

## Charles I and the Aristocracy, 1625-1642

**Review Number:**

1528

**Publish date:**

Thursday, 9 January, 2014

**Author:**

Richard Cust

**ISBN:**

9781107009905

**Date of Publication:**

2013

**Price:**

£65.00

**Pages:**

363pp.

**Publisher:**

Cambridge University Press

**Publisher url:**

<http://www.cambridge.org/gb/academic/subjects/history/british-history-after-1450/charles-i-and-aristocracy-16251642>

**Place of Publication:**

Cambridge

**Reviewer:**

Christopher Thompson

Ever since the publication of his book on the Forced Loan of 1626–8, Richard Cust has been recognised as one of the principal figures in 17th-century historiography. His scholarly reputation was enhanced by his study of Charles I, the best study of the King so far published. He has now turned his attention to Charles's relationship with his peerage from his accession in 1625 to the eve of the outbreak of the English Civil War in 1642. This book builds constructively on Cust's own collaboration with Andrew Hopper, to whom he pays a generous tribute, on the Court of Chivalry. This work thus has much to say on the culture of honour in this period, on the policies that the King and his Earl Marshal, Thomas Howard, 14th Earl of Arundel, followed with the aim of enhancing the honour and standing of the aristocracy, and on the responses to those policies. Professor Cust asks new questions, poses novel challenges and suggests positive answers of a challenging and comprehensive nature. By any standards, it is a study of major importance.

The book has two interlinked themes. The first concerns the need to reform the honours system. There had been attempts by successive Earls Marshal in the 16th century and by the College of Heralds to uphold the status of the aristocracy and gentry, to ensure that their ranks were filled by men of lineage and worth and to exclude social upstarts. But none of these had proved truly effective in the face of countervailing pressures any more than had efforts to regulate duelling and quarrels over precedence. James VI and I's financial difficulties and willingness to create new knights, to bring into being an order of baronets and to sell honours, including peerages, compounded these problems. Indeed, it was not until after the Duke of Buckingham's death in 1628, when his fatal charm and racketeering were finally removed, that they could

be seriously tackled.

His second theme deals with the efforts of the King and the Earl to shape the peerage into a loyal, more Court-centred pillar of the Caroline regime. This required careful attention to preventing slights to their dignity by reviving and extending the authority of the Court of Chivalry presided over by Arundel, by ensuring that they were appointed to suitable offices, locally and nationally, and by involving them in Court ceremonies. Ultimately, of course, it entailed mobilising their support against the Scots in the two Bishops' Wars of 1639 and 1640, in the struggle against the Junto in the first 20 months of the Long Parliament and in preparing for the Civil War itself.

In tackling these themes, Richard Cust draws on the rich stream of contemporary comments on issues of honour, and on the archives of the Chapel Royal, the Court of Chivalry and the Order of the Garter. He has also mined the Parliamentary materials from the 1620s, those for the Great Council of Peers which met in the autumn of 1640 and those for the early stages of the Long Parliament in 1640–2 to good effect.

Naturally enough, concerns about questions of honour and the preservation of social distinctions were almost always expressed in conservative terms. Commentators on heraldry in the second half of the 16th century like Gerard Legh and John Ferne placed their stress on the proper conjunction between gentle descent and virtue, particularly in arms: those of gentle stock were more likely than new men to display the moral attributes of their ancestors. Peers and gentlemen were thus set apart from commoners and plebeians. Experts on blood and lineage with professional and financial interests to protect, like the College of Heralds, agreed. Indeed knowledge of pedigrees and an understanding of coat armour helped to transform the officers of the College into the masters of a new science, one that stimulated an intense interest in genealogy and history by 1600. This interest in matters of honour intersected with growing worries about social disorder and about the dangers of social levelling and popularity. Upholding the status of nobles and gentlemen was an objective upon which the sovereign, the aristocracy, gentlemen and heralds could agree in theory even if it was much more complicated in practice to regulate the honours system.

These practical issues were made worse after 1603 by King James's reckless creation of knights and, after 1610, by the introduction of the order of baronets. The inflation in numbers of the peerage (down to 1628) exacerbated these problems. Inevitably, those who thought their own honours and precedence had been adversely affected by royal generosity or by the Crown's need for funds protested, hence the objections from the younger sons of peers over allowing baronets to be placed immediately behind barons and from English peers to allowing precedence to fellow countrymen holding Irish or Scottish titles. Equally inevitably, perhaps, Jacobean profligacy in creating honours affected the King's Parliaments and came to be associated with a damaging culture of corruption. On all of this, Professor Cust has new light to shed as a preliminary to his main analysis.

Thomas Howard, 14th Earl of Arundel, is the central figure in this process. By the standards of the de Veres, Earls of Oxford, his family was of relatively recent noble vintage, but he appeared to contemporaries to be the epitome of ancient nobility. As Earl Marshal from August 1621, he was able to re-establish the Court of Chivalry as the arbiter of claims to honour and title and to define its procedures as a civil law court. Unfortunately, Arundel's efforts at reform and enforcement were at first affected by the changes in his political relationship with the Duke of Buckingham, who successfully passed from being the favourite of King James to being that of King Charles: it was only after the Duke's assassination in August 1628 that Arundel had a better opportunity with Charles's support to uphold ancient honour and to tread on the neck of seditious popularity. This was essential if the support of the peerage was to be secured for the Caroline regime after the vicissitudes of the 1620s.

Professor Cust shows how, in the Chapel Royal, in the reception of foreign ambassadors, and in the values associated with the Order of the Garter, there was a new sense of order and decorum. Charles himself was committed to the welfare of the peerage and to ensuring that peers were treated with the respect their rank demanded: libellous words against them were punished in Star Chamber and serious efforts were made to proscribe duels between peers and challenges to them from men of lesser rank. This was not always

straightforward as Professor Cust's discussion of the quarrel between the Earl of Holland and Lord Weston in 1633 makes clear. Peers, however, who fell short of the standards expected of them, most notoriously in the case of the Earl of Castlehaven's sexual misdemeanours, were punished, in this instance, by execution. The Court of Chivalry itself proved attractive to litigants seeking swift and cheap justice, particularly in matters of defamation affecting gentlemen. Visitations of counties by heralds in the 1630s were less obviously successful since they relied on a degree of voluntary co-operation from the local gentry and were affected by a division of interests between the heralds and the civil lawyers operating in the Court of Chivalry. But the reform programme initiated by the King and the Earl of Arundel did enjoy a degree of success. A higher percentage of the peerage was attracted to Court in the 1630s and their claims to military experience grew, both contentions that overturn the findings of earlier studies. The persuasive power of Cust's claims here is impressive.

This case underlies his second set of contentions about the King's relationship with the peerage. He sees the latter as playing a mediatory role in the Parliaments of 1626 and 1628 and as surprisingly helpful and sympathetic in Charles's military expeditions against the Scots in 1639–40. When the latter of these failed, the meeting of the Great Council of Peers at York enabled him to out-manoeuvre his enemies (the Junto and petitioner peers) amongst the nobility and in some respects to secure the initiative early in the proceedings of the Long Parliament. He was, for example, able to enlist support for Strafford's acquittal in the impeachment proceedings in the spring of 1641, to avoid the appointment of a *Custos Regni* in August of that year, to build a royalist party in the House of Lords in defence of his rights and those of the Bishops in the autumn of 1641 and to draw peers to York in the spring and summer of 1642 when military conflict threatened. Cust makes clear that the King was also guilty of serious political mistakes in allowing the Army plot to proceed in the spring of 1641, in permitting the Bishops to petition the House of Lords on their rights and the prospective invalidity of proceedings in their absence in December 1641 and in his attempt to arrest Lord Mandeville and the five members of the House of Commons early in January 1642. Nonetheless, six months later, it was clear that he enjoyed the support of more than half the active peers as they and his other subjects faced the unpalatable choice of deciding which side they would fight for. This is a piece of political analysis which has profound implications for the interpretation of the Junto's activities to be found, for example, in the works of the late Conrad Russell.

50 years ago, a work on this subject would have been filled with discussions of relative deprivation and status disequilibrium. It is a pleasure to read a text so free of sociological jargon. But it does suggest explicitly that Caroline peers recognised that they owed their power and positions to the Crown and that their authority might be compromised by threats to that of the King. It would be interesting to learn how far great landowners like the 4th Earl of Bedford or the 3rd Earl of Essex or the 2nd Earl of Warwick shared that view. There is also a question-mark over the role of the House of Lords in the Parliaments of 1626 and 1628. J. S. Flemion and other scholars considered that the Parliament of 1626 was dissolved to prevent Buckingham's conviction by the House of Lords and that the passage of the Petition of Right by that House was a defeat for Charles I. The events of the late 1620s may have constituted a more severe crisis than is, perhaps, recognised here. It is questionable, too, whether John Warner was responsible for what has come to be known as the Bishop's diary of proceedings in the House of Lords in 1641 in the light of his correspondence with Henry Oxinden.

There is also one major criticism to be made of Cambridge University Press: the book's cover has a fine reproduction of Rubens's portrait of the Earl of Arundel in 1629 but the illustrations in the text are disappointingly monochrome. For a work of this quality, this is a disappointment. But such minor reservations aside, this is a book that deserves to be seriously studied. It tells its readers much more about the honour culture of Caroline England and the attitudes of its aristocracy than we knew before. For that we are all in Richard Cust's debt.

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment.

---

**Source URL:** <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1528>

**Links**

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/80777>