



# The Great Revolt of 1381

*Charles Oman*

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Few of the really important episodes of English history are so short, sudden, and dramatic as the great insurrection of June 1381, which still bears in most histories its old and not very accurate title of ‘Wat Tyler’s Rebellion’. Only a short month separates the first small riot in Essex, with which the rising started, from the final petty skirmish in East Anglia at which the last surviving band of insurgents was ridden down and scattered to the winds. But within the space that intervened between May 30 and June 28, 1381, half England had been aflame, and for some days it had seemed that the old order of things was about to crash down in red ruin, and that complete anarchy would supervene. To most contemporary writers the whole rising seemed an inexplicable phenomenon—a storm that arose out of a mere nothing, an ignorant riot against a harsh and unpopular tax, such as had often been seen before. But this storm assumed vast dimensions, spread over the whole horizon, swept down on the countryside with the violence of a typhoon, threatened universal destruction, and then suddenly passed away almost as inexplicably as it had arisen. The monastic chroniclers, to whom we owe most of our descriptions of the rebellion—Walsingham and his fellows—were not the men to understand the meaning of such a phenomenon; they were annalists, not political philosophers or students of social statics. They only half comprehended the meaning of what they had seen, and were content to explain the rebellion as the work of Satan, or the result of an outbreak of sheer insanity on the part of the labouring classes. When grudges and discontents have been working for many years above or below the surface, and then suddenly flare up into a wholesale conflagration, the ordinary observer is puzzled as well as terrified. All the causes of the great insurrection, save the Poll-tax which precipitated it, had been operating for a long time. Why was the particular month of June 1381 the moment at which they passed from causes into effects, and effects of such a violent and unexpected kind? What the Poll-tax was, and why it was so unpopular, we shall soon see. But its relation to the rebellion is merely the same as that of the greased cartridges to the Indian Mutiny of 1857. It brought about the explosion, but was only one of its smaller causes. Things had been working up for trouble during many years—only a good cry, a common grievance which united all malcontents, was needed to bring matters to a head. This was what the Polltax provided...

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