it is apparently impossible for us to think philosophically about politics; if Condren is right, we cannot know what is true.


In *Revolutionary England and the National Covenant*, Edward Vallance announces his intention in the Introduction: the work is a “study of the significance of the idea of an English national covenant” (1, italics added). It reveals, among other things, a longstanding English covenanting tradition, one that existed alongside and in conjunction with the Scottish tradition of personal bonds that culminates in the National Covenant of 1638.

According to most traditional narratives, the Scots take credit for the covenanting movement of the mid-seventeenth century. This tale would have the Covenant emerge, fully-formed, from the tortured head of Archibald Johnston of Wariston, sweep Scotland in a wave of millenarian enthusiasm, and be foisted on England through the device of the Solemn League and Covenant of 1643. That treaty, the price of Scottish participation in the English civil war, bound both nations in a civil union and obliged Parliament to reform the Church of England according to “the word of God and the example of the best reformed churches.” By this telling, the English emerge as rational actors, pragmatic politicians caught up in a nasty war with their own king. The Scots, by contrast, are beholden to an apocalyptic Calvinist fanaticism, drafting national oaths, press-ganging the unwilling, and calling God to witness and enforce it all.

This is a convenient anglophile narrative, useful to insulate the English from the obsessions of foreign zealots. It is, however, a telling that has been buried by a generation of scholarship. In his important new study, Vallance adds another nail to the coffin of the traditional Whig narrative. Vallance demonstrates that the several Covenants of the seventeenth century had a long genesis in England, and that millenarianism was present on both sides of the Tweed. Identifying the origin-state of the Covenants, he says “is pointless given the degree to which it was a part of a shared Anglo-Scottish Protestant
culture”(6). He uses three of these, the Protestation of 1641, the Vow and Covenant of 1642, and the Solemn League and Covenant of 1643, to illuminate that composite culture and to shed light on several important historiographical issues. The pamphlets and sermons debating the covenants show the development of resistance and contract theories, while the subscription returns yield evidence of early-modern nationalism as well as the expansion of the political nation in the civil war period.

The search for “the origins of the idea of a national covenant”(6) begins in the sixteenth century with the sermons of Hugh Latimer at the court of Edward VI, continues with the resistance literature of the Marian exiles and crescendos in the personal and political oaths under Elizabeth. Vallance assigns theological significance to all of the above, including traditional English oaths of association and Tudor oaths of allegiance. Indeed, he asserts that “the term ‘oath of association’ effectively became a synonym for ‘national covenant’”(17) under Elizabeth. Though he cites and discusses opposed views, this hasty sacralization constitutes a weakness in an otherwise solid argument; the equation of a secular oath of mutual protection, even when sworn in the imagined presence of God, is a far cry from an obligatory national subscription to a political program that identified God as a participant in a convenanted relationship.

Covenants or not, the discussion of Tudor and Jacobean oaths of association gives way to the three examples that form the backbone of the book. In these, Vallance has plumbed a rich vein of literature. The Protestation, the Vow and Covenant, and especially the Solemn League and Covenant provoked hard-fought pamphlet wars, and left a record of subscription returns that to this point have been the near-exclusive domain of the cliometricians. Royalist sermons and pamphlets consistently assailed the various Covenants as illegal and disobedient, Parliamentary partisans insisted that the coronation oath was a contractual agreement, as binding on the crown as was obedience on the subject. The violation of the coronation oath justified resistance, resistance that was itself justified in the contractual nature of the Covenants. Regicide and army coups meant that the Solemn League and Covenant, born of the civil war, became by 1650 “a bulwark against the forces of revolution” (178).
If the pamphlet wars illuminate the changing nature of the Covenant, the subscription returns illustrate the way that English parishioners took the oaths that different regimes foisted on them. Vallance finds evidence of equivocation and reservations, but ultimately (and wisely) refuses to draw strong conclusions from uneven records. What can be said, though, is that the inclusion of unpropertied men and women into these explicitly political tests of loyalty and association constitute “an implicit expansion of the political nation” (129). This was not lost on civil war-era radicals, who interpreted the Covenants through their own circumstances. Diggers and Levellers “saw these documents as not only involving spiritual obligations, but also bestowing extensive political and economic rights upon subscribers” (156). Revolutionary England and the National Covenant is based on prodigious archival research, and the arguments derived from the subscription returns may be the most original section of the book.

Be it Scots or English, the millenarian enthusiasm of the mid-seventeenth century did not endure. In his study of oaths from the latter seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Vallance finds that the nature of the covenants changed. Oaths of association to the Hanoverians were rooted in the “constitutional and commercial considerations “ (214) and consciously avoided discussion of the Covenants of the past. Gone was the nationalism, gone was the impending apocalypse. “England’s Covenant with God” he concludes “had been forgotten” (216).


This fine contribution to Four Courts Press’s series of monographs on Ireland’s place in the history of the three Stuart kingdoms originated in the author’s PhD dissertation under Michael Perceval-Maxwell’s supervision. The book proceeds chronologically and provides abundant political and military context for O’Hara’s analysis of interest in Irish affairs, the newsbooks, their editors, and the content of their articles. This strong contextualization of English reporting and publishing during the confederate period yields two main theses. First, the birth of the English newsbook owed a great debt to