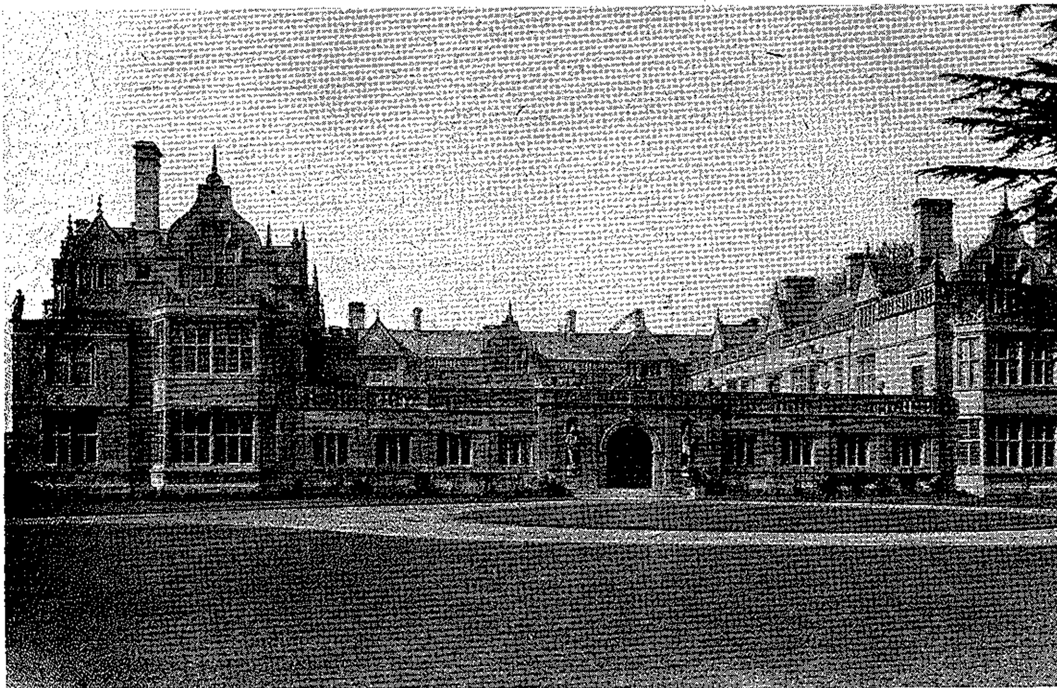
Country-House Radicals
1590-1660

By H. R. TREVOR-ROPER



Coughton Court, Alcester, Warwickshire Photo: A. F. Kersting

Revolutionary impulses do not always originate in proletarian discontent. This article traces 17th-century radicalism to a very different social source.

FOR CENTURIES THE COUNTRY HOUSES of England have been regarded as centres of conservatism: by their solidity, their comfort, their former traditions, their present uninhabitability, they remind us regularly of the past, and the past in England has, on the whole, been, or seemed, a good past, at least for those who built such houses, lived in them, and, in every generation until this, signalized their prosperity by improving and enlarging them. It is therefore difficult to envisage a period in which this apparently comfortable and conservative class of Englishmen was in fact, as a class, politically and socially radical. Nevertheless, in English history, the period between 1590 and 1640 was, in my opinion, such a period. It was a period first of gentry mutterings, then of gentry conspiracies—the plot of the Earl of Essex in 1601, the Bye Plot and the Main Plot in 1603, the Gunpowder Plot of 1605—and finally of gentry revolution—the Puritan "Great Rebellion" which was launched by the Long Parliament in 1640 and brought to power first a gentry republic, then a gentry dictatorship: the rule of Oliver Cromwell.

This is not the conventional interpretation of the period. The most advanced historians interpret it differently. But in my opinion they have failed to see the underlying unity because they have over-emphasized superficial distinctions. Particularly they have over-emphasized the religious distinction between puritanism and popery. The little rebellions were popish rebellions, the Great Rebellion was a puritan rebellion. Further, there is a fashionable (but in my view quite erroneous) theory that these religious differences corresponded with differences of social status and philosophy, so that the popish rebellions are assumed to be different in origin and character from the puritan rebellion. Finally, because of the loudly denounced practice of enclosure, the landed gentry of this period are widely supposed to have been " rising " at the expense of their peasantry, so that a crisis of their class seems by definition absurd. In fact, of course, enclosure (since it required no capital outlay) can be the resort of the desperate as well as the investment of the prosperous, and this theory of the rise of the gentry class is, in my opinion, an illusion. In my opinion the gentry —using the word in its exact sense, of non-noble landlords living mainly on agricultural rents—were in economic difficulties ; and compared with this uniting factor the divisions between the popish and the puritan gentry are unimportant.

The difficulties of the provincial gentry are obvious from the large contemporary literature of complaint ; nor is the reason far to seek. First, since 1540 the value of money had rapidly declined while customary rents had only slowly risen ; secondly, fashions of ever-increasing extravagance were being set by a favoured minority within the class : a minority who had learnt to profit, not to suffer, by the changes of the time, and upon whose example the popular illusion of a general " rise of the gentry " has been based. And who were these fortunate few ? They can be summarized in two words : the Court and the City. Under the Tudors both the Court of Westminster and the City of London had immensely grown—indeed "Tudor despotism " had been defined as the domination of London over the provinces—and the laments of the provinces, of " mere country gentry " who resented the invidious ostentation of those old or new neighbours enriched by official fortunes, and of borough merchants from " decaying " towns like Norwich or Beverley who resented the monopolization of foreign trade by the City of London, were both loud and long. To see the phenomenon at a glance one only has to look at the great new houses, or the spendid new tombs, which were everywhere being built in this period. They were not being built—as in the eighteenth century—by " mere " country gentry, rising effortlessly upwards on the rents of improved land. In almost every case where we can discover the economic basis of such extravagance, it is found to be Court or City money. Take a relatively remote county like Yorkshire. Nostell Priory was built by an official—a President of the Council of the North; Temple Newsam by a City financier; East Riddlesden by a cloth-merchant dependent on the City market. . . . It is the same story everywhere. Among all the great houses of this period I can only think of one—Althorp—which seems to have been built primarily upon the profits of land. In general it was officials and London merchants who were the " rising " gentry : the " mere " gentry—i.e., the gentry who relied upon rents alone, or primarily upon rents—were in decline. It was not that they were poor (that is to introduce an anachronistic term) : it was that they could not maintain the " port " to which they felt committed and consequently, in that ostentatious and competitive age, felt unbearably humiliated and eclipsed. " It is impossible," declared one of them, " for a mere country gentleman ever to grow rich or raise his house. He must have some other vocation with his inheritance, as to be a courtier, lawyer, merchant or some other vocation. If he hath no other vocation, let him get a ship and judiciously manage her, or buy some auditor's place in his county. By only following the plough he may keep his word and be upright, but will never increase his fortune. Sir John Oglander wrote this with his own blood, June the 25th, 1632." " With what comfort can I live," asked another, " with seven or eight servants in that place and condition where for many years I have spent three or four hundred pounds yearly and maintained a greater

Photo : J. Allan Cash

Ashby St. Ledgers, Northamptonshire : a draper replaced the country gentleman

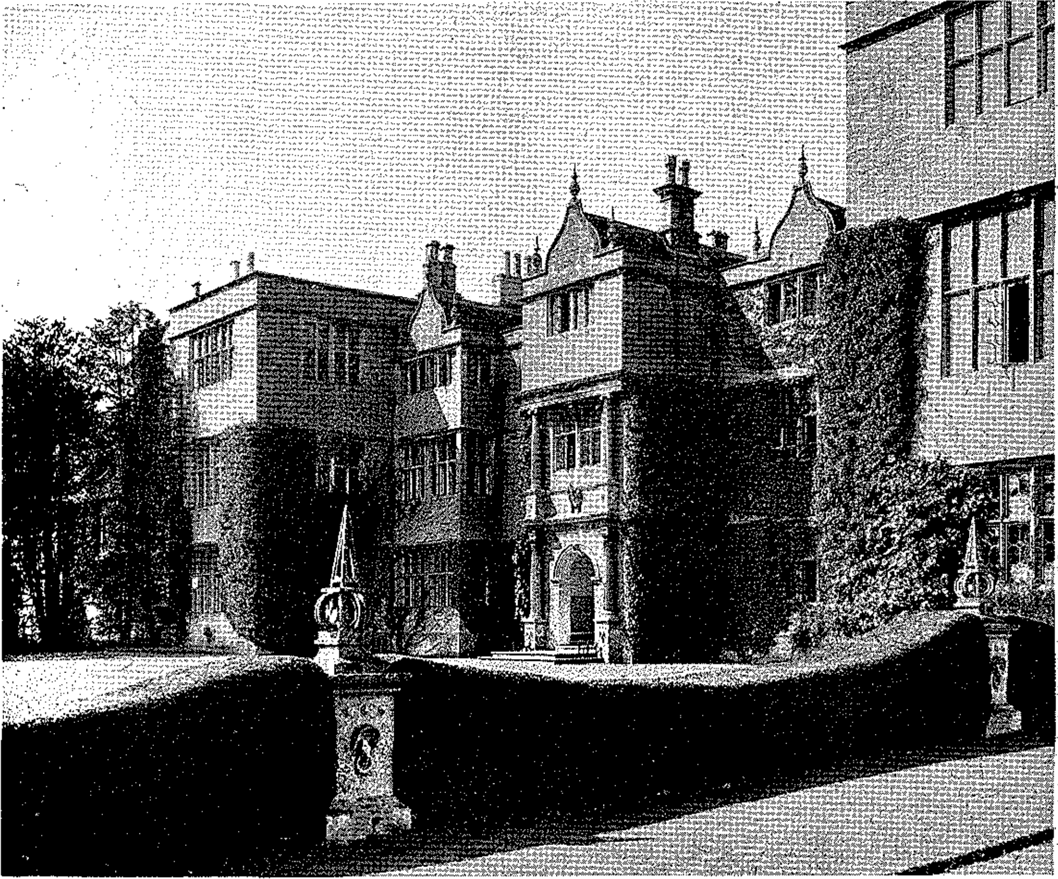
charge ? " What was such a " mere country gentleman " to do ?

First and most obviously, he would do his best to obtain an office. But offices were few and claimants many, and there were always bound to be a host of disappointed suitors, especially when (as happened throughout Europe in that century) competition drove up the purchase-price of offices and the fortunate possessors sought, and often contrived, to make them hereditary in their families. Failing an office, the " mere country gentleman " had to resort to some other expedient. He might " get a ship and judiciously manage her "—i.e., become a privateer ; consequently, as this depended on a state of war, the " mere " gentry featured throughout this period as the party favouring war with Spain. " Are we poor ? Spain is rich ; there lie our Indies ! " was their cry. Or, if he stayed at home on his estate, the " mere gentleman " might try desperately to stave off insolvency by raising his rents and enclosing his lands, regardless of those clamours from his tenants which a more comfortable landlord would have heeded. Finally, he might emphatically reject the society into which he could not obtain admittance and, making a virtue of necessity, signalize his rejection by repudiating its religion. Anglicanism, in the reign of Elizabeth, was a new religion : its roots seemed shallow ; it had not yet acquired that *mystique* which must be drawn from the catacombs in the days of persecution ; and to many of her subjects it

seemed merely a state-religion, the religion of the Court. Thus those who repudiated the Court could repudiate its religion as readily as those who were admitted to the Court would assume its religion, and, repudiating it, they looked for a "purer" faith appropriate to those who had not the wish, or the means, to compete in that fashionable, expensive, superficial world. Some turned to Romanism, revived since 1580 by the Jesuit missionaries: it was in the country houses of the provincial gentry or the unfashionable, uncourtly, impecunious peers that the priest-holes were to be found; others turned to Puritanism, which was by no means a commercial religion as has so often been stated (although the City of London made an opportunist alliance with it for a brief time) but the religion, in England as in Holland, of the backward impoverished gentry, who despised, partly because they could not afford, the expensive frivolities of the Renaissance court from which they were excluded. Socially, I believe that Romanism and Puritanism were not opposite but rival ideologies, appealing to different members of the same class, the declining gentry. The chief difference was that whereas an anti-court family, if it chose Romanism (as was more natural under the Protestant Queen Elizabeth), thereby deprived itself of political opportunities and was reduced to despair and conspiracy; a similar family, if it chose Puritanism (as was natural under the "romanising" Stuarts) still had access, through Parliament, to political influence and could therefore sustain hope and plan more prudently for change. Thus the period of Romanist Opposition, from 1569 to 1605, is a period of desperate conspiracy while the period of puritan opposition, from 1605 to 1640, is a period of skilful political manœuvre. But the social basis of opposition in both periods was the same: the crisis of the gentry.

Such, then, was the social background: how did it reveal itself in political action? At first the political skill of Queen Elizabeth and her ministers controlled the situation. The backward North indeed, for which Tudor centralization meant an invasion of "carpet-baggers" from the South, rebelled under Roman Catholic leaders in 1569; but that rebellion—a rebellion against the monopolization of patronage by the Cecil and Dudley families and their numerous clients—was crushed, and after its suppression the colonization of the North continued at an increased pace. Then, about 1590, a second outbreak threatened. Not only was the plight of the gentry now worsened by war-taxation and economic slump, but death was beginning to make gaps in the government—the Dudleys were dead, Walsingham was dead, Lord Burghley was verging to the grave, and the Queen herself was old—and rival and younger politicians were ready to speculate upon impending change. This was the situation which the Earl of Essex sought to exploit when he challenged Robert Cecil for Lord Burghley's inheritance and raised against him what one historian has called a "revolt of the squires." But Essex was not a sufficient politician to contend with Robert Cecil, and his squires were, in general, too provincial to compose a solid or organized party. They came, once again, from the backward areas, from the North, still mutinous against the "Cecilian" carpet-baggers, and from Wales, where Essex's own power lay. It was not in these remote areas that effective gentry opposition could be organized—and indeed, after these failures, the gentry of the North and West, who were mainly recusant, became quietist and were largely royalist in the Civil War. With the defeat of Essex and the peaceful accession of James I the centre of gentry radicalism changed; from now on it was not the North or the West, but that other area of chronic social pressure: the Midlands.

Since the middle of the sixteenth century at least, the Midland counties, dependent almost entirely upon agriculture, had been a centre of unrest: there the declining gentry, less qualified than their more maritime brethren to "get a ship and judiciously manage her," had sought to raise their rents and enclose commons, and had thereby, in that area of conservative open-field farming, provoked peasant discontent; and on the other hand, since the Midlands were near enough to London, there the great *nouveaux riches* of Court and City had regularly established themselves at the expense of the resident gentry. Contemporaries continually referred to this fact. In Northampton-



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Gayhurst, Buckinghamshire :
from such houses as these the recusant gentry rose

shire, the Dukeries of the Jacobean era, " most of the ancient gentlemen's houses," wrote Sir Edward Montagu of Boughton, " are either divided, diminished or decayed. . . . There hath been within these three or four years many good lordships sold within the county, and not a gentleman of the county hath bought any, but strangers, and they no inhabitants " : In Nottinghamshire, too, " foreigners "—London aldermen and Court grandees—were said to have squeezed out the resident gentry ; in Worcestershire there were said to remain " few gentlemen of antiquity." Such was the state of the Midland counties when King James I, by increasing yet further the burdens upon the already groaning gentry of England, gave a new stimulus to the organization of radical conspiracies in both the papist and the puritan country houses.

For the organization already existed. The gentry of the Midland counties were politically more alert than the gentry of the North and West, and if we study either the Recusant Underground or the Puritan Underground in the days of Elizabeth, we soon see how closely both were organized around a nexus of Midland country houses. From Warwick Castle and Kenilworth the two Dudley brothers maintained aristocratic control over their Puritan party, whose secret printing-press issued the Marprelate tracts from Fawsley in Northamptonshire, the country house of the Knightley

family, themselves for the next sixty years patrons of puritan gentry-opposition. On the other hand, the Jesuit John Gerard travelling in the same country also " had so many friends on my route, and so close to one another, that I hardly ever had to put up at a tavern in a journey of 150 miles," and near Henley the Stonors of Stonor Park harboured the only secret papist press outside London. Thus both parties among the radical gentry had already shown themselves capable of organization when the failure of Essex and the accession of King James, pledged now not to break but to continue the " Cecilian " monopoly, drove them both alike into action.

How did King James exasperate the English gentry ? Almost everything he did was an offence to them. His extravagance necessitated heavier taxes upon them, especially the " feudal " tax of wardship which was conveniently outside Parliamentary control ; his swollen court was maintained by " purveyance" —that abuse which even under the frugal Queen Elizabeth had only been contained by the skill of the even more frugal Lord Burghley; in his confidence that no bishop meant no king, James I also reversed the policy of his predecessor and defended the property of the Anglican Church against gentry encroachments ; and finally, he made peace with Spain and thus ended the opportunities of privateering which for twenty years had provided so useful an outlet for gentry discontent. The early years of King James were the heyday of the Court at Westminster, that vast, extravagant, costly Court to which he welcomed back the peers whom Elizabeth had alienated and invited the Scots peers whom Elizabeth had never known, and they were the heyday of the City of London, thriving as never before in the great boom-time of the Spanish peace ; but they were lean days for the " mere gentry " of England, whom King James never wooed or sought to woo or even bothered to notice, and who paid the cost of Court and City alike and resented alike the immunity of the Anglican Church and the immunity of the Spanish treasure-fleets now sailing safely home.

What were the radical gentry to do ? The puritan gentry, who had Parliament as their engine, could afford to act cautiously. Through Parliament they organized opposition and clamoured for relief : absolute relief through the abolition of the non-parliamentary taxes which they could not control—wardships and purveyance—and relative relief through the shifting of their burdens on to other shoulders. In particular, they sought to transfer the burden to the unrepresented members of their own class, the recusants. In other words, they demanded the enforcement of the recusancy fines ; and the recusants, being unrepresented, and therefore unable to resist by constitutional means, panicked and resorted to conspiracy. In Sherwood Forest in 1603, throughout the Midlands in 1605, the recusant gentry rose hopelessly against the government : Kirby Bellers in Leicestershire, Rushton in Northamptonshire, Hinlip in Worcestershire, Coughton in Warwickshire, Chastleton in Oxfordshire, Gayhurst in Buckinghamshire, Stoke Dry in Rutland—these were the country houses in which the plans first of the Bye Plot, then of the Gunpowder Plot, were laid—for though Guy Fawkes and a few others came from the North, survivors of Essex's party there, the majority of the conspirators came from the Midlands, which were the scene of their intended triumph and actual ruin. And when the conspirators themselves were ruined, what then ? The families they had intended but failed to rescue from decay irresistibly declined ; some of them sought to stay the process by yet harsher exploitation of their peasantry, and thereby provoked the Midland Peasant Rising of 1607 ; in the end they surrendered and a new generation of courtiers and citizens moved into their deserted manor-houses : Erasmus de la Fountaine, merchant of London, replaced the Markhams at Kirby Bellers ; Brian Ianson, citizen and draper of London, replaced the Catesbies at Ashby St. Ledgers; Walter Jones, clothier of Worcester, replaced the Catesbies at Chastleton ; Sir William Cokayne, alderman of London, replaced the Treshams at Rushton. The popish gentry of the Midlands had failed and failed finally ; it was left to the puritan gentry of the Midlands to try again.

They tried, and, unlike the recusants, they succeeded. Unlike the unrepresented papists, the puritan gentry, whose background and grievances were so similar but whose means

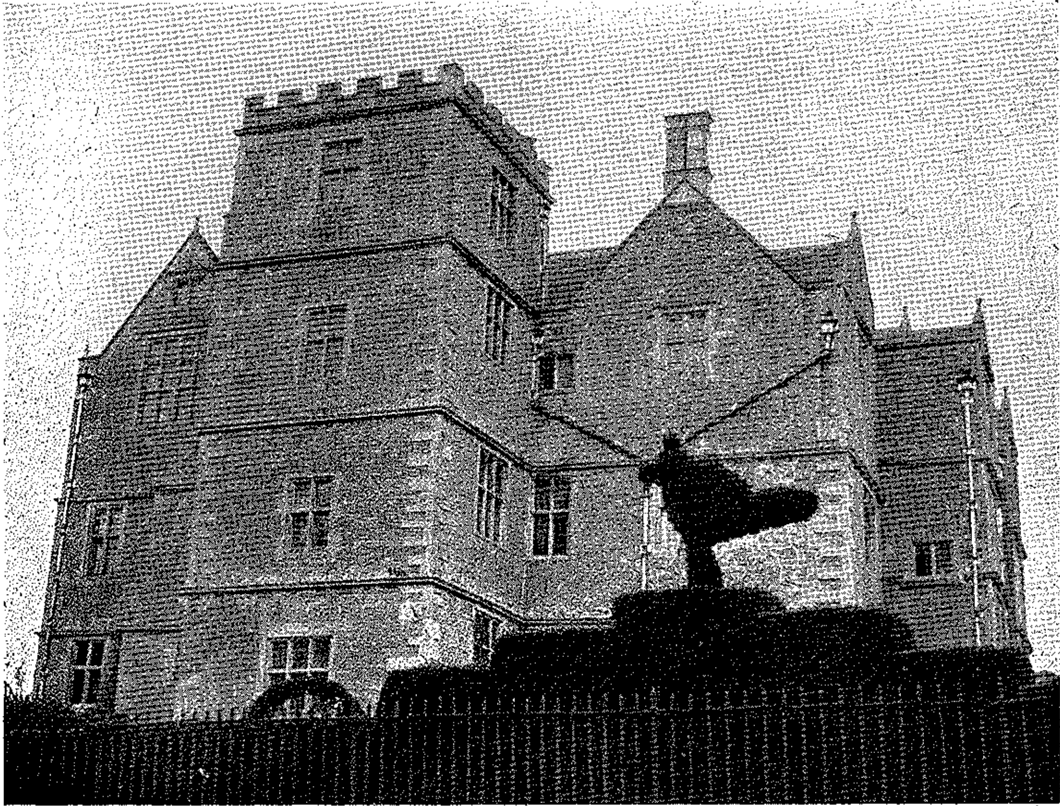
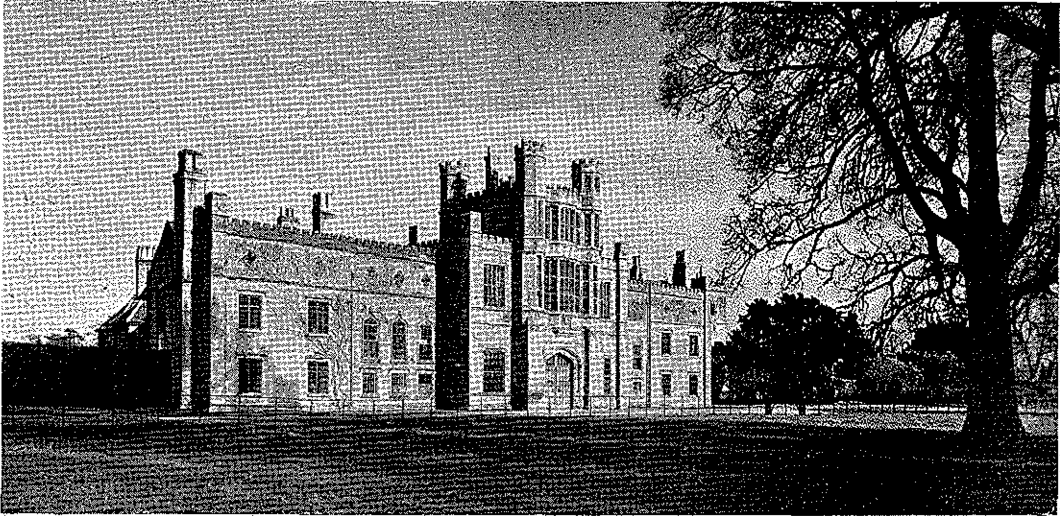


Photo : Reece Winstone

Chastleton, Oxfordshire. Sold by Robert Catesby to raise funds for the Gunpowder Plot

and language were so different, could afford to wait. They had Parliament as their instrument, and they waited till, by skilful exploitation of government mistakes, they had found supporters both in Court and City, to weaken the government and finance themselves. They struck, not blindly and desperately like their rivals, but cautiously, constitutionally, politically. When the first blows failed, others were planned ; and with the attack on Ship-Money—devised at Fawsley in Northamptonshire, first aimed at Broughton Castle in Oxfordshire, and finally delivered at Great Hampden in Buckinghamshire—they turned the tide in their favour. Ultimately it flowed too fast for their courtly allies, their City financiers ; but the exasperated gentry of England would not be halted by Court and City, who were in truth their real enemies. In the end they destroyed both, and set up in England, on their ruins, that brief, disastrous experiment: the republic of the gentry.

A brief, disastrous experiment ? Some historians would reject this description. Was not the Puritan Republic a stage in the progress of liberty and democracy, in the emancipation of the *bourgeoisie*, in the development of Parliament, in the adoption of religious toleration ? In my opinion it was no such thing. Beginning, so long as it was under the control of dissident but enlightened members of the Court and the City, as a progressive movement, it quickly became, once it had triumphed over its own leaders, a meaningless *jacquerie* of unconstructive radical gentry, who knew well enough what they hated, what they wanted to



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Rushton Hall, Northamptonshire ; a City alderman ousted the Treshams

destroy, but knew no more. Their slogans on the way to power, their fumbling actions while in power, all made that clear. Away with the Court, they cried, with its officials, its lawyers, its pensioners, its privileged monopolists ! Away with the peers—they hoped they would "live to see never a nobleman in England." Away with the City, the merchants who penetrated to their counties and drove them from their estates : "this nation," they complained, "was falling into the rickets, the head bigger than the body." Away with feudal taxes, wardships and purveyance ! Away with the Anglican Church, the Court Church, that sought to recover from them those lands and tithes with which they had refreshed themselves since the Dissolution of the Monasteries. Away with the Spanish Peace, King James's Peace, which had put an end to the glorious days of privateering, the days of "Queen Elizabeth of glorious memory," when a country-gentleman, in default of office, could "get a ship and judiciously manage her . . ." All these things, in their radical mood, they attacked and destroyed. They abolished the Monarchy and the House of Lords, purged the City, sold up the Church, and broke the peace with Spain ; but when it came to construction, what did they do, where did they aim ? Their own leader, Oliver Cromwell, himself a declining gentleman, adequately expressed their philosophy when he answered that question with the enigmatic but in his own case true words, "None climbs so high as he who knows not whither he is going."

So the experiment failed. All that the radical gentry of England gained by their revolution was, in the end, another court—the court of Cromwell, that fatuous expensive court which made even the court of King James seem cheap and cheeseparing—with its inevitable complement of other office-holders, other great financiers, heavier taxes. In 1660 an exhausted country welcomed back the old royal line. Just as the radical popish gentry, after their vain risings in 1603-5, had relapsed into popish quietism and become the most devoted royalists, so many of the radical puritan gentry, after their failure to establish a republican government, relapsed into protestant quietism. They became the royalist Anglican "young squires" of the Convention and Cavalier Parliaments, the squires of the October Club, the high-flying non-resisting Tories. It is from then, and then only, that the country houses of England have been, as they have seldom ceased to be, conservative.