

Jonathan Scott. *Commonwealth Principles: Republican Writing of the English Revolution*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004. xii + 402 pp. \$75.00. Review by CHARLES W. A. PRIOR, UNIVERSITY OF HULL.

In his seminal study of the Atlantic republican tradition, *The Machiavellian Moment* (1975), John Pocock observed that republican ideas “had to become domiciled in an environment dominated by monarchical, legal, and theological concepts apparently in no way disposed to require the definition of England as a polis or the Englishman as a citizen” (334). To a very large extent, Jonathan Scott’s mission is to show how this process of domestication took place, and the result is a thought-provoking discussion of republicanism in a variety of discursive and political contexts. Where others have associated republican thought with one key figure (normally Machiavelli or Harrington), Scott here seeks to expand the discussion from single writers and concepts to an examination of “commonwealth principles.”

The book is divided into three parts, totalling sixteen chapters: “Contexts” examines the religious and social content of republican ideas; “Analysis” engages with broad and thematic concepts such as “liberty” and “virtue”; and “Chronology” places all of this complex exegesis within the context of political disruption in England between 1603 and 1725. It is a book dominated by many long passages and quotations from the works under discussion. On the one hand, this is an effective demonstration of how the republican idiom sounded, and in many cases the works are permitted to speak for themselves; but on the other the reader occasionally loses sight of how this complex parade of ideas can be seen to bear on events, especially given the comparative brevity of the contextual chapters. Nevertheless, the work is a seminal one in the sense that never before have we been presented with such a substantial discussion of republican thought, one which should force a revision of the tradition as a whole.

Scott argues that republican thought came to England in aid of a radical “reformation of manners.” Here, he revisits arguments from his influential *England’s Troubles* (2000), a work of synthesis that can be seen as the foundation for the present study. That Scott sees religion as important to telling the story of republicanism is a welcome development, since proponents of republicanism have tended to see the period in overwhelmingly secular terms. However, the pattern is shifting, albeit unevenly: Pocock himself has lately

found religion in his continuing series of volumes on Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*, where he has observed that the Church of England is the "key" to early modern English history, while Quentin Skinner remains deaf to the roar of religion and its links to government, preferring instead the whisper of neo-Roman ideas. Scott applies a powerful correction, arguing that English republicans were "overtly engaged" with matters of religion (42). For example, they evoked providential and apocalyptic language to forecast the destruction of the earthly monarchy; they called for toleration, liberty, and freedom of conscience; and they aimed for a reformation of manners, defined by the attainment of a Godly form of civic virtue. Yet it is also the case that Scott has tended to focus on one set of voices in the debate over religion: in addition to a core group of republicans, we have the Levellers and men on the edges of the Westminster Assembly, a body desperately trying to pick up the pieces of the shattered confessional state. He observes that republicans emphasised the sufficiency of scripture, were virulently anti-clerical and anti-Catholic, yet they were silent on matters of doctrine. Here, Milton is an archetype: he entered political debate in a series of pamphlets attacking episcopacy and calling for a return to the example of Constantine and the "monuments" of British antiquity. By 1650 he was a convert to republicanism. However, providing an explanation for Milton's apotheosis is not part of Scott's remit, and this leaves us wondering why figures like Milton embraced a body of ideas that seemed so alien to their former preoccupations.

Before 1649, republicanism was essentially "stateless" (its major spokesman being Thomas Scott), and in this book it emerges as a stream of classically informed discussion of a kind of civil theology. Moreover, as Mark Knights has observed in connection with this study, it relies on a "canon" of luminaries. Rather than commonwealth "principles" we have commonwealth "principals": Sidney (on whom Scott has written two books), Milton, Harrington, Molesworth, Nedham, Neville, as well as John Streater, the regicide Henry Vane, and John Toland, who published many of the major texts at the end of the seventeenth century. The picture that emerges is a complex one: Scott's republicans were not crude anti-monarchists (although they could be), but sophisticated commentators on a range of political topics, from the nature of just war and the problem of "empire," to the discussion of liberty and virtue, commonwealths, and rebellion; a major theme, developed by Scott in a series of articles, is the Anglo-Dutch connection, which allowed

three kingdoms to be transformed into a “supranational state” (357). There are many Scottish and Irish historians who will disagree with this analysis, and so here and throughout we find that Scott has retained his ability to provoke. He also displays characteristic flair and originality. Two excellent chapters “Old Worlds and New” and “The Politics of Time” take up the problem of republicanism and history. This is a crucial contribution to our understanding of the early modern reverence for the past, evident among the common lawyers and advocates of the ancient constitution, and churchmen and others interested in the ancient roots of British Christianity. Given that the precise patterns of these historical narratives came to be contested, there emerged a variety of historically-rooted political theories. In this way, Scott’s study offers a bridge between republicanism, law, and ecclesiology—if not in content, then surely in terms of the preoccupation with the past as a repository of authoritative examples.

England experienced eleven years of kingless government, as against eleven centuries of monarchy. Hence republicanism had to compete with an immense weight of tradition; after the Reformation and the Union of the Crowns, kingship became sacerdotal and imperial, and hence what Scott calls the “English revolution” was not strictly English, nor was it a revolution. The question of whether there was a “British” republicanism is one that awaits its historian. Seen in this way, republicanism was a body of ideas that were employed to fill a void caused by the wholesale collapse of the ecclesiastical polity. In place of the antiquity of the ancient constitution, it urged forward Plato, Aristotle, and Machiavelli, and in place of the established Church, it retained religion, yet its discourse was shaped by the millenarian fringes. And then, in 1660, the conditions that fostered it vanished. Its importance would seem to lie in its legacy, as Pocock suggested in 1975: republicanism became a principled language of civic virtue useful as a response to the corruption and luxury of the Walpole regime, and as the great lever that pried America loose of the tyranny of George III. Moreover, it was always a political language employed by those who inhabited the neo-classical groves of the political wilderness. How times, and the very idea of republicanism, have changed.