



Captain Pouch

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Introduction

Captain Pouch was the alias of John Reynolds (d. 1607), a leader of an English anti-enclosure uprising that began in Northamptonshire in 1607 and spread elsewhere in the region. Reynolds claimed to have been sent and directed by God, and he carried a large pouch which he claimed contained material to defend his followers against whatever threats might emerge. Apocalyptic-related ideas were echoed elsewhere, offering insights into the views associated with Reynolds. A petition by land workers in Warwickshire was sent to other rebels, who alluded to the biblical book of Isaiah to help explain the causes of exploitation and warn of the impending catastrophe of harvest failure.

John Reynolds and the Midlands Rising (1607)

Very little is known about John Reynolds (Walter 2008). He seems to have been a pedlar or tinker who emerged as a leader in the popular, disciplined Midland rising in late spring 1607. The protest was against the enclosure of common lands in Northamptonshire and quickly spread to Warwickshire and Leicestershire. Protesters attacked hedges and filled ditches as a reminder that they had been removed from the land their ancestors tilled since "ancient time." Reynolds went by the alias 'Captain Pouch' because he wore a large leather pouch said to hold "sufficient matter" to defend his followers against allcomers. However, this was later dismissed unsympathetically as mouldy cheese. As was typical of rural uprisings, Reynolds argued that he was acting with the authority of the king. It also seems that Reynolds claimed some kind of prophetic authority in that he was "sent of God...directed by the Lord of Heaven." The protest was quickly suppressed, and Reynolds was captured and executed, though he may have been involved in negotiations. (For the main narrative of Reynolds and the uprising cited here, see Stow and Howes 1615, 888–89).

The protesters seem to have self-identified as "levellers" and kept themselves busy "digging" (Nichols 1807, 83), labels later associated with certain radicals of the English Revolution. A petition during the uprising of "The Diggers of Warwickshire to all other Diggers" offers some insight into the interests and ideas associated with Reynolds and the protesters. The authors wrote with reference to their work as "poore Delvers & Day labourers." They also invoked the king and God and complained about enclosures, depopulation, destruction of towns, and "these incroaching Tirants" who "grinde our flesh" on the

“whetstone of poverty” for their private gain at the expense of the common good (Halliwell 1846, 140–41). The rebels were then aware of issues of class exploitation and the economic causes of their plight, as were the authorities of Crown and Church, and this was echoed by Shakespeare in *Coriolanus* (for discussion, see Hindle 2008; cf. Patterson 1989, 135–46; Fitter 2017).

The rebels articulated their predicament with reference to prophetic literature in “The Diggers of Warwickshire to all other Diggers.” Steve Hindle (2008, 27, 34, 40) points out that here the rebels understood their situation (as did others) through allusion to the book of Isaiah, noting Isaiah 3:15 (“What mean ye that ye beat my people to pieces and grind the faces of the poor?”) and 5:8 (“Woe unto them that join house to house, that lay field to field, till there be no place, that they may be placed alone in the midst of the earth!”). To this we can add another (Isaiah 4:2) as the rebels anxiously explained the potential catastrophe of a failed harvest when they claimed, “but if it should please God to withdraw his blessing in not prospering the fruites of the earth but one yeare” (cf. Isaiah 4:2: “...the branch of the LORD be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the earth shall be excellent and comely for them that are escaped of Israel”).

The uprising, and therefore the accompanying apocalyptic tendencies, are typically located in the social and economic changes taking place in the Midlands and, in varying ways, across England. The enclosure of land for pasture by large landowners and a reduced reliance on human labour meant lower wages as the cost of living rose. Food pressures (not least from a growing capital) placed greater demands on land use and for enclosures. The country was facing a period of inflation and population growth, which contributed to a situation that, for many, involved a dearth of food, impoverishment, displacement, and significant changes in traditional ways of life. This general backdrop helps us understand the emergence of the concerns associated with a prophetic leader like Reynolds and a movement elsewhere aware of imminent catastrophe. For a summary of the socio-economic setting that helps understand the upheavals of the era and what they might have meant for someone like Reynolds, see Healey 2023, 27–36.

Further Discussion

The primary source material on Reynolds and the Midlands uprising is from John Howes and his updated version (1615) of John Stow’s *Chronicles* (Stow and Howes 1615, 888–89; see also, e.g., Bickley 1947). For the petition of “The Diggers of Warwickshire to all other Diggers,” see British Library, Harley MS 787, f. 9v, reprinted in Halliwell 1846, 140–41.

For the standard biographical treatment of Reynolds, see Walter 2008. For further scholarly discussion of Reynolds and the Midlands uprising, see (for instance): Gay 1904; Martin 1983, 161–215; Manning 1988, 229–46; Walter 2006, 20–22, 104, 106, 193, 199, 208, 215; Hindle 2008; McDonagh 2018, 62–90; Healey 2023, 29–36.

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