The Murder of King James I

The people of early modern England loved a good conspiracy theory. During the Elizabethan period, Catholic polemicists portrayed the regime as a conspiracy of evil counsel. Under the Stuarts, various iterations of a ‘popish conspiracy’ against Church and state damaged Charles I’s authority, animated opposition towards him during the Civil Wars, and created political crisis during the reign of his son. Conspiracy theories were what sociologists call ‘sense-making’ activities, providing contemporaries with coherent and satisfying explanations for the troubling, uncertain and ambiguous things they knew, or thought they knew, about politics and religion. The fact that some plots and conspiracies were all too real no doubt encouraged this habit of mind.

One of the less well-known conspiracy theories of the early Stuart period concerned the death of James I. In March 1625 the King had fallen ill with a tertian ague, not necessarily fatal even in an old king with an unhealthy lifestyle and a healthy scepticism about the efficacy of his doctors’ prescriptions. Yet after the administration of a drink and a plaster, James’ condition had rapidly deteriorated, and he died shortly thereafter. These remedies had been provided against the advice of his doctors by James’ powerful favourite, the Duke of Buckingham. Rumours soon began to circulate that the King had been deliberately poisoned, and that Buckingham, or perhaps even the new King, Charles I, had played some part in it.

The notion that Buckingham had deliberately murdered James made sense of a range of suspicious circumstances. A number of Buckingham’s aristocratic rivals had recently died, including the Marquis of
Hamilton. Hamilton’s corpse had swelled oddly after death, indicating to contemporaries that he had been poisoned. Buckingham also had a motive to murder the King. His close relationship with James had cooled in 1623–4, when Buckingham and Prince Charles had grasped the political initiative by pushing for war with Spain. The Prince and favourite exerted parliamentary pressure to steer the king away from his former Spanish allies, although James resisted war until his death. The influential Spanish ambassador, Gondomar, had been expected to arrive in England shortly with fresh offers for a negotiated settlement that threatened to undermine Buckingham’s policy and his position at court. The death of James, it seemed, secured the Duke’s position under the new king, Charles I, and removed the main obstacle to their plans for war.

The consequences of Buckingham’s administration of medicine to the dying King, as Alastair Bellany and Thomas Cogswell show in their fascinating, landmark new book, were seismic. Buckingham had many enemies from across the political and religious spectrum, and they exploited rumours about his involvement in James’ death to devastating effect. They were forcefully repeated in a pamphlet titled The Forerunner of Revenge, written by a Scottish Catholic polemicist, George Eglisham. This pamphlet, which was published with some degree of official backing by Buckingham’s enemies in Habsburg Flanders, deeply damaged the Duke’s reputation. It contributed not only to the failure of the Parliament of 1626, but also to the atmosphere of public hostility that culminated in Buckingham’s assassination at the hands of a disgruntled soldier in 1628. Suspicions that Charles I had some hand in his father’s death were seized upon by parliamentarian polemicists at the outbreak of the first English Civil War, playing an important role in discrediting the King during the Vote of No Addresses in 1648, and during Charles’ subsequent trial and execution. Charles’ supposed complicity in James’ murder became one of the founding myths through which the Republican regime sought to legitimise its authority, and sparked furious debate between republicans and royalists, and later Whigs and Tories, for many decades to come.

Bellany and Cogswell inform readers looking for definitive conclusions about James’ death that they do not offer ‘a footnoted episode of “CSI: Jacobean London”’. Yet if they did, this would be compulsive viewing of the box set binge variety. The book is structured like a thriller, and even those familiar with the period will find themselves wanting to know what happens next. It moves smoothly from admirably clear surveys of the complicated political and religious landscape to a close analysis of secret histories and libels, frequently pausing to consider a fascinating and telling vignette. Unlike some collaborations, the stitching between the contributions of the two authors is not noticeable. The clarity and wit of Bellany’s and Cogswell’s writing, and their inherently interesting subject, mean that The Murder of King James I should appeal to, and deserves to find, a wide audience.

The book breathes vivid life into a whole political and intellectual world. From James’ bawdy correspondence to the scurrilous poems attacking Buckingham as a sodomite ‘evil councillor’, complete with clammy hands and perfumed breath, the texture of political culture during this period is revealed in all its pungency and profanity. The joyously disgusting accounts of James’ final illness and the Marquis of Hamilton’s autopsy shed light on the competing medical ideas and practices of the time. Indeed, as Bellany and Cogswell show, it is only by taking the medical and political beliefs of the time seriously that we are able to understand the conspiracy theories that swirled around James’ deathbed and rescue those who believed in them from the enormous condescension of posterity.

The publication of The Murder of King James I is perfectly timed. Much of the heat has gone out of the debate on the causes of the English Revolution, but Bellany’s and Cogswell’s book builds on the post-revisionist turn towards cultural history as well as recent interest in the politics of the early modern ‘public sphere’. It complements Peter Lake’s excellent recent examination of Elizabethan ‘secret histories’, Bad Queen Bess?, as well as deepening our understanding of the contest over monarchical authority explored in Kevin Sharpe’s trilogy of books on Tudor and Stuart image-making.

The authors are two of the most distinguished authorities on this period, and their book is based on a wealth of source material, from libels to polemical pamphlets, plays and parliamentary speeches drawn from an impressive range of archives. Their exhaustive and forensic research draws on many sources that are relatively unused, such as a fascinating collection of material written by a circle of spies working for the
Flemish agent in London. Although they deploy this evidence with great skill, Bellany and Cogswell acknowledge that it is impossible to say for sure whether or not Buckingham really did poison King James, although they find this unlikely. Bracingly, they argue that his administration of medicine might nevertheless have contributed to James’ death, although probably not intentionally.

While they avoid definitive conclusions about James’ death, Bellany and Cogswell nevertheless make a series of important and convincing arguments. One of these is that conspiracy, rumour and myth need to be placed at the centre of any account of early Stuart politics. Victorian historians like S. R. Gardiner who sought to discover ‘what really happened’ had little time for wild tales about James’ murder, yet, as Bellany and Cogswell persuasively argue, these stories, truthful or otherwise, shaped the perceptions and behaviour of political actors and played a crucial role in undermining monarchical authority. They also encouraged individuals to ask broader ideological questions about the origins of monarchical power and the legitimacy of resistance, encouraging historians to rethink the relationship between high politics and salty alehouse talk, between rhetorical points made to win a transient political battle and the more enduring, elevated and abstract stuff of political philosophy.

Bellany and Cogswell also demonstrate that historians of early modern England need to pay much more attention to continental Europe. Events at the Jacobean court and in parliament could be shaped by pamphlets produced in the Antwerp literary underground. Indeed one of the most striking things about the accusations against Buckingham and Charles was the ease with which they could spread through various media and among different social and religious milieux, as well as across geographical borders. As the accusations against Buckingham and Charles moved from oral rumour to print and manuscript and back again, Protestants and Catholics, the elite as well as the common people all drew from the same storehouse of tropes and ideas and borrowed freely from each other. As Bellany and Cogswell point out, it is highly ironic that that the Forerunner, written by a Catholic with backing from a foreign power, was later used by Protestant radicals to justify the trial and execution of a King who was accused of complicity in popish conspiracy.

An astonishingly wide-ranging and stimulating work like this provokes further questions. The first of these involves news culture and Charles’ failure to exploit it. The authors convincingly argue that rumours about Charles’ involvement in his father’s death damaged his authority, contributing to the long-term causes of the English Revolution. Although Charles later became adept at exploiting propaganda during the 1640s, for a number of practical and ideological reasons he failed to exploit the weapons of political communication during the 1620s, and thus allowed destabilising rumours about James’ death to gain greater traction than they otherwise might have done. Such arguments contribute to perennial debates about Charles’ character and political nous. The question here is whether the authors think that more fundamental political and cultural forces were at work.

Although Charles was slow to adapt to the explosion of printed news and commentary during this period, one wonders whether observers who hungered for political news and received it in ever greater volumes were also rather slow to adapt to the sometimes distasteful and confusing practical realities of politics that were thereby revealed. Charles’ and Buckingham’s critics sometimes seemed to share a set of assumptions and ideals about how politics was supposed to work that were either excessively cynical or unrealistically optimistic. Some polemists seemed to set stringent standards and expectations (perhaps encouraged by monarchical propaganda) for the religious and moral purity and consistency of political actors that made few concessions to the ambiguity, compromise and balancing of interests that were necessary in real-life domestic politics and foreign affairs. Since contemporary political thought had difficulty explaining how the public good could emerge from the competition of private interests, ‘evil councillors’ like Buckingham who supposedly worked for private interests were contrasted with idealised virtuous councillors who were devoted to the public good.

This was a model of politics that dealt in moral absolutes and had difficulty explaining political conflict except as the result of pathological and malign forces like evil counsel. Thus the complexities of early Stuart domestic politics and diplomacy, puzzling enough for historians and incomprehensible to some
contemporaries, were neatly explained in terms of conspiracy. Yet even the belief in plots and conspiracies mixed paranoia with naivety, since they implied that if you simply removed the conspirator (Buckingham, for instance), political life would revert to a naturally virtuous and harmonious state. It is sometimes difficult to tell whether contemporaries believed in this model of politics or whether it was merely a rhetorical pose. Nevertheless, do the damaging rumours about the murder of James I show that during the early Stuart period a growing desire for news brought people’s expectations and assumptions about politics into conflict with political reality?

_The Murder of King James I_ also raises wider questions about conspiracy theories. As Bellany and Cogswell demonstrate, 19th-century historians like S. R. Gardiner tended to treat stories about the poisoning of King James with a certain amount of condescension. This scepticism was not new. While some came to treat Charles’ culpability for James’ death as historical fact, many supporters of the Stuart monarchy had of course never believed it and had sought to refute such beliefs from the moment of James’ death. Nevertheless, the attitude of historians like Gardiner perhaps implies that something had changed. If early modern people really did love a good conspiracy theory, one wonders why this was the case? Were there any fundamental reasons that they seemed to proliferate during this period? Or is this view an illusion? What is historically specific, and what is universal and transhistorical, about conspiracy theories? I suspect that it would take another book to answer such questions, but our understanding of early Stuart politics has been hugely advanced and enriched by this one.

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