

BOOK REVIEW

Mark Stoyle. *A Murderous Midsummer: The Western Rising of 1549*

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Historians, despite our best efforts, often fall victim to teleology. Knowing the outcome of an event leads to the temptation to see not just the roots of its success or its failure long before any of the participants would, but also a kind of conclusive inevitability. It is a rare book that can take a familiar incident and make it seem both urgent and uncertain in outcome. Mark Stoyle's intricately researched *A Murderous Midsummer* accomplishes this to brilliant effect. Here, the event is the Western Uprising of 1549, otherwise known as the Prayer Book Rebellion or, to its contemporaries, the "commocion time" of the restless summer when it seemed as if all of southern England was on the verge of mutiny. Though historians have often studied these events, *A Murderous Midsummer* manages to hold the reader in suspense, moving with astonishing detail through the week-by-week, even day-by-day, story of this rebellion. While explained clearly enough for the nonspecialist reader, its conclusions make important interventions in our understanding of the mid-Tudor polity. Throughout the book, the overwhelming impression is just how close English history came to taking a very different tack.

A Murderous Midsummer begins with an overview of the South West, and the context provided sets up the events to come in an evocative, pacey fashion. The book really hits its stride, however, in part two, which in four chapters takes us through the events of June, July, and August 1549, when thousands of rebels (a contentious term, Stoyle argues) began to move against the centralizing, reformist policies of Edward VI's government, as led by the duke of Somerset. Stoyle argues that the resistance in the West was based on twinned anger at English cultural imperialism and evangelical Protestant reformation. He claims this uprising was thus unlike the uprisings in the East, most notably Kett's Rebellion, insofar as it was not "primarily a social conflict" (294). The interconnection of these disruptions waits until Part III, where Stoyle moves to the gruesome fates of the failed rebellions' leaders. Here, Kett and the Western captains find themselves put on trial at the same time in a deliberate attempt by the earl of Warwick's faction to solidify power: as he puts it, "to further the ruling junta's political ends" (276). The unfolding of the Western Uprising, Stoyle argues, must be seen on its own terms.

Stoyle justifies this claim with a painstaking level of research and a bone-deep familiarity with both scene and players. In *A Murderous Midsummer* we see the unspooling of a rebellion in real time, with moments of contingency; of personality (cautious Lord John Russell, the fiery Carews, and—perhaps this reader's favorite—fearless Frances Duffield, who slaps the mayor of Exeter across the face when hearing of her father's imprisonment); of panic. Archival records taken at face value by later historians make sense only in this kind of

context, with letters arriving to address particular moments that we have previously misunderstood (186). Stoye carefully parses loyalties, motives, timelines, even revealing names of major players heretofore unidentified. The book is at its most convincing in these moments, with a sensitivity to the sources that provides extraordinary perspective on events we thought we knew.

While Stoye's eight "new insights" in the conclusion are interesting, the most compelling arguments bracket these points in a brilliant conceptual framework (292–6). Here, Stoye argues that the Western rebellion had evolved from an affair led by important local figures to one commanded by men with clear ties to national political factions. It is a striking blend of the types of rebellions described in two of the most important books on Tudor uprisings (and, I would argue, Tudor politics) in the past fifteen years: Andy Wood's *The 1549 Rebellions and the Making of Early Modern England* (2007) and Krista Kesselring's *The Northern Rebellion of 1569: Faith, Politics and Protest in Elizabethan England* (2007). Like the former, it had at its core men and women deeply invested in and knowledgeable of the politics of the day, using familiar rhetoric and strategies to attempt a redress of hated policy; this is particularly well-argued in chapter 3. Like the latter, though, it was intimately involved with national and even international politics, with efforts to replace the power on the throne with one more sympathetic to their aims—though here through a regent Mary Tudor rather than a regnant Mary Stuart. What rings throughout this story, and especially in chapters 4, 5, and 8, is Stoye's argument about how close this all came to succeeding.

A Murderous Midsummer does leave the reader with some questions. Most critically, how did the rebels know how to rebel? The political quiescence of the late medieval West Country that Stoye describes—"about matters of government, it seems fair to suggest, most people, most of the time, thought relatively little" (20)—is not fully persuasive. Though Stoye argues well that religion incited new action, Cornwall (and to a lesser extent Devon) had been deeply involved in earlier Tudor rebellions, as mentioned briefly later in the chapter (33–6). The rational, logical actions of the rebel leaders in the church tower of Sampford Courtenay or in the Cornish stronghold of Bodmin also speak to the kind of broad understanding of popular political tactics that Wood and others have so powerfully described. As Stoye himself puts it, the rebels "effectively hijacked the traditional machinery of local government," issuing warrants and raising militias (132). These clearly were a political, even restive, people. Even if we accept Stoye's argument that this rebellion was not a social conflict, it was certainly one informed by a fine-grained understanding of social relations and capacities. Stoye powerfully claims that the Reformation lit a new fire in the South West, but more attention both to the dynamics and longer continuities of popular political agency would only strengthen the text.

But the majority of questions raised by this excellent book are provocative in the most intellectually stimulating, even irresistible, ways. If the rebels had fought differently at Fenny Bridges, would the rebellion have turned into a civil war? Would the Western Uprising have successfully reversed religious policy? Could the tactical maneuvers of Wriothesley have made Mary, not Warwick, the next Protector? Such counterfactuals are an antidote to teleology. A good historian knows how to balance contingency and structure, narrative and outcome. A great one knows how to use this balance to transform the familiar into the unpredictable. In *A Murderous Midsummer*, Mark Stoye does precisely that.