The English Civil Wars
A Beginner’s Guide

Patrick Little
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In writing this book, I had two primary aims. The first was to produce a concise, accessible account of the conflicts collectively known as the English Civil Wars. The second was to try to give the reader some idea of what it was like to live through that traumatic episode. These aims explain the structure of what follows, which falls into two parts: a narrative of events between the outbreak of war in 1642 and the final defeat of the royalists at Worcester in 1651; and a thematic study of the military, religious, political, and social aspects of the civil war period.

This book has been informed by my own experiences in trying to bring the period to a wider audience. I am grateful to various groups and individuals for encouraging me to continue with what some colleagues may consider a quixotic venture. First, I am indebted to the late Professor Barry Coward, who involved me in teaching mature students at Birkbeck College, London, and then introduced me to The Cromwell Association. More recently, my role as chairman of the latter has allowed me to make contact with a wide range of groups catering for enthusiasts for the period, especially the Battlefields Trust, the Naseby Project, the John Hampden Society, the English Civil War Society, and the Sealed Knot. Parts of this book originated as a talk given to the ‘Marston Moor Live’ event staged in July 2011 and hosted by Jo and David Smakman at Marston Grange. I am very grateful to them, and to audiences drawn from a variety of organizations, for their helpful comments and encouragement. My thanks also to Lilian Ladle and her team for discussion of the excavations at Bestwall near Wareham in Dorset, and to Dr Kerry Houston for
information on John Oker. Dr David L. Smith, who kindly read a draft of the manuscript, provided valuable comments and criticisms. My wife, Susanne, also read the text, and drew my attention to various places where more explanation and clarification were badly needed.

Inevitably, I have relied heavily on the work of many historians, past and present. As this series does not include notes, I must beg indulgence from those whose work I have used and yet cannot acknowledge in the usual way. The guide to further reading at the end of the book includes those books and articles that I found most useful, and others that will help the reader to explore in greater depth for him- or herself.

Finally, I would like to thank my family for their support and encouragement; and on this occasion especially my sister, Clare, to whom this book is dedicated.
The outbreak of war

In the early afternoon of 23 October 1642, the armies of King Charles I and his parliament stood facing each other at Edgehill in Warwickshire. The king’s forces, around 12,000 strong, were positioned on the slopes of the Edgehill escarpment — a long 300-foot-high ridge that dominated the surrounding area. Parliament’s army, roughly the same size as that of the king, and led by the newly appointed ‘lord general’, the earl of Essex, had formed up in front of the village of Kineton. A wide-open area, known as the ‘great meadow’, separated the two armies.

Despite the rolling drums, the boldly displayed flags, and the shouted encouragements from officers to their men, the prevailing mood was one of doubt. The king’s men were keen to defeat the ‘rebels’ in one decisive encounter, and to march on London to dictate peace terms, but there had been disputes among the high command in the hours before the battle started. The king’s general of foot, the earl of Lindsey, had complained of being slighted. The decision to fight at Edgehill had been taken ‘without advising with him’, he complained, and the army’s deployment on the battlefield had been ‘in a form that he liked not’. Lindsey felt his honour was at stake, and resigned his command, returning to his own foot regiment in the front line.

Parliament’s commanders had problems of their own. They were well aware of the risks they were taking, leading an armed
revolt against their lawful king. Essex knew that he could follow his father, Elizabeth’s favourite, the 2nd earl, to the block. His concern for his position – and that of all his friends and comrades – may have been a factor in his decision to fight a defensive battle. He did not intend to become famous as the man who had attacked his sovereign. Junior officers shared this sense of revulsion at what was about to take place, and at the very start of the battle one of the parliamentarian cavalry officers, Sir Faithful Fortescue, led his troop from the parliamentarian lines to join the king’s side.

There was also some doubt as to the quality of the forces that had been raised hastily in the previous few weeks. As Oliver Cromwell, then a parliamentarian captain, remembered telling John Hampden after the battle: ‘Your troopers…are most of them old decayed servingmen and tapsters and such kind of fellows, and, said I, their troopers are gentlemen’s sons, younger sons and persons of quality; do you think that the spirits of such base and mean fellows will be ever able to encounter gentlemen that have honour and courage and resolution in them?’ Nor was Parliament’s army the only one to feel anxiety at the poor quality of its recruits. The decision to use a simplified battle order – one of the issues that had so offended the earl of Lindsey – was probably taken because of the lack of muskets in the ranks of the king’s army. Some of the royalists were armed with only agricultural implements and cudgels. It was painfully apparent to both sides that they were amateurs, who were being forced to fight if not against their wills, then against their better judgement. One can guess the questions that ran through the minds of the combatants as the drums sounded the advance. Could the peace-loving English really be fighting one another? Why had Parliament and the king not been able to settle their differences by peaceful means? Was the world being turned upside-down? In order to appreciate the causes of the conflict that broke out in the summer of 1642, we must look at the two most important areas of dispute: politics and religion.
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A political crisis?

England in the seventeenth century was a deeply conservative place, with a rigid social and political hierarchy. One reason for this was that the ‘political nation’ – the group of people who had some stake in how decisions were made – was relatively sizeable. In countries like France or Spain, which were large and diverse, containing numerous semi-autonomous regions with their own systems of law, government and taxation, royal authority was exercised by crown officials, or delegated to great noblemen subject to, or allied with, the ruling dynasty. Except in cities, where urban elites had some degree of self-government, the European ‘lower orders’ had no say at all in how they were governed, or taxed. England was different. There, the king’s power was not based on magnates or bureaucrats, but on a host of volunteers, working within a fairly uniform system that covered the whole country: these included the MPs and peers who gathered in Parliament to pass laws and vote in taxes; a similar group in the shires who served as justices of the peace (JPs), deputy lieutenants, or commissioners; and, on a parish level, the lesser men who were constables, jurors, or churchwardens. The theory that society was a pyramid, with the king at its apex, was reflected in reality. All power, whether legal, military, economic, or religious, derived ultimately from the crown, and most of England was subject to, and accepting of, this stable political system.

There was, however, an important caveat. For the government to run smoothly, all these local men had to be willing to serve, unpaid; and this willingness depended on whether they thought they had a chance of influencing policy, on whatever level, and whether the king had the best interests of the nation at heart. Under James I, the system had worked fairly well, and the king had been careful to remain flexible, to modify or reverse unpopular decisions, and to smooth ruffled feathers. Charles I was not made in his father’s image. Encouraged by those who saw the monarch as enjoying ‘divine right’ to rule – being answerable not
to his people but to God alone – Charles was extremely reluctant to compromise with his subjects. He was also a man who loved order and decorum, who restricted access to himself through a formal court, and who reacted very badly to being opposed. Serious opposition only provoked Charles to retaliate, seeking to undermine opponents, to court his enemies’ enemies – and that made him appear untrustworthy and duplicitous.

The crown may have been the ultimate source of authority, but it was not the only focus for political activity. At each
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level of the political hierarchy, whether at the quarter sessions held by JPs, or the gentry meeting at the mustering of the local trained bands, there was the opportunity for discussion, and dissent. This was most apparent in Parliament. Parliament, made up of the House of Lords (with lay peers and bishops) and the House of Commons (with representatives from the shires and the boroughs), was not organized along ‘party’ lines, although MPs could align themselves into factions on particular issues. Rather, each MP and peer was influenced by an array of personal, family, local, regional, and religious factors. Under Elizabeth I and James I, it had been possible for the crown to guide and channel debate and legislation, working through the government officials and courtiers who sat in both Houses. Parliament already had a highly developed sense of its own privileges, its rights and powers, that a sensible monarch was careful to respect; and, as the representative of the ‘political nation’, Parliament also reflected the concerns that crown policy raised throughout the country.

It was hardly surprising that an imperious, inflexible king like Charles I would find Parliament difficult to handle. Charles had first fallen out with his parliaments in the 1620s, when an unpopular foreign policy – which combined a refusal to support the Protestant states in Europe with ineffectual naval expeditions against France and Spain – led to Parliament withholding taxation. He had responded by raising money without consent. Many MPs had also opposed the king’s religious policies, which were seen by many as undermining the Protestant settlement, and even as ushering in Roman Catholicism. Charles’s reaction was not to address the complaints, but to silence the complainers. In 1629, he refused to call any more sessions of Parliament, and embarked instead on a period known as the ‘personal rule’. The next eleven years until 1640 thus saw a distancing of Charles and his subjects, made worse by his insistence on using his own powers to raise money, notably ‘ship money’, which maintained the navy. Levying taxes without Parliament’s agreement raised fears
of ‘arbitrary rule’ – the contemporary term for the sort of royal absolutism seen in Catholic Europe. Charles did not debate with those who refused to pay; he pursued them through the courts in a series of notorious test cases. With their rights trampled on,
and no prospect of presenting their grievances through Parliament, the volunteers who operated local government began to feel alienated.

Further problems were created by unrest in Scotland. The northern kingdom was united to England only through the monarch – when James VI of Scotland became James I of England in 1603 – and it had its own parliament, legal system, and church government. It was the last of these that would cause Charles I the most difficulty, as he tried to force the Presbyterian Scots to accept a prayer book similar to that in England in 1637. Rebellion against the king’s religious policies in Scotland in 1638 led to the raising of an English army to march north in 1639. Peace was negotiated before there was any bloodshed, but the main issue had not been solved.

Charles began preparing for another campaign against his unruly subjects in the north. A new army could not be funded without Parliament voting to provide the money, so in the spring of 1640 Charles had to call the Short Parliament – so-called because it was soon dissolved in disarray, as Charles realized that a grant of money would only be agreed if grievances were addressed. An attempt to fight a new war with the Scots in the summer brought defeat and humiliation. Without the means to pay off the Scots (who occupied northern England), Charles had no choice but to call the Long Parliament in November. For the next nine months, the king was forced to look on, impotent, as his opponents in the two Houses gleefully brought down his chief advisers and reversed many of his most prized policies.

Charles had given ground, but he had done so with bad grace. The key issue over the next year was that of trust. Charles was eager to turn the tables on his enemies, and became involved in ill-advised ventures in order to do so. In the spring of 1641, he sponsored a plot within the army to stage a coup in London against his enemies in Parliament; and, in the autumn, he was implicated in another plot to seize his chief opponents in Scotland.
Both schemes served to shake any faith his opponents may have had in his willingness to reform.

However, it was the outbreak of rebellion by the Catholics of Ireland in October 1641 that did Charles the most damage. Like Scotland, Ireland was in theory united to England only through the king, but the island had for a long time been treated as subordinate by its larger neighbour, and this attitude was strengthened by the century-old policy of removing Irish landowners and ‘planting’ their lands with settlers from England (and, from 1603, from Scotland as well). This inevitably led to tensions, made worse by the Irish adherence to the Roman Catholic Church, and a general economic crisis, which many blamed on the Dublin government. The rebellion in 1641 brought attacks on the settler population, and soon the stories of massacres of innocent Protestants by bloodthirsty Catholics reached England.

There is no evidence that Charles had anything to do with the Irish rebellion, but his opponents in Parliament were ready to link it to existing fears that the king secretly planned to introduce Catholicism and arbitrary government in England. Charles, under pressure, tried another coup. On 4 January 1642, he arrived at the Commons with soldiers, to arrest the ‘five members’ – the ringleaders of the opposition – John Pym, John Hampden, Denzil Holles, William Strode, and Sir Arthur Hesilrige, alongside a prominent peer, Lord Mandeville. The hostile reaction from Parliament and the citizens of London shocked the king, who withdrew to Hampton Court on 10 January, fearing for his safety.

In the following months, Parliament insisted on raising troops to defeat the rebellion in Ireland, but the king, who suspected these troops would be used against him in England, refused to give his assent to the necessary bill. In March, Parliament instead passed a militia ordinance (a measure that did not require the king’s agreement) and proceeded to appoint its own lords lieutenant and lords deputy in the English counties. The political unity, the accepted hierarchy, that had characterized English
society only a few months before, had started to unravel. Trust, on which the whole system depended, had begun to evaporate.

In June, Parliament’s ‘Nineteen Propositions’ presented the king with an ultimatum. If he agreed to give Parliament a role in the appointment of officers of state and the reform of religion; if regular Parliaments were guaranteed and the militia ordinance accepted as law; and if there were harsh measures against Catholics at home and abroad, then conflict could be averted. The king rejected these terms out of hand on 18 June, and both sides prepared for war.

One of the greatest conundrums of 1642 is how Charles I managed to attract sufficient support to field an army in the first place. At the opening of the Long Parliament, the king was almost completely isolated – especially once his closest advisers and officials had been imprisoned or forced to flee – and Parliament was more or less united in its opposition to his policies. Yet, by the summer of 1642, large areas of the country supported him, as did many peers and gentry, and a surprising number of his erstwhile critics had become his friends.

The sudden growth of a royalist party was in large part a result of the increasing confidence and ambition of the king’s opponents at Westminster. Not content with reversing the worst of Charles’s policies and removing his chief advisers, MPs and peers had sought to prune royal power still further and, above all, to press for religious changes that would have made the old church unrecognizable. The reaction could be seen from the summer of 1641, when various MPs objected to what was happening, and especially in the spring of 1642, when Parliament overreached itself by trying to raise troops without royal authority, through the militia ordinance. The tone, as well as the contents, of the Nineteen Propositions justified such concerns. Just as Parliament proclaimed that its rebellion was in the true interests of king and kingdom, so the thousand royalists who joined Charles when he raised his standard at Nottingham in August 1642 saw themselves
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as defending the monarchy against those who wanted to change England for the worse. And there were many others who agreed with them. As a result, on 23 October, Charles was able to muster a substantial army on the slopes of Edgehill.

**A war of religion?**

When considering the political causes of the civil wars, it was necessary to go back fifteen years or so, to the beginning of the reign of Charles I. The religious causes originated over a hundred years earlier, during the reign of Charles’s great-great-uncle, Henry VIII. The Reformation of the 1530s had created a Church
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of England that sat awkwardly between the reformed churches of the continent and the Catholic Church of Rome. In time, this Anglican *via media* (or middle way) came to be seen as a great boon, allowing the English church to avoid the excesses of its rivals, but its hybrid form had many contradictions. For example, the theology of the new church was similar to that of John Calvin’s reformed church in Geneva, but in the Book of Common Prayer it retained a liturgy that was basically Roman Catholic, and the church continued to be governed by the old system, presided over by bishops. As a result, there were some within the church who hoped for further development, especially the so-called ‘puritans’, who sought to bring it closer to the reformed churches of Europe and were suspicious of ceremonies and vestments that smacked too much of Rome. In the early seventeenth century, few puritans refused to attend their parish churches – they were content to push for reform from within, and in the meantime to conduct their own prayer meetings and Bible studies at home, while seeking out approved preachers when they could. As Joseph Bentham, vicar of Boughton in Northamptonshire, put it, the puritans were merely ‘practising Protestants; such men who daily read the scriptures, pray with their families, teach them the way to heaven’.

This broad, ‘national church’, accepted by most of the people and with common forms of worship and doctrine, was fostered by James I, but it was destabilized by Charles I, who promoted a group of clergy that became known as the ‘Laudians’. These Laudians were influenced by the writings of the Dutch theologian Arminius, who questioned the church’s Calvinist theology and put much more emphasis on the sacraments (Baptism and Holy Communion) than on preaching as the means to receive Grace from God. Initially championed by Richard Neile, bishop of Durham in the 1620s, the Laudians took control of the church with the appointment of William Laud as archbishop of Canterbury in 1633. With their emphasis on church services
The words used to describe different religious groups and persuasions are also problematic. ‘Puritan’ was a term of abuse for those who sought to ‘purify’ the church in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries – the supporters of such reforms called themselves ‘the godly’ or ‘the saints’. The term ‘Laudian’ for those who backed the high church reforms associated with Archbishop Laud is not ideal either, as it ignores those, such as Bishop Neile of Durham, who fostered similar ideas in the decades before Laud became all powerful. Nor is the word ‘Anglican’ for mainstream members of the Church of England very useful, as it only entered common parlance after the Restoration. With all these terms, there is also the underlying problem of lumping together men and women of rather different views into groups that suggest a greater coherence than they actually had – a false notion of religious ‘parties’ or even fixed denominations. Having said that, these names are familiar, and require little further explanation; they also reflect a view at the time, that such groups were organized and coherent, and these perceptions were important in shaping the religious disputes of the period. The alternatives are not obvious, and so the traditional terms have been used, with some reluctance, in this book.

(using the set forms of the Book of Common Prayer) and especially Holy Communion, the Laudians were determined to make churches holy places rather than rooms for preaching. This desire to re-establish ‘the beauty of holiness’ led to the introduction of artwork into churches and cathedrals, choirs and organs, the use of elaborate ceremonies, and, above all, a renewed reverence to the communion table, now termed an ‘altar’, which was placed at the far east end of the church, rather than in the midst of the congregation.

Although Laudianism gained some support from their congregations, who welcomed the greater sense of reverence, and the chance to repair and beautify neglected churches, it also provoked the puritan element within the church, who could not tolerate what they saw as a blatant attempt to bring the Church of England closer to Rome. Written attacks on Laud and his
clergy by Henry Burton, John Bastwick, William Prynne, and others led to harsh measures against them through the civil and church courts, while the refusal of others to comply with strictures brought the removal of puritan ministers and the prosecution of lay offenders in the dioceses.

When the Caroline regime began to fall apart (thanks in large part to the rebellion of the Presbyterian Scots) and Parliament was recalled in 1640, the political nation was more or less united in its opposition to Laudianism, with future royalists also calling for the reform of the church. When the puritan MP Harbottle Grimston denounced Laud as ‘the sty of all pestilential filth’, and compared him to ‘a busy angry wasp, his sting is in the tail of everything’, his views would have been echoed by many conformist Anglicans. Retribution was swift. Laud was imprisoned, along with the most notorious of his bishops, and innovations in religion were reversed; the victims of the Laudians, seen as martyrs, were compensated; and by the summer of 1641 it seemed that a return to the Jacobean consensus was the most likely outcome. Over the next twelve months, however, such hopes faded. The puritans, not content with returning to the status quo, now took the opportunity to push further, demanding the removal of bishops, the abolition of the Prayer Book, and a church settlement more like that of Geneva than Canterbury.

The prospect of cleansing the church and returning to the good old days of Elizabeth and James had been welcomed by many church-goers, who found the Laudian innovations unpalatable; but the ‘root and branch’ reforms demanded by the radicals during 1641 went much too far for the average Anglican. During the winter of 1641–2, there was a series of petitions from English counties calling for the church to be protected against the puritans. The Cheshire petition, subscribed by 9,000 people, emphasized the strength of feeling in the county for ‘our pious, laudable and ancient form of divine service’ according to the Book of Common Prayer, adding that there was ‘scarce any family or person that can read, but are furnished with the Books of
Common Prayer; in the conscionable use whereof many Christian hearts have found unspeakable joy and comfort’.

This backlash was of tremendous importance in providing the king with the support that he needed to resist Parliament by force in 1642. The leaching of support from Parliament in turn encouraged Charles’s critics to dig in. The king’s hostility to the Presbyterian Scots, the outbreak of rebellion by the Irish Catholics in October 1641, and the increasing importance of the Catholic queen, Henrietta Maria, in Charles’s counsels further
encouraged the parliamentarians in their distrust of the king, and made open rebellion seem the only option. As Parliament told the Scottish government in early September, their ‘chiefest aim’ was ‘the truth and purity of the reformed religion, not only against popery but against all other superstitious sects and innovations whatsoever’.

**England divided**

In simple terms, the outbreak of the English Civil War was caused by a short-term political crisis, and a long-term religious problem of gradually increasing intensity. It was only when the two coincided – largely thanks to the failings of Charles I as king – that the conditions for civil war were created. It should be reiterated that, for both Charles’s supporters and his critics, civil war was not a welcome choice. There were a few ‘fiery spirits’ on both sides who thought that a single decisive battle would accomplish what months of arguing had not; but for the majority of the country, from the leading politicians and generals to the ordinary townspeople and peasants, civil war was a complete failure, a breakdown in the stable, consensual society that was highly valued, not least as the Thirty Years War raging across Germany provided a terrible example of what could happen when a country fell victim to prolonged warfare. This, in part, explains why the early course of the war was so hesitant, with repeated attempts to make peace, and many doing their best to remain neutral.

In the days before Edgehill, the royalist Sir Edmund Verney said that ‘I do not like the quarrel, and do heartily wish that the king would yield and consent to what they desire; so that my conscience is only concerned in honour and gratitude to follow my master’. A few months later, Verney’s words were to be echoed by the parliamentarian general Sir William Waller, when he wrote, ‘that great God, which is the searcher of my heart,
knows with what a sad sense I go upon this service, and with what a perfect hatred I detest this war without an enemy’. It is to this sad conflict that we now turn.

**ROUNDHEADS AND CAVALIERS?**

The traditional view of the civil wars is not much different from that caricatured in W.C. Sellar and R.J. Yeatman’s *1066 and All That*: ‘Charles I was a Cavalier King and therefore had a small pointed beard, long flowing curls, a large, flat, flowing hat, and gay attire. The Roundheads, on the other hand, were clean-shaven and wore tall, conical hats, white ties, and sombre garments. Under these circumstances, a Civil War was inevitable.’

This is all wrong. First, while a few extreme puritans objected to sumptuous clothes as nothing but vanity, in general the clothing worn by either side in the civil wars was almost identical – as can be seen in the flamboyant portraits of many of the leading parliamentarian politicians and soldiers. Second, ‘Cavalier’ – a term meaning horseman – was almost as derogatory as ‘Roundhead’ – derived from the custom of London apprentices having closely cropped heads. Finally, the popular image of the dashing Cavalier as opposed to the dour Roundhead reinforces a stereotype of the civil war as some kind of class conflict that is most unhelpful when exploring the complexities of the period. ‘Royalist’ and ‘parliamentarian’, straightforward and self-explanatory contemporary terms, are surely preferable.