The Interregnum in Britain and Ireland, 1649 – 1660, convened by Dr Rachel Foxley

The Interregnum in Britain and Ireland covers one of the most exciting periods in English history. It was a time of major political rupture, when England, Scotland, and Ireland experienced constitutional experimentation. This course explores the challenges faced by both rulers and subjects in England, Scotland, and Ireland after the execution of Charles I. Students explore how far the civil wars of the 1640’s had prepared people for the ideological and practical implications of living without a monarchy. In addition, the many different ways in which political arguments and alignments shifted in response to the new situation are also considered.

Broadly, Dr Foxley’s research interests are based in the history of political ideas. She addresses long traditions of political concepts which date back to antiquity, and are still evident in the early modern period. In particular she enjoys applying these theories to the specific time frame of the Interregnum. Dr Foxley has undertaken considerable research on the Levellers; a political group prominent during the English Civil Wars. Her published articles on the group are used by students within this module. In addition, Dr Foxley is in the process of publishing research on Republicanism, which is again highly relevant to the interregnum period.

The content of this course is taught thematically. Initially, students are introduced to the political history of the period. Topics discussed include the workings, phases, and problems of parliament previous to, and during the Interregnum. Students consider the personality of Cromwell, and debate whether he was sincere or corrupt in his motives. Following on from political history, students examine the contestation and breakdown of religion in the period. The radical change in public expression of religion, and the loosening of religious policy to allow toleration for some groups will be addressed. The final section of the course returns to political theories, where students explore
the propaganda and images associated with each political regime of the period.

The Interregnum in Britain and Ireland is a very document intensive course, aiming to provide students with ‘hands on’ experience of the historian’s task. A wealth of primary sources is used, including letters, diaries, pamphlets, political literature, images, engravings, and material culture. In addition to relevant primary sources accessed through Early English Books Online (EEBO), students can utilize material held at Special Collections, based at the Museum of Rural Life (MERL). MERL houses many specialist resources which include archives of 17th century pamphlets. In particular, students have the rare opportunity to examine original pamphlets which detail the trial and execution of Charles I.

This module is taught entirely through two hour weekly seminars. The majority of this time is dedicated to class discussions. Typically students will analyse selected primary sources and consider how these relate to the historical context, contemporary arguments, and historians’ interpretations of the period. Assessment consists of a long essay and an exam.

This is an enthralling module covering a period of significant political upheaval. Dr Foxley’s previous students have relished the level of detail present within the course, and thoroughly enjoyed the scope of primary materials offered.