

England's forgotten uprising

Anthony Frewin

THE STORY of Sir William Courtenay's populist rural uprising in Kent in the 1830s has largely been ignored by historians. This is especially remarkable as it was the last *armed* uprising in England and left in its wake twenty dead and many more injured. The battle between the greatly outnumbered farm labourers under Sir William's 'command' and soldiers of the 45th Regiment of Foot has been described as 'perhaps the most desperate on English soil since 1795.'¹

Yes, remarkable. For instance, in a fact-rich 384-page study of the 1830s rural 'Swing' disturbances published in 1969,² the writers manage to avoid mentioning Courtenay altogether; and if an account of him is not to be found there, where is it to be found?

One hundred years earlier Charles Dickens had written briefly about Sir William as a 'dangerous maniac' in the periodical he then edited³ and thirty years before that Dickens' literary model and mentor, William Harrison Ainsworth, had given Sir William a brief cameo appearance in his novel *Rookwood*.⁴

There were a couple of pages on Courtenay in one of Charles G Harper's chatty road books in 1895⁵ and then a gap of forty years before a chapter on him appeared in a volume on English 'messiahs' in the 1930s.⁶ Then silence

¹ E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Penguin Books, 1991), p. 881.

² E. J. Hobsbawm and George Rudé, *Captain Swing* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1968).

³ *All the Year Round* (London), xvii (1867), pp. 441-6.

⁴ London: Richard Bentley, 1834 (with later revisions). *Rookwood* is chiefly remembered today, if remembered at all, for Dick Turpin's ride to York, an invention of Ainsworth's, an author arguably more popular in his day than Dickens would be in his.

⁵ *The Dover Road: Annals of an Ancient Turnpike* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1895).
It was this work that first alerted P G Rogers to the story. See further below.

⁶ Ronald Matthews, *English Messiahs: Studies of Six English Religious Pretenders, 1656-1927* (London: Methuen & Co, 1936), Chapter IV, 'John Nichols Tom, "The Peasants' Saviour" (1799-1838)', pp. 127-59.

until P G Rogers published his account of Sir William in 1961.⁷ But Rogers, despite his considerable merits as a writer, was not an historian, and he presented his subject as some Victorian oddity who managed to *enthrall* witless farm hands by religious and political legerdemain.⁸ However, in 1969 an historian did come along, E. P. Thompson, but he devoted only a few paragraphs to Sir William though he does place him within the context of nineteenth century English rural dissent.⁹ There are a few paragraphs, too, by other historians, in 1978¹⁰ and 1979,¹¹ but paragraphs only.

A standard reference on *Popular Disturbances in England 1700-1870*¹² relegates Sir William to a mere *footnote* while the *Biographical Dictionary of Modern British Radicals*¹³ knows him not at all.

Finally, in 1990, more than a century and a half after the events, an historian worthy of the subject came along and wrote what will probably stand as the last word on the affair.¹⁴ This was Barry Reay of the University of Auckland (yes, a New Zealander). If Rogers concentrated on Sir William to the exclusion of the labourers, Reay reversed the approach. While more than adequately examining Courtenay he shows that the labourers were not the uninformed and feckless crowd that Rogers presented, and that there were many existing factors that contributed to his messianic message finding such ready acceptance.

But if the mainstream of history has passed over Sir William it is not so in the Kentish villages where he lived and died. For many years after his death

⁷ P. G. Rogers, *Battle in Bossenden Wood: The Strange Story of Sir William Courtenay* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961)

⁸ A more serious criticism is that Rogers frequently writes of things he cannot possibly know. That is, supposition is presented as fact. Further, his constant denigration of Sir William's followers is inaccurate and irritating. He writes continually of, for example, 'slow working minds' and 'simple Kentish yokels' (a tautology and a double whammy!).

⁹ Thompson, see note 1, pp. 880-81.

¹⁰ George Rudé, *Protest and Punishment: The Story of the Social and Political Protesters Transported to Australia, 1788-1868* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), pp. 120-22.

¹¹ J. F. C. Harrison, *The Second Coming: Popular Millenarianism, 1780-1850* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), pp. 213-15.

¹² John Stevenson, (London: Longman, 1979), p. 244.

¹³ J. O. Baylen and N. J. Gossman (eds), (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1979 and 1984). Two volumes.

¹⁴ Barry Reay. *The Last Rising of the Agricultural Labourers: Rural Life and Protest in Nineteenth-Century England*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990). Reprinted (London: Breviary Stuff, 2010).

coloured and tinsel-bedecked pictures of him were current. Today there are Courtenay Cottages, a Courtenay Farm, a Courtenay Road, and even a used car lot, Courtenay Cars. There are souvenirs and mementoes of him in private hands. A local pub displays contemporary engravings of the affair. Mementoes are exhibited in a country house. But more than that, his memory is kept alive by the villagers themselves, amongst whom are many actual descendents of Sir William's followers.

Lest the reader think the 'fray' (as it was known locally) was some provincial affair without consequence, it can be noted that the national press carried full accounts. Further, there were many heated exchanges in the House of Commons regarding the uprising, including calls for the resignation of the Home Secretary in Lord Melbourne's Whig administration, Lord John Russell; and, indeed, Select Committees examined the matter and reports were published.

Why History has overlooked Sir William is one question. There are many others and not least of these is this: who *really* was Sir William Percy Honeywood Courtenay if he was not who he claimed to be? Who indeed? And *why*?

He was in actuality John Nichols Tom (born 1799), a wine merchant and maltster from Truro in Cornwall, and while successful in these pursuits he suffered from 'melancholia' and 'mania' and received treatment (what these contemporary terms actually mean is hard to define), though there is no history recorded of anything delusional as was witnessed in Kent. In 1832 he sailed from Truro to Liverpool with a cargo of malt. His family heard nothing more of him for the next couple of years until he was located in Maidstone Gaol after having been found guilty of perjury.

As to the why . . .

POSTSCRIPT: And still it continues! Since writing the above I came across *A Radical History of Britain* by Edward Vallance (London: Abacus, 2010) who is described as a Reader in Early Modern History at Roehampton University, no less. Some 639 pages and, you've guessed, nary a mention of Courtenay.