

Inheritance Of Conflict: Did America's Civil War Originate In England'S?

Julian Brazier

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Brazier, Julian (1999) "Inheritance Of Conflict: Did America's Civil War Originate In England'S?," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 2 .

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol1/iss2/35>

Review

INHERITANCE OF CONFLICT

Did America's Civil War originate in England's?

Brazier, Julian

Fall 1999

Phillips, Kevin *The Cousins' Wars: Religion, Politics, & the Triumph of Anglo-America*. Basic Books, ISBN 465013694

In **The Cousins' Wars**, Kevin Phillips gives a remarkable account of the evolution of today's dominant power bloc and culture -- the Anglo-American one, whose language is the international tongue of commerce, computers, and air travel, and whose stronger partner, America, dominates the world, militarily and economically. The book focuses on the three principal conflicts within that culture which, he argues, largely shaped it: the English and U.S. Civil Wars and the American Revolution.

Phillips shows how "recurrent threads" connect the three conflicts: alignments of wartime loyalty that at least partly repeated themselves, together with the effect of each outcome in chastening aristocracy, monarchy, or High Church religion and in spurring economic modernization and westward or commercial expansion." The author illustrates the sheer complexity of the divided loyalties in the English-speaking world in each conflict and outlines the little-known role of Americans on both sides of the English Civil War. He even reveals that this reviewer's own local paper, the *Kentish Gazette* (still publishing today under the same name), opposed military action against the colonists in the American Revolution.

The impact of Britain on the U.S. Civil War, and, in turn, its impact on Britain and her New World possessions (Canada and the West Indies) are carefully described. Throughout, Phillips identifies two communities in Britain: Eastern/Dutch/Puritan versus Northern and Western/Episcopalian/Catholic and illustrates their sister cultures in New England and the South. (The latter two were in temporary alliance in the American Revolution, but the Eastern/Puritan English were still sympathetic to their Yankee cousins.)

Rejecting the fashion for determinism, Phillips points out that any of the three wars easily could have gone the other way. He even hints that the British military commander, General Howe (who, ironically, doubled as a Member of Parliament elected on an anti-war platform), may have deliberately thrown decisive victory away by failing to support Burgoyne's Saratoga campaign. Lincoln is recognized for his brilliance in forging an unlikely coalition: he brought New England Yankees together with groups such as the Catholic Irish and the Germans whom they otherwise regarded as enemies.

Phillips is quite clear as to whom he believes deserved to win in each case: "On the one side, in each war, were commerce, industry . . . reformist evangelical religion, and the proselytizing middle class. On the other side was landed agriculture, with its feudal remnants and hierarchical religion and its greater ratios of horsemen, soldiers, and cavaliers. At a certain point in each nation's history, it was a necessity . . . for the former to push aside the latter."

While revealing his own view, he tries hard to be fair regarding the second and third of the three wars. For example, he reminds us of the extent to which the British defended American Indian rights against the colonists' aggression; he outlines the tariff demands of the North, which so threatened a Southern economy reliant on free trade; and he exposes the hypocrisy of the North in abandoning the blacks as soon as victory and Reconstruction had delivered Yankee commercial objectives.

Phillips is a political writer. This remarkable historical work is a bold attempt to underpin his individualistic Whig Protestant philosophy by tracing its successes through the generations. For those committed to an older, more traditional, organic conservatism, it cries out for an historical reply from a "Tory" historian of equal standing. Phillips's striving for balance in the latter two "Cousins' Wars" ultimately is undermined by his unbalanced analysis of the English Civil War, grounded in a fleeting caricature of the previous century, the century of the Reformation. Indeed, he paints the English Reformation as a straightforward matter of economic progress.

Yet, in his landmark novels, the (future) British Prime Minister, Benjamin Disr'li, a lapsed Anglican of Jewish origin, raised the battle cry for social and political reform in the Victorian Era by calling for a return to the institutions of pre-Reformation England. He paints it as a land of astonishing opportunity, in

which a shepherd's son had risen to be pope and where social provision, from relief of poverty to education, was provided by the Church. He denounces Henry VIII's new *arriviste* upper middle class for seizing assets (including closing all the hospitals in London) and permanently kicking away the very ladders they had climbed, fossilizing the English class structure for centuries.

Phillips makes no mention of the popular risings (often unarmed) against these changes in the north and west of England. Nor is there a word about the hideous massacres of the protesters ordered by Henry VIII, sometimes using German mercenaries. He records with disapproval, however, the horrible moral decay into which these areas had descended two generations later. For Phillips, the rallying in these areas of such downtrodden people to a broad-minded king -- whom they perceived as standing against the tyranny of the new masters and their Dutch friends -- is just a matter of ignorance and graft. This alternate viewpoint is mentioned only indirectly, in a brief reference to a Confederate philosopher, George Fitzhugh, who harked back to the writings of Royalist Sir Robert Filmer.

The Cousins' War lists a catalogue of British Victorian reforms as triumphs of "British Whig and Liberal politics," yet many of the items listed, from Catholic Emancipation to reform of public health and urban conditions, were wholly or mainly Tory/Conservative measures, several of them introduced by Disr'li!

For Phillips human motivation is about ideology (religious and secular) and economics. He has little use for the organic institutions, arguably the best in the world, developed in Saxon and Medieval England. The Saxon Moots and Witan -- parent of Parliament and Congress -- are discussed just once. The early Norman kings combined Norman officers with the redoubtable Saxon Fyrd (militia), giving victories at Tinchebray, Crecy, and Agincourt; modernized by Elizabeth I in 1576, they begat the New World colonial militias and thence the Minutemen (and today's National Guard). **The Cousins' Wars** does not mention the pivotal role of these institutions at all.

Nor does it ask why individual Confederate soldiers -- most of them neither slave-owners nor experts on tariffs -- fought so unbelievably courageously for the South; or what role these militias played in the motivation of one of the best citizen armies of all time, which almost defeated a major industrial power. In his leap from the third "Cousins' War" to today, Phillips does not pause to ask what

part the Crown, which he obviously despises, played in stiffening British morale and in attracting gallant volunteers from around the Empire. Churchill believed that the Crown played a vital part in the lonely British stand against Hitler.

Only a writer for whom political theory heroically transcends institutional detail could say "the Restoration Parliament had wiped away Cromwell's electoral reforms and banned further democratization," albeit a decent interval after admitting that Cromwell had abolished Parliament and ruled as a dictator.

This is a heavyweight work; in its own terms, a landmark. Somewhere, there must be a Tory historian to give it the reply it deserves.

A former Oxford scholar and Territorial Army officer, Julian Brazier is Member of Parliament for Canterbury.