**Rebellion Repressed:**

**The recapture of Plymouth by loyalist forces in 1549**

The story of what happened in Plymouth during the Western Rising of 1549 - the so-called ‘Prayer Book Rebellion’ - has long been cloaked in shadow. The single contemporary narrative of the rebellion upon which all subsequent histories are primarily based - that of Exeter’s mid-Tudor chronicler, John Hooker - does not once mention affairs in Plymouth.[[1]](#endnote-1) As a result, scholars have been forced to rely on isolated scraps of evidence when attempting to reconstruct the course of events in the south Devon port during the tragic summer of 1549: a summer which saw thousands of West Country folk rise up in arms against the radical religious policies of Edward VI’s government, only to suffer bloody defeat at the hands of a royal army commanded by John, Lord Russell, the Lord Privy Seal.

Chief among these evidentiary fragments is a passage which appears in a near-contemporary chronicle of events preserved in a manuscript volume in the town archives known as ‘the Black Book of Plymouth’. This passage was reproduced by the local antiquary R.N. Worth in his *History of Plymouth* in 1890, and then again in his *Calendar of the Plymouth Municipal Records* three years later, and runs as follows:

‘In this yere was a greatte insurreccyon throughoute all the Royaulme of England, and esspecyally in the counties of Devon & Cornewalle, in which tyme the Cytie of Excestre & the Castell of Plymmothe were valyently defended & kepte from the Rebelles, untyll the comying of the Lord Russell … [with] a great armye’.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Drawing upon this passage - and upon other fragments of information which he had unearthed in the town records and in Richard Carew’s *Survey of Cornwall* (1603) - Worth was able to deduce, first, that Plymouth had been attacked by the protestors in 1549 and, second, that both the old castle, just to the south of town, and St Nicholas Island, in Plymouth Sound, had been defended against them by local loyalists.[[3]](#endnote-3) Worth had little more to say about events in Plymouth in 1549, however, and it was left to a subsequent historian to take up the specific pieces of evidence which he had found and to incorporate them within a wider narrative.

That historian was Frances Rose-Troup who, on the eve of the First World War, published *The Western Rebellion of 1549*: the formidable, 500-page work which remains, to this day, the standard account of the insurrection. Understandably enough, given the paucity of the evidence, Rose-Troup was content to deal with Plymouth’s involvement in the rebellion in short order, but what she had to say on this subject was to prove extremely influential. First, and most important, of all Rose-Troup claimed that Plymouth had initially been attacked by the insurgents during the opening stages of the rebellion, at some point prior to 20 June 1549.[[4]](#endnote-4) This claim at once achieved the status of historical orthodoxy: a status which it would continue to enjoy for the next century. Second, Rose-Troup stated that, while the town itself had ‘offered ineffectual resistance’ and had been captured by the rebels - perhaps as a result of treachery - the castle had ‘withstood them *for a time*’.[[5]](#endnote-5) It will be noted here that, while the original entry in the ‘Black Book’, as cited by Worth, had clearly implied that the defenders of Plymouth Castle had continued to hold out for the Crown throughout the entire course of the insurrection, Rose-Troup had instead given her readers to understand that the loyalists occupying the stronghold had eventually surrendered it to the insurgents. Few subsequent historians followed Rose-Troup’s line on this, probably because it was so clearly contradicted by the evidence of the mid-Tudor chronicler. Nevertheless, it seems probable that, by downplaying the duration - and thus the significance - of the siege of Plymouth Castle in the way that she did, Rose-Troup inadvertently managed to persuade later historians that there was little more to be said about Plymouth’s experiences in 1549; certainly, most subsequent accounts of the rebellion deal with events in the South Devon port in a few lines at most.[[6]](#endnote-6)

But, as I demonstrated in a recent article, a close re-examination of the Plymouth receivers’ accounts for 1549 makes it possible to shed a good deal more light on what happened in the town and castle during that turbulent summer.[[7]](#endnote-7) It now seems almost certain, for example, that, far from having been captured by the insurgents during the opening stages of the rebellion, as Rouse-Troup averred, Plymouth had not come under serious attack until several weeks after the insurrection had begun. An entry in the receivers’ accounts shows that, on ‘Mydsomer nyght’ - that is to say, on the evening of 23-24 June - the mayor and his brethren had assembled at Plymouth’s high cross: almost certainly to oversee the annual procession of the town’s armed men known as ‘the midsummer watch’.[[8]](#endnote-8) Among the entries which follow - all sadly undated - are references to the carriage of guns, to the purchase of gunpowder and ammunition, to local gentlemen being ‘sent for’ to discuss ‘the townes busynes’, to the taking of a formal ‘muster of men’ and to the town councillors assembling twice together ‘in Counsayll’ at the Guildhall.[[9]](#endnote-9) It is hard to doubt that these entries refer to expenses which had been incurred during late June and early July 1549 - and that, at this point, the town governors had still been preparing to resist any potential rebel attack.

As I have argued elsewhere, however, it would appear that this situation suddenly changed during the second week of July, possibly as the result of the incursion of a powerful force of Cornish rebels over the Tamar. At around this time, the mayor and his brethren clearly concluded that Plymouth - which possessed no substantial defences on its landward side - was indefensible against a determined attack. Accordingly, the most determined of the local loyalists - who included some, at least, of the town governors - now took the decision to abandon the town and to retire into last-ditch defensive positions in the ancient castle and on St Nicholas Island.[[10]](#endnote-10) Here, they successfully defended themselves, while the rebel forces occupied the town itself. What conditions were like in rebel-held Plymouth over the following weeks it is impossible to say because the evidence is so slight. One, slightly later, source reports that the insurgents seized a number of ‘cannon’ in the town, which they took away to reinforce the main rebel host, which was then besieging Exeter.[[11]](#endnote-11) Another chance reference reveals that the protestors ‘spoyled’ certain victuals which had been gathered in Plymouth for the king’s service at sea.[[12]](#endnote-12) The author of the ‘Black Book’, finally, later recorded that ‘our stepell [was] burnt, [in 1549] with all the townes evydence in the same by Rebelles’: a statement which indicates that the insurgents had not only targeted official records of all sorts while they were holding Plymouth - as other protestors are known to have done elsewhere - but that they had also carried out at least one act of deliberate arson.[[13]](#endnote-13) We must not forget that this evidence comes from the pen of a loyalist writer, however, who would have had his own reasons for wishing to portray conditions in rebel-held Plymouth in the most anarchic of lights.

While Plymouth Castle remained closely besieged, elsewhere the tide was beginning to turn against the protestors. By the end of July Lord Russell had managed to assemble a powerful royal army at Honiton, and between 3 and 5 August Russell’s troops fought their way through the East Devon countryside towards the besieged city of Exeter: slaughtering many hundreds of the insurgents in the process. On 5 August, the remaining rebel forces round Exeter abandoned their positions and withdrew towards the west, permitting Russell to enter Exeter in triumph the following day. Here, he paused for a little over a week in order to settle affairs in the city and gather his strength, before word reached him - in mid-August - that rebel forces were massing at the mid-Devon village of Sampford Courtenay, where the protests had initially begun. On 16 August Russell set out from Exeter with a huge royal army, and soon afterwards, he utterly destroyed the remaining rebel forces in a bloody battle fought at Sampford.[[14]](#endnote-14) Russell’s victorious troops now swept westwards towards the Tamar and on into Cornwall, and previous historians - including myself - have assumed that it was at this point that the siege of Plymouth Castle was finally lifted, and Plymouth itself recaptured by royal forces.[[15]](#endnote-15) Yet a new piece of evidence reveals that Plymouth had, in fact, been retaken the day **before** Russell’s troops marched out of Exeter.

In the register of St Budeaux, a little parish which lies just to the north-west of Plymouth, the following entry appears immediately beneath a reference to the christening of ‘Tamsine Pope’, the daughter of one Matthew Pope, on 15 August 1549: ‘The same daye were the Rebells driven out of Plymouthe, & lxxx of them taken prisoners’.[[16]](#endnote-16) In the margin beside these words, the single word ‘**Commotion**’ is written in large letters: this being the alternative term which was frequently used by local people to signify the rebellion of 1549.[[17]](#endnote-17) Thanks to this brief comment in the register - a comment which all previous historians of the insurrection had missed - it is now possible to pin-point, for the first time, the day on which the protestors lost control of Plymouth, while the fact that no fewer than 80 ‘rebells’ are noted to have been ‘taken prisoners’ suggests that there must still have been a sizeable insurgent force in the town at the time of its recapture.

Many questions about just how the rebel occupation of Plymouth came to an end remain tantalisingly unanswered, of course. Were the ‘rebells’ who were captured in August all strangers to the town, for example, or did they include many local men in their ranks? And where did the loyalist forces who are recorded to have ‘driven out’ the insurgents come from? Had the defenders of Plymouth Castle - perhaps having learnt that most of the forces which had previously been blockading them had been drawn away in order to bolster the rebel host at Sampford - decided to launch a sudden sally? Had royal troops from Exeter managed to sweep across the South Hams to relieve Plymouth Castle even before Russell’s main army had set off to crush the rebel forces elsewhere in Devon? Or had loyalist sea-captains somehow contrived ‘to land [men] at the backs of the rebells’ from ships cruising off the South Devon coast: a tactic which Russell had definitely urged the government to adopt in a letter written just four days before?[[18]](#endnote-18) We will probably never know - but it is hard to doubt that, for many of the luckless individuals who were captured at Plymouth in August 1549, retribution was swift in coming. Soon after recording a payment of 3s 4d which he had made as ‘[a] Reward to my lord privye sealls trompeter’ - presumably at the time of the castle’s deliverance - the loyalist keeper of the receiver’s accounts went on to note an altogether less celebratory series of payments which he had made for the construction of certain ‘gallowes’ in the town: including one payment made to seven carpenters ‘for workyng all nyght, & for makyng the gallowes’, together with further sums laid out for the provision of food, drink and candles for them while they worked.[[19]](#endnote-19) In these dry notations, it seems fair to conclude, we catch a grim, unsettling glimpse of what A.L. Rowse well-termed the ‘tragic days’ which followed the repression of the rebellion of 1549: days when ‘darkness draws down, lit only by lurid lights here and there’.[[20]](#endnote-20)

1. REFERENCES

   J. Hooker, ‘The Description of the Citie of Excester’, in R. Holinshed, *The Third Volume of Chronicles* (London, 1587), pp. 1014-1027. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. R.N. Worth, *History of Plymouth: From the earliest period to the present time* (Plymouth, 1890), p. 38; and R.N. Worth, *Calendar of the Plymouth Municipal Records* (Plymouth, 1893), pp. 16-17. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Worth, *History of Plymouth*, p. 38. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. F. Rose-Troup, *The Western Rebellion of 1549: An Account of the Insurrections in Devonshire and Cornwall against Religious Innovations in the Reign of Edward VI* (London, 1913), pp. 122-30. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid., p. 130. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. See, for example, A.L Rowse, *Tudor Cornwall: Portrait of a Society* (1941, New York 1969 edition), p. 265; J. Cornwall, *Revolt of the Peasantry: 1549* (London, 1977), p*.* 99; and B.L. Beer, *Rebellion and Riot: Popular Disorder in England during the Reign of Edward VI* (second edition, Kent State University Press, 2005), p. 51. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. M. Stoyle, ‘Fullye Bente to Fighte Oute the Matter: Reconsidering Cornwall’s Role in the Western Rebellion of 1549’, *The English Historical Review*, volume 129, no. 538 (June 2014), pp. 566-67. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Plymouth and West Devon Record Office, Plymouth [henceforth: WDRO], W 1/130 (‘Old Audit Book’), f.254v. Plymouth’s midsummer watch was finally abolished during the 1580s, see R. Hutton, *The Rise and Fall of Merry England: The Ritual Year, 1400-1700* (Oxford, 2001), p. 121 [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. WDRO, W 1/130, ff. 254v- 257 [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Stoyle, ‘Fullye Bente to Fighte Oute the Matter’, pp. 556-57. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. M.A.S. Hume (ed.), *Chronicle of King Henry VIII of England* (London, 1889), p. 181. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Rose-Troup, *Western Rebellion*, p. 359, note 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Worth, *Calendar*, p. viii. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. For the events of August 1549, see Stoyle, ‘Fullye Bente to Fighte Oute the Matter’, pp. 569-71 [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid., p. 572. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. WDRO, 542/1 (Parish Register of St Budeaux, 1538-1656), f. 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. See J. Vowell, alias Hoker, *The Antique Description and Account of the City of Exeter* (Exeter, 1765), p. 33, marginal note. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. N. Pocock (ed.), *Troubles Connected with the Prayer Book of 1549* (Camden Society, New Series, 37, 1884), pp. 60-61 [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. WDRO, W 1/130, ff. 256v-57. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Rowse, *Tudor Cornwall*, p. 283.

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