Catholic Confederation, had allied themselves with the royalists who, now that Charles I was dead, were busy preparing the way for the return of the Stuarts in the person of his son, Charles II. Cromwell needed the eastern seaports to support his New Model Army of 12,000. Dublin was secured at the Battle of Rathmines and attention then turned to Drogheda where the royalist/Catholic forces had gone for defense. In a siege marked by brutal fighting and high casualties, Cromwell breached the walls and asked for surrender. When his offer was refused and he saw how many of his soldiers had died in the assault, he ordered no quarter be given, as was the custom of the time, and the town was sacked leaving 2,500 royalist soldiers dead, 500 transported to the Barbados sugar plantations, and an unknown number of civilians, probably around 700, put to the sword. For the next few years the Parliamentary army methodically overcame one royalist stronghold after another until all that was left was guerilla warfare. The guerillas were numerous and successful enough that draconian means were employed to quell the resistance and it is during this period that Irish resisters and bystanders alike

were treated with the brutality that has come to define Cromwell in Ireland and add more reasons, as if any were necessary, for the Irish to hate the English.

Meanwhile Charles II had deserted his Irish allies to make common cause with Scots Covenanters and Cromwell left Ireland to deal with this new threat. On his way north, his army passed through York and recruited William Edmundson. As mentioned earlier, William served with Cromwell, first in Scotland, then in pursuit of the Covenanter army and Charles II who were eventually brought to bay and defeated at Worcester. Serving a while longer on the Isle of Man and then in the north, he left the army, married and prepared to move to Ireland as a merchant. His brother John was with the British army in Antrim, and at his instigation William was offered a duty-free position in the army – duty-free in that he would have no military duties and duty-free in that as a military man he would have no duty imposed on the goods he brought over from England for resale. Here was an offer too advantageous to refuse, and yet refuse it he did, citing in his journal, “...but I refused, and would not accept of their kind Offers; for my Inclinations were after Religion, and my Conscience began to be awakened by the Lord’s Hand of Judgment mixed with Mercy, which preserved me”(7). He returned to England to replenish his goods and while there, attended a mass meeting in his home district, heard James Naylor speak and, in his own words, he was “...convinced of the Lord’s blessed Truth; and the Lord’s former Dealings with me came fresh into my Remembrance. Then I knew it was the Lord’s Hand that had been striving with me for a long Time. This was the year 1653”(8).

It was with thoughts such as these that Quakers understood their passage through this world; at least William was given over to them. These constant prayers made up part of his armor against a world offended by and hostile to the beliefs and behaviors of these radical Christians. Indeed the abuse heaped upon early Quakers was vicious and not infrequently deadly, as William was to learn to his sorrow.

One of the quainter areas of conflict was the matter of hat courtesy. In this highly structured class system, inferiors were expected to doff their hats and stand aside for their betters. Quakers believed that such distinctions violated the God-given equality of all souls and bared their heads for no one except God. On one occasion a Quaker who would not doff was knocked down, his hat filled with excrement and jammed back on his head. A more substantial dispute centered on tithes. Quakers wouldn't pay; the law said they had to and the church had the legal right to seize property for surety. Many a Quaker suffered impoverishment and imprisonment over this issue, including William.

Remember freedom of religious conscience was a century away from virtue. To most Brits the Quakers represented anarchy, and by the end of hostilities, most had tired of chaos and longed for whatever normalcy they could reclaim. After Cromwell the Restoration monarchy determined to reassert uniformity of worship and permitted the abuse of all non-conformists, especially the Quakers.

In the face of this mistreatment the Quakers learned to practice non-violence. In response to abuse they returned passivity. One who abused a Quaker might get a sermon but not physical resistance. When a mob burned a Quaker meeting house in London, the

members met in the rubble as if it made no difference. Any bully, or dog for that matter, finds lack of fear disarming; if the prey won't run what fun is the chase? George Fox declared in the face of harassment and imprisonment, "The spirit of Christ will never move us to fight a war against any man with carnal weapons." (quoted in Walvin 19)

At the same time Fox and others promoted the practice of regularity, honesty, and literacy among the members, habits which dissipated in time the feeling of their countrymen that Quakers represented chaos and disharmony. These traits in fact were responsible for the surprising rise and prosperity of the sect over the next two centuries. Traditional class-bound Englishmen felt no particular obligations of honesty toward their inferiors, and when they happened to go into business, many honored their contracts and fiduciary responsibilities with the same high-handedness as they did their social interactions. Take a case in point. When chocolate became the rage in Europe, many chocolatiers adulterated their goods with soot or other finely-ground substances and sold it at pure chocolate prices. It is a trick well known to every drug dealer. Not so the Quakers. If they said it was pure cocoa, the public came to understand, it *was* pure. This reputation for strict rectitude served Quaker tradesmen and investors well. Cadbury's and Lloyd's of London are two modern relics of 17th century religious practice manifest in the economy.

The emphasis on literacy was intended to allow scattered Quakers to maintain communication with the regular meetings and compliance with the group's decisions. It also had the effect of generating many letters and journals without which I would have no direct knowledge of William and his travails. From his journal, for example, we hear that

he was imprisoned repeatedly, in Maryborough in Dublin, in Armagh, in Cavan and in Londonderry, all before 1671. He would be taken to prison again and often before 1689 changed the official attitude toward Quakers.

Most of his journal is of his organizing activities throughout Ireland, and starting in 1671 the Americas. In all he made three trips to America between 1671 and 1683. Oh to have seen the new world through his eyes! Most of what he writes concerns what we would call missionary work – preaching and meeting and convincements to truth of backsliders and converts. Occasionally we hear of his facing down or evading official censure, especially in the Caribbean and New England. When attempting to land in Antigua he was prevented by the governor who reasonably said that his conversion of soldiers to Quakerism meant they would no longer fight, now being convinced pacifists. Perhaps his most interesting encounter was with Roger Williams in Rhode Island concerning 14 theological and anti-Quaker propositions this apostate Puritan had published and challenged anyone to debate with him. William Edmundson took the challenge and for three days at Newport and another at Providence faced off with the man many have called the father of religious tolerance in America. Here are Edmundson's words from his journal:

“When these propositions (as he called them) came to be discoursed of, they were all but Slanders and Accusations against the *Quakers*; the bitter old man could make nothing out, but on the contrary they were turned back upon himself: he was baffled (sic), and the people saw his Weakness, Folly, and Envy against the Truth and Friends” (65).

Roger Williams' evaluation of the debate is unrecorded, but probably differs in his estimation of the outcome.

The Rhode Island experiment in freedom of conscience illustrates a key point in the history of religious tolerance. Just as the Puritans came to New England to have this freedom and then set about denying the same to anyone who disagreed with them, essentially driving Roger Williams to found a community where his religious conscience could be allowed, Roger Williams didn't believe this same freedom extended to the Quakers. To be fair the Quakers, guided at first by the inner light of each believer to find God in her own way, also felt the need to restrict freedom with regard to pacifism, literacy, honesty in trade, and plain living. Perhaps it is fair to say that no community can exist without some limits on the freedom of its members to do as they please and the Quakers' strictures were at least dedicated to the principle that everyone's voice deserved to be heard. This limitation on freedom in the pursuit of freedom is not of course peculiar to religion. In our day a nation of immigrants seeks to calumniate and exclude newer immigration. I am reminded of Samuel Johnson's quip during the American Revolution: "How is it we hear the loudest yelps for liberty from the drivers of Negroes?"

During this first trip William visited Barbados, Antigua, Nevis in the West Indies, and Maryland, Virginia, the Carolinas, New York and Rhode Island. Taking his three voyages together he visited and preached in all the colonies save New Hampshire, Georgia (not yet established) and ironically Pennsylvania.

He returned to Ireland to his farm in Mountmelick just to the southwest of Dublin and continued to support Quaker activities and to be abused and imprisoned for his efforts. This era leading up to the battle of the Boyne would prove challenging and will go far toward answering the question in the title and perhaps a little way in removing the taint of Cromwell from this English immigrant to Ireland. In the 1680s, under the Earl of Tyrconnel, the English were disarmed and the Irish Raparees, irregular remnants of the forces defeated by the English, turned loose upon the Protestants. Because he was prominent among the Quakers, William came in for a great deal of abuse. He was frequently in Dublin seeking relief and protection for all who were so afflicted and “...was sometimes with King James (II), and told him of the Calamity the Protestants were under in the Country, and he would hear me quietly, for the Lord made Way in their hearts for us...” (139). One of the great ironies of history has it that James II, himself a Catholic, should side with the Quakers against the Catholic Raparees and soldiers, but James was looking for tolerance for himself and his religion and felt the best route was to espouse a policy of toleration for all. Thus did this most tone-deaf of monarchs earn the gratitude of the Protestants in Ireland. Those in England, however, deposed him and put his reliably Protestant sister and her husband, Mary and William, on the throne in his place. With their coming, toleration for Quakers was finally and firmly established; Catholics would have to wait another century and a half for the same status.

But before the peace and prosperity of William and Mary would take hold in Ireland, William had to undergo his greatest trial. Around the Battle of the Boyne, the Raparees

came to his house in Mountmelick, looted and burned the premises and marched William and his wife off to prison, both stripped naked in the winter weather. Either the exposure or the prison conditions or a combination proved too much for his wife who died shortly afterward. When the victorious Protestants came looking to return the devastation on the Catholic Irish, William protected them and allowed them to pasture their animals in his fields so they would escape confiscation and the poverty and hunger such losses would certainly bring.

Here seems a good point to explore answers to my questions. As to the taint of Cromwell, William was still at York during the siege and massacre at Drogheda, came to Ireland where he consistently returned forgiveness for injury and extended aid in return for abuse. The hatred of the Irish for Cromwell is well-founded, grounded on a particularly nasty episode in Irish-English relations, but I don't believe William merits much blame, whatever his other connections with Cromwell and Protestantism.

As to the possibility of civility in civil war, my conclusions are more tentative. Any civil war seems to loose the worst in human nature from the ordinary bounds of civility, somehow even more so than war between nations. War is inherently uncivil, usually animated by a fervor akin to religious conviction. Our side is the one God likes; those guys He doesn't and killing them is service to the deity. We are fortunate to live in a time when people no longer believe that matters of faith are justification for deadly violence; well at least the Catholics and Protestants have stopped killing each other in Belfast for a

few years now. The rest of the world seems headed back toward division and death delivered in the name of whatever deity is on whatever side.

In contrast, William Edmundson found in his faith the strength to forgo vengeance, the generosity to help those who had injured him, and the conviction that for violence to lessen he had to forswear being violent himself. In the midst of this most chaotic, violent, and certainly uncivil era in British history he found the strength of character and courage of his convictions to act civilly. I don't imagine he was an easy man to live with. He believed his actions and words were the inspiration of God, and at least by his own account, he was unbending in his adherence to this faith. When such a one appears in tranquil times, he is greeted, if greeted at all, with rolled eyes and classed with the cranks. But William's times were anything but tranquil, and his life story emerges as one of the few civilized responses to a barbaric ordeal.

Heroes provide examples to which we may aspire but not expect to reach. We have made many heroes of those who kill more effectively, more dramatically, more bravely. We rarely celebrate those whose resistance to violence entails bravery in the face of personal danger and adherence to principles of civility. And so yes, in the example of William Edmundson we see there can be something civil about civil war.

Works cited

Edmundson, William. *Journal of the Life*, Mary Hinde, London, 1774

Walvin, James. *The Quakers, Money and Morals*, John Murray, London, 1998

