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The Changing Reputations of Elizabeth I and James VI & I

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Few figures in British history have such storied reputations as Elizabeth I or James VI & I. The three books reviewed here represent recent contributions to changing and evolving approaches to these rulers. While none of the authors offers a bold new interpretation, Pauline Croft most successfully draws together twenty years of revisionist scholarship to present a new composite portrait. Alan Stewart's ambitious attempt to write the first 'modern' biography of James since David Harris Willson (1956) produces a decidedly mixed result. Carole Levin's rather inaptly titled *Reign of Elizabeth I* offers less a new overview than selected topical essays. Christopher Haigh's revised edition of *Elizabeth I* (Longman; London, 1998) still remains the best choice. Academic books on controversial individuals are bound to find scholarly readers, but Levin's and Croft's books are aimed at students while Stewart targets the popular audience who appreciated his books on Francis Bacon (co-authored with Lisa Jardine) and Philip Sidney.

James VI & I has been thoroughly reassessed in the past twenty years. The obvious target was David Willson's toxic treatment in *King James VI & I* (Jonathan Cape; London, 1956). Jenny Wormald's seminal article 'James VI and I: Two Kings or One?' (*History*, 68 (1983), 187-209) challenged the hostile historiography which enveloped James, pondering how it was that the Scots and English held such different views of the same monarch. Wormald deconstructed the contemporary (primarily printed) sources that had shaped historians' treatment of the king, particularly polemics by Anthony Weldon, Arthur Wilson, and Francis Osborne. She emphasised their inherent English xenophobia, designed to further a project of Stuart vilification which began in the 1620s and rose to a fever pitch in the 1650s. Having set scholars the task of recovering the authentic James, many took up the call. The results have cast in a more favourable light James' effectiveness with religion, diplomacy, patronage and finance, and the governance of multiple kingdoms. The missing element in this revisionist project has been a full-length study of James capable of supplanting Willson.

Pauline Croft's *King James* now offers the best overview. Croft brings two substantial strengths to her political study of James in his three kingdoms: an understanding of the period grounded in extensive experience as a published archival historian; and practice coming to grips with her subject in the classroom. Croft has published widely on the first decade of James' reign, with particular emphasis on parliament, finance, and Robert Cecil - her 'modern' study of Cecil is forthcoming. The devil is in the details with subjects like these and those details are in the Jacobean archives that Croft knows well. At the same time, while acknowledgments like Croft's which thank her students sometimes appear clichéd, no one who has taught James' reign can fail to appreciate how valuable the classroom or lecture hall is for working through an understanding of such a 'dauntingly complex' subject. Drawing on these strengths, Croft has produced an interpretive synthesis which is confident, agile, and judicious.

A generation of Scottish historians have fashioned an increasingly nuanced picture of James as king of Scots. We now have assessments of his education and formative years, the politics of his minority, his evolving notions of imperial kingship, and the long struggle to translate his political ideas into practice in the secular, religious, and territorial realms. This is Croft's starting point, which produces a credible assessment of James:

The pragmatism of 'little by little' was coming to characterise his style of governance. At the same time, the curious combination of ability and complacency, idleness and shrewd judgement, warm emotions and lack of discretion so well described by Fontenay remained typical of James throughout his life. (p. 20)

Beyond James' personality and style, Croft helps us appreciate how much his Scottish kingship centred on the expansion of royal power: simultaneously subordinating the nobility and drawing them into a ruling partnership (with the rising literate laymen), fashioning a workable royal supremacy over the reformed kirk (including the reintroduction of bishops), and attempting to expand royal authority across the 'Highland line'. What emerges from her synthesis of work by historians like Roger Mason, Alan MacDonald, Michael Lynch, Julian Goodare, and Wormald is a Scottish king with a practical sense of his *imperium* - the claim to unchallenged royal authority in secular, religious, and territorial matters - entirely in keeping with the pretensions of his Stewart predecessors and Tudor cousins. We are far better equipped to understand James in his three kingdoms after 1603 when we understand his evolving imperial kingship in Scotland.

The traditional narrative of James' reign in England is covered in five chapters whose balanced treatment will now seem familiar: the heady days of James' accession, the rise of Anglo-Scottish xenophobia and the collapse of his plans for Anglo-Scottish union, troubles with finance and extravagance (both in parliament and without), the death of Robert Cecil in 1612 and the rise of kingship by favourite with (successively) Robert Carr and George Villiers, and James' pro-Spanish diplomacy in the context of renewed confessional warfare after 1618. Croft examines two significant areas of reassessment in separate chapters: James' rule over multiple kingdoms and the religious fissures among his diverse collection of subjects. The chapter examining the former opens - rightly - with discussion of his political ideas in *The True Lawe of Free Monarchies* and *Basilicon Doron*. Croft directly ties the territorial component of James' imperial philosophy discussed in these celebrated works to his actions authorising the failed colonisation of Lewis, his Highland policy, and his whole-hearted support for the plantation of Ulster and 'legal imperialist' projects of John Davies in Ireland. Croft's assessment - which will certainly be contested - is that James' 'achievements after 1603 as monarch of three kingdoms was both pioneering and impressive'. (p. 154) The mixed success of James' efforts governing the churches in his kingdoms is effectively synthesised and Croft pulls no punches in siding with Alan MacDonald's view that James' imposition of the Articles of Perth laid the seeds for his son's troubles in Scotland.

Croft's overall assessment of James is appropriately mixed. She recognises his good intentions in matters like Anglo-Scottish union, his openness to different points of view, and his agenda of a peaceful foreign policy within his kingdoms' financial means. His actions moderated frictions between his diverse peoples. Yet he also created new ones, particularly by supporting colonisation that polarised the crown's interest groups in Ireland, obtaining insufficient political benefit with his open-handed patronage, an unfortunate lack of attention to the image of monarchy (particularly after the image-obsessed regime of Elizabeth), pursuing a pro-Spanish foreign policy that fired religious prejudice and opened the door for Arminians within the English church, and enforcing unpalatable religious changes on the Scottish kirk. Many of these criticisms are framed within a longer view of James' reigns, including the legacy - now understood to be more troubled - which he left Charles I. Elements of all these judgments can be debated. With respect to Caroline Scotland, Charles should hardly be forgiven the Act of Revocation, his long-delayed and Anglocentric coronation at Holyrood, or the Laudian canons and prayer book of 1636-37. Yet in such debates we begin to approach an authentic appraisal of James that escapes both the hostile historiography of the past and worn-out frames of reference. We at last assess James on his own terms, as an imperial monarch governing multiple peoples and kingdoms.

Where Croft offers a study of James' reign, Alan Stewart aims for a study of James' life in *The Cradle King*, a richly textured biography ideally crafted for a well-read popular audience. Stewart's style is engaging; place, personality, and a sense of the times are captured in fine fashion. Stewart incorporates interesting topics which contribute to his treatment of James as a human subject in a historical context, including artistic patronage and culture, James' relationships with Queen Anna and their children, lessons to be gleaned from his poetical works, and the treasure trove of contemporary gossip and rumour surrounding the Stuarts.

Overall, Stewart does not bring the same strengths to a study of James that Croft does, especially an intimate familiarity with the Jacobean archives. Literary and cultural sources are his métier. There tends to be a heavy reliance upon printed primary sources (some of questionable accuracy or credibility) blended with old-fashioned historiography, selections of recent scholarship, and avant garde literary and cultural studies. Together these elements yield an eclectic, uneven, and ultimately unconvincing treatment of James, particularly as a political subject.

The least convincing element is what seems to be Stewart's overriding interpretation of James' character. David Willson had his Anthony Weldon, the crabbed Jacobean courtier who penned an 'acid description [of James] . entirely one-sided including no redeeming features that might permit a more balanced verdict.' (Croft, pp. 3-4) Stewart finds his Weldon in John Oglander, 'a staunch royalist' whose reminiscence of James (in the 1650s) as '"the most cowardly man I ever knew"' is the prelude to resurrecting perhaps the most discredited imputation against James in the historiography shaped by the likes of Weldon. The violence James encountered during his formative years, beginning with the storied murder of his mother's secretary (David Riccio) while he was still in her womb, left him with a 'fearful nature'. (Stewart, pp. ix-x) Thus, James retreated from people and crowds, covered his timidity with bluster and boasts, clung to trusted favourites, and never quite mastered the harsher realities of political conflict at home or abroad. As Stewart concludes:

Despite his age, despite his many years on two great thrones, he still uses the present tense - 'Tis true I am a cradle king' - as if, even now, he remains an infant, an innocent for whom the harsh realities of kingship are still unimaginable. (p. 350)

This flawed perspective compromises the ensuing examination of James as a political actor. Unlike his interesting close reading of James' poetical works, Stewart treats *True Lawe* and *Basilicon Doron* in cursory fashion, producing nothing like Croft's insightful and informed reading of them and their essential connection to James' actions as king. The court James initially constructed in 1603 is inconsistently characterised. The assertion that the privy lodgings were depoliticised under Elizabeth because of gender has been challenged by the studies of her ladies-in-waiting.(1) Stewart recognises the influence of James' Scottish cronies staffing his bedchamber per Neil Cuddy's work, but fails to incorporate the work of Croft and Linda Levy Peck which clarifies its influence as chiefly pertaining to patronage, not politics. Paradoxically, when Stewart suggests that the influence of the Scottish earl of Dunbar was negligible (pp. 173-4), he misses one of Cuddy's most important conclusions. Dunbar is now acknowledged to have been enormously influential before his death in 1611.

When we move to James' kingcraft, we return to Willson's 'Sylvan Prince' obsessed with hunting and pathologically uninterested in business:

James did not believe himself to be negligent in his style of government. Indeed, he was continuing very much in the way he had for the past two decades in Scotland . Complaints about James' hunting were almost always complaints about James' style of government - or, more pertinently, his failure to govern effectively because of his physical absence from court. (pp. 176, 181)

Historians like Wormald and Peck questioned assertions like these a decade ago, demonstrating that they are not supported by the archival evidence and arose from historians like Willson misreading the printed sources for the period. First, James did spend considerable time outside Whitehall, but this criticism is a 'straw man', given Elizabeth's perambulations and her own love of hunting or the frequent circuits and progresses of James' Scottish predecessors. Where James failed was in not exploiting his perambulations to cultivate a better rapport with his subjects. Further, the Jacobean archives are filled with volumes of correspondence and memoranda among James and his courtiers and counsellors. When James was not in London conducting business face to face, the business of governing found its way on to paper in the form of packets and letters. There is manifold evidence which attests to James secreting himself in his bedchamber with the daily post, devouring packets, and dictating or personally penning long, detailed responses to them.(2) Croft's assessment of 'ability and complacency' is surely closer to the mark, though even this understates James'

activism as king.

The underlying problem here is the heavy reliance upon printed sources. Both Simon Walker and John Guy have astutely addressed the interpretive challenges posed by early modern printed primary sources in their respective studies of Henry VIII and Thomas More. The challenge is particularly acute for More, given the need to 'rely on the legacy of the sixteenth century biographers . [who] were constructing and projecting an image . refracting or distorting what historians later took to be the "primary sources" for the life and career of Thomas More.' Guy's conclusion is a dreary one: 'I no longer believe that a truly historical biography of Thomas More can be written. The sources are too problematic.'(3) Sources are more abundant for James' life but the Jacobean printed primary sources are equally plagued by 'spin'. Indeed, the modern reassessment of James grew directly out of Wormald's critique of those sources. What is absolutely essential is to employ archival material as the 'critical' companion to printed sources - and vice versa. Neither can stand alone, as Stephen Alford effectively demonstrated in his examination of William Cecil's much-interpreted life in *The Early Elizabethan Polity: William Cecil and the British Succession Crisis, 1558-1569* (Cambridge University Press; Cambridge, 1998).

These problems push *Cradle King* down an unsympathetic and condescending path. In one instance, we are asked to consider James growing so jealous of his eldest son Henry's popularity that we might wish to credit the contemporary gossips - recounted in detail - who suggested that James poisoned the heir to the throne. (Stewart, pp. 216-18) Stewart's final judgment on James' reign is troubling: 'Twenty-two years of what many perceived as negligent government, a grossly lavish lifestyle, and an unsavoury parade of pretty young favourites, was at an end, and not before time.' (p. 346) This is followed by praise for the chaste court of the new king, but this is hard to swallow given James' favourite, Villiers - the 'grievance of grievances' - remained and Charles's mania for courtly order and decorum left him fatally out of touch with political reality by the 1630s. Stewart even recounts the gossip suggesting Villiers poisoned James; he argues Charles owed something of his eventual trial and execution to his opponents' revival of that gossip - 'Charles would never fully rid himself of the accusation that he owed his throne to murder' - never apparently considering the context of or motives at work in 1648. 'It is perhaps fitting,' writes Stewart in closing, 'that the death of King James aroused such speculation and innuendo.' (p. 349) Not just his death: James has apparently found a David Willson for the twenty-first century.

Carole Levin's *Reign of Elizabeth* is seemingly the 'odd book out' in this review, yet the theme of shifting reputations ties together both James and Elizabeth. While James' star has risen since the 1980s, the brilliance of Elizabeth's is somewhat dimmer these days - though the 'Gloriana industry' seems alive and well on the 400th anniversary of her death! In Elizabeth's case, the primary target has been Sir John Neale's loving study *Queen Elizabeth I* (Jonathan Cape; London, 1934) and the accounts of John Foxe, Robert Naunton, and William Camden underpinning Neale's treatment of Elizabeth as a Protestant Gloriana and political genius. Historians approaching Elizabeth in a less worshipful train have explored crucial points of conflict in her reign: religion, court politics, diplomacy, gender, political creeds, even Elizabeth's role in politics and her relationship to other political actors.

Levin wades into the shifting currents of Elizabeth's reputation having made her mark with the widely read *Heart and Stomach of a King* (University of Pennsylvania Press; Philadelphia, 1994) which examined the politics of gender surrounding Elizabeth's queenship. This naturally informs her treatment of Elizabeth - as it does for most scholars now - though it seems oddly muted here. What follows is a book with much the same clarity, accessibility, and judiciousness as Croft's. A very general overview of Elizabeth's life follows a short historiographic introduction. Both are essential reading for students because the ensuing chapters are more akin to topical essays. Religion is the first substantive issue addressed. The religious settlement of 1559 and the religious fissures at the elite and popular levels are examined in breathless fashion, though it is undoubtedly too neat to conclude (on page 37) that 'England in 1603 had become a Protestant nation'. Elizabeth's commitment to the 1559 settlement and the authoritarian turn of her regime in the 1590s papered over but did not resolve either the debate about her *imperium* in religious matters or the providential and millenarian imperatives to create a godly society felt by more zealous Protestants. England was not a country religiously 'at ease with itself' in 1603, the Welsh populace had yet to embrace the reformed church in large

numbers, and the union of the three kingdoms created new opportunities for religious fissures to open.(4) As in so many other areas, Elizabeth left her successor a mixed legacy.

Religion, diplomacy, marriage, and succession dominate Levin's book. She narrates with admirable clarity the interaction of these related topics in her core chapters. Indeed, if there is a defining theme in the book it is that these elements were the ones that defined Elizabeth's reign and they could never be disentangled from one another in governing her Tudor realms, including Ireland. In constructing these chapters, Levin leans heavily on the now-standard work by Patrick Collinson, Susan Doran, John Guy, Christopher Haigh, Norman Jones, and Wallace MacCaffrey, but she does not neglect the important work of Nicholas Canny, Jane Dawson, or Hiram Morgan. That said, the perspective here remains very much that of 'enriched English history' rather than British history: Scottish historians get rather short shrift here and Alford's aforementioned study of William Cecil and British succession politics in the early Elizabethan regime is curiously absent.

If not quite seen as her 'second reign', the period 1585-1603 is now recognised by scholars as distinctly more troubled than the first half of Elizabeth's long reign. Costly wars against Spain and the Irish, involvement in the Netherlands, socio-economic distress, and an authoritarian turn by the regime all cast a pall over Gloriana's final years, underpinning a weariness with the queen's rule and open criticism of her government and its failures. Levin closes her book by looking at these troubled times through the perspective of those who were 'different': poor women persecuted as witches, Jews, and Africans. Jews and Africans are studied both through their place in the cultural record (Marlowe, Shakespeare, the stage generally and accounts of exploration and travel) and as ethnic communities. This 'take' on the end of the reign will not appeal to everyone, but it does highlight the consolidation of a chauvinistically Protestant English identity which exacerbated pre-existing tendencies to see others as 'curious and inferior'. (p. 118)

Tudor xenophobia toward 'foreigners' not only found play among Jews, Africans, and the poor. It inflamed religious, cultural, and ethnic differences in the three kingdoms after 1603. It left its mark on the seventeenth century and the age of empire which followed. Tudor xenophobia and anti-Catholic hysteria informed the polemical fashioning and refashioning of Elizabeth into a Protestant saviour and the vilification of James and his successor. The aging, irascible, and lukewarm Protestant queen of 1603 was from the 1620s embraced as the saviour of the reformed church during the mortal struggle with Catholic Spain. By contrast, the adult male with undoubted Protestant credentials who ensured a peaceful succession was refashioned as the 'fearful', debauched Scot who played the willing dupe to Counter-reformation Catholics bent on 'universal monarchy' and the destruction of European Protestantism. As Elizabeth waxed, so James waned in the seventeenth century. Fortunately, today's appraisals are more evenly balanced, even if James' reputation has not quite escaped Weldon, Wilson, Osborne, and their descendants.

Notes

1. Pam Wright, 'A change in direction: the ramifications of a female Household 1558-1603', in David Starkey (ed.), *The English Court* (Longman; Harlow, 1987), pp. 147-172; Natalie Mears, 'Politics in the Elizabethan Privy Chamber: Lady Mary Sidney and Kat Ashley', in James Daybell (ed.), *Women and Politics in Early Modern England* (Ashgate, forthcoming).Back to (1)
2. I have dealt with this at length in my *Kingship and Crown Finance under James VI and I 1603-1625* (Boydell and Brewer; Woodbridge, 2002), pp. 50-60 and generally.Back to (2)
3. John Guy, *Thomas More* (Arnold; London, 2000), pp. x-xi.Back to (3)
4. For instance Nicholas Canny, 'Irish, Scottish, and Welsh responses to centralisation, c. 1530-c.1640: a comparative perspective', in Alexander Grant and Keith J. Stringer (eds.), *Uniting the Kingdom? The Making of British History* (Routledge; London, 1995), pp. 147-69.Back to (4)

Alan Stewart has read Professor Cramsie's review and does not wish to comment further.

Carole Levin would like to thank Professor Cramsie for his thoughtful review and I am most appreciative

that he finds the text clear , accessible and judicious. While I agree that Christopher Haigh's *Elizabeth I* presents an interesting, provocative account of Elizabeth, it is different enough in approach from my study, particularly in the final chapter as Cramsie notes, that I would hope readers would find both texts to be valuable.

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