

The Cult of King Charles the Martyr

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‘Do you recollect the date’, said Mr. Dick, looking earnestly at me, and taking up his pen to note it down, ‘when King Charles the First had his head cut off’?(1)

Struggling – without success – to keep the troubles in Charles’s head out of his own, and to keep Charles himself out of his grand ‘Memorial’ to his own times, Mr. Dick in *David Copperfield* proves a prescient (if slightly deranged) spokesman for the longevity of interest in – and trouble over – the figure of Charles I. Early Stuart historians continue to produce rich but differing accounts of this controversial early modern monarch. Downplaying ideological conflict and pointing to short- rather than long-term causes of civil war, revisionist accounts have looked at functional and structural explanations: financial difficulties, the gap between centre and locales, and the difficulties of ruling three kingdoms.(2) But the conversation invariably returns to the personality and practices of Charles I, the villain of earlier Whig history and not noticeably improved in most recent accounts. Various studies have found Charles inflexible, vindictive in applying the Forced Loan, autocratic in temperament, and fanning the flames of religious tension.(3) Nonetheless, Kevin Sharpe’s account of the king as a conscientious, able administrator, whose Personal Rule was marked by calm, compromise and co-operation before the Scots started trouble in 1637, offers another (albeit contested) option.(4)

At the same time, both literary scholars and historians have recognised the importance of the royal image in ceremony, painting, masque, poem and printed text. Himself a connoisseur, Charles in many ways controlled his own image: commissioning Bernini sculptures and the elegant paintings of Sir Anthony Van Dyck,

overseeing lavish court masques in which both he and his queen performed, and imposing rules and regulations to govern behaviour at court, in contrast to the improprieties of the Jacobean era. But again there is scholarly disagreement over whether court culture was sycophantic, insular and isolating, part of the tensions leading up to civil war, or whether it educated and advised the monarch, effectively promoting an image of virtue to the nation. While Kevin Sharpe sees Caroline court culture as a last manifestation of the Renaissance belief in the didactic power of images, Judith Richards argues that few subjects ever saw Charles and the now well-known images 'stayed in royal possession or went directly into private hands, well away from the general view'.⁽⁵⁾

While much of the discussion of representations of Charles I has centred on courtly representations, a recent volume edited by Thomas N. Corns broadens out to popular print from the 1640s through to the early eighteenth century.⁽⁶⁾ Essays by various authors in this volume stress change and malleability in the royal image: from tensions over how to depict the prince and king in the 1620s (warrior or king of peace), to marital and national harmony in the 1630s, through challenges in popular print (including opposition by Levellers, republicans, and fifth monarchists), to the image of martyr that reached full force in *Eikon Basilike*, a text then variously augmented, appropriated, illustrated, turned into rhyme and set to music until well into the eighteenth century.

Yet despite all this interest, the single most important text on Charles – the *Eikon Basilike* and the concomitant martyrology – has been the subject only of discrete chapters (three in the Corns' volume) or single journal articles. The martyrology is a big and important subject, but, as Andrew Lacey points out early in *The Cult of King Charles the Martyr*, one that is 'usually mentioned rather than studied'. (p. 5) Hence Lacey has presented us with an equally big and important book, giving a rich and detailed account of the cult of martyrdom from its inception in the civil war years, to its definitive rendering in *Eikon Basilike* and the elegies and sermons just after the 1649 regicide, to its official status when the Office of 30 January was annexed to the Book of Common Prayer in 1662 and its final removal in 1859. According to Lacey, the success of the cult, dependent upon a shared set of assumptions about divine right, patriarchy, and passive obedience, opens a window into a conservative political theology that has at times been overshadowed by a focus on revolution and change.

Moving in chronological order, Lacey traces the development of the cult of martyrdom through a wealth of printed texts: early sermons on the regicide, biographies, political pamphlets, collections of elegies, printed devotions, the Service in the Book of Common Prayer, and 30 January sermons before the Court or the Houses of Parliament. By tracing the shaping of the cult of Charles the martyr from its beginnings in the 1640s until its last official moments in 1856 (although commemorations still continue), Lacey provides the *longue durée* usually absent in discussions of representations of King Charles. The result is a rich exploration and reconsideration of a martyrology based largely on printed and literary texts, including the enormously influential *Eikon Basilike*.

The opening chapters typify Lacey's approach: judicious summary of multiple texts – some familiar, some new – along with the pinpointing of key themes, which he sees as conservative and largely unchanging after their initial articulation in the late 1640s. Lacey begins with a chapter on the royal actor, setting out how *Eikon Basilike* appeared as part of longstanding fashioning of Charles in art, masque, and verse, and in the context of Protestant iconoclasm as exemplified by John Milton's *Eikonoklastes* (1649). The theology and iconography of martyrdom, Lacey points out, were the common heritage of English Protestants, although even within Protestantism the true martyr was sometimes difficult to determine. Accounts of Charles include many of the standard elements from John Foxe's influential *Book of Martyrs*: spurious worldly authority, a defendant speaking boldly at his trial, judges who are deaf to his arguments, physical and emotional suffering of the martyr, an affective leave-taking with family, steadfastness and constancy of the martyr in the service of truth, and receipt of supernatural aid in suffering. Lacey also notes one unusual element in accounts of King Charles: a direct parallel or comparison with the passion and death of Christ, in part, reflecting the unique situation of a martyr who was also a reigning monarch.

In his chapters on the lineaments of the royal martyr, Lacey is very little concerned with Charles's

behaviour. The fiscal and ecclesiastical policies of the 1630s – distraint of knighthood, forest fines, the granting of monopolies, ship money, innovations in the church (in other words, the actions that many historians see as provoking resentment and reaction) – do not appear. Nor do Charles's war-time policies, seen by his opponents as double-dealing, intransigence, and unreliability, appear.

Thus, rather than look at opposition or complicating behavioural factors, Lacey focuses more narrowly on the component elements of martyrdom as put together well before the regicide, by Charles and his followers. These are traditional views authorising kingship on the basis of divine and natural law and stressing non-resistance and passive obedience. Lacey does note that some of the most exalted language about Charles, including early use of the passion of Christ, stems from precise political contingency: the embarrassment of incriminating letters captured at the battle of Naseby in June 1645 and published in *The King's Cabinet Opened*. Epideictic techniques enabled writers to avoid thorny political and constitutional issues, to concentrate on creating a sympathetic and pathetic picture of a good king suffering for his people. But one of Lacey's central points is that the martyrdom – far from being attributable to unique characteristics in Charles himself – is based on a conservative myth reaching deep into the national psyche. The cult was thus ready and waiting, Lacey argues, for its main figure to step upon the scaffold on 30 January 1649.

Chapters 3 and 4 on the post-regicide period keep the focus on the cult and its promoters: the bishops and clergy who fled abroad or found a space in the homes of the gentry; and the printed texts – sermons, and elegies, and most prominently the *Eikon Basilike*. Regicide seemed to validate the typologies and genres already in place. Lacey does not spend much time on the trial and it would be interesting to hear his response to a recent series of articles by Sean Kelsey arguing that the Independents did not intend to execute Charles, that, even at the point of the trial, they merely meant to back him into compromise, and that the king's own intransigence and refusal to recognise the court forced their hand and brought about his own execution.⁽⁷⁾ Does the character of Charles trouble the image of the martyr?

Although he does not detail the shortcomings of the king's character, Lacey does recognise that, with Charles dead, his supporters – proponents of the cult – could develop his image with no fear of dissonant actions on his part; 'Charles was far more useful to the cult dead than alive'. (p. 51) The main use was in the *Eikon Basilike*, which along with sermons and elegies elaborated on the image of king as martyr. As he sorts out the complicated authorship of the *Eikon Basilike*, Lacey stresses that its presentation was remarkably consistent with the elegies and sermons that followed, showing Charles as innocent and his enemies as base rebels and Jews. Again, Lacey stresses continuity and conservatism; the themes developed in exile and defeat would be given an officially-sanctioned public arena with the Office of 30 January and 'were to be the commonplace of 30 January sermons' over the next century. (p. 118)

As he turns to the Restoration, however, Lacey also begins to note competing versions of the martyrology. Chapter 5 notes that the establishment of the cult in the liturgy of the church represented the triumph of one particular memory of Charles and the war. Attached to the Bill of Attainder of the regicides as instructions to keep 30 January as a fast day, the service focused on an Old Testament theology of the chosen people, God's law and human rebellion, judgement and vengeance provoked by disobedience and regicide, and expiation of bloodguilt.

On the one hand, the political doctrines embodied in these texts were deeply conservative: divine right of kings, non-resistance, passive obedience, indefeasible hereditary right and prerogative power. Hence Lacey comments that 'this process of fashioning and "establishing" after 1662 reflected the process of Anglican self-definition ... and was profoundly conservative and monarchical'. (p. 143) Yet Lacey notes at the same time that commemoration of 30 January became subject to party politics. With the Popish Plot and calls for Exclusion, these sermons became even more strident, part of the Tory counter-attack, hence underscoring the party nature of the martyr who was reduced to a pretext for political discourse.

Lacey's final chapters trace how the events of 1688-89 and 1714 made the Fast Day more important than ever. A battle over interpretation of the regicide was waged from the pulpits on 30 January. How could the Revolution be accommodated to conservative principles, retaining the basic premise of the divine origin of

government and the need for subordination in society? How could one reconcile the seeming contradiction between everything the cult stood for and the replacement of the divinely anointed king? Here Lacey does point to change in the core message of the cult. Official sermons, preached before the two Houses of Parliament or the City increasingly reinterpreted divine right to mean the powers that be rather than kings, in a significant divergence from the early Restoration version of the cult. Lacey also notes opposition in print from the 1690s onwards. Nonetheless, in Lacey's view, Charles's new link with the Tories and emergence as a party symbol continued to evince an ongoing line of traditional thought and conservative popular support.

Lacey stresses, above all, the unchanging nature of the cult of the martyr. And in this amply-illustrated and compelling story, the martyrdom of Charles I shows significant continuity and an important conservative strand. Lacey's materials add important aspects of continuity to the turning points of 1649, 1660, 1688-89, and 1714. Lacey is characteristically generous in acknowledging other scholars and careful and thoughtful with his own texts and conclusions. His account of the long and stable afterlife of the martyr king is one in which historians and literary scholars should take keen interest.

But at the same time, the rich and wide-ranging materials that Lacey amasses may have another story to tell: more revolutionary, less stable, regarding authorship, readers, print, polemics, and the public sphere. While *Eikon Basilike* dominated the image of the king in the 1650s, it was not necessarily unchanging or unchallenged, even before the party contestation of the later Restoration period.

In an important essay (footnoted by Lacey), in Corns' *The Royal Image*, Elizabeth Skerpan Wheeler stresses that there is no one text of *Eikon Basilike*, but rather multiple editions, varying formats, differing illustrations, with added prayers, accounts of Charles's leave-taking from his children, and musical settings (8) Skerpan Wheeler argues that, rather than speaking with one voice, *Eikon Basilike* was multi-vocal; the king's book was a shifting composite, whose very mode of accretion, accumulation, and public composition changed the nature of the kingship that it celebrated. While the message was conservative, the form of the *Eikon Basilike* radically transformed its ultimate meaning.

Kevin Sharpe continues this line of argument, noting in a recent (2000) article on images of Charles I that, while at first sight 'the *Eikon Basilike* appears as the most powerful articulation of conservative and royalist politics', that conclusion must now be questioned. Following Skerpan Wheeler, Sharpe stresses multiple authors and influences, composite and shifting form: 'though the message of the *Eikon* was conservative, in its form, its language, and its strategies it was a radical re-presentation of the king'. For Sharpe, from the moment of their construction, 'representations of kings and queens were labile, open to reading and appropriation and shifting over both short and longer periods of time'.(9)

These recent assessments (and indeed the general stress in Corns' volume on change and instability) provide a challenge to Lacey's reading. For Skerpan Wheeler and Sharpe, the mode of composition of *Eikon Basilike*, its shifting text and multiple appropriations, belie the conservative message of the martyr king, which cannot simply be seen as a conservative political theology. Lacey does trace this contestation post-1660, but does not look at reception, treat printed oppositional images to the *Eikon* from the Commonwealth period, or include manuscript accounts at any point. Lacey does, in fact, note the limits of time and scope in an already big book to explain why he focuses on printed texts alone. But the eschewal of manuscript sources may contribute to a reading of the cult as definitive, unchanging, conservative, and finally unable to adapt to the times rather than as a more complex – if messier – story of multiple adaptations, re-readings and appropriations.

Also interesting and paradoxical is that in order for Charles successfully to be shaped as a martyr – in his own time and ours – he must be largely kept out of the text. Charles’s own actions, prevarication, and double-dealing exasperated his opponents in his own day. But as the king himself faded as an actual person, the martyrology took on deep and rich life. Lacey astutely observes that once deceased, Charles is no longer able to mar with his actions the idealised portrait of the martyr. But Lacey too largely keeps the historical Charles I out of his account. His is a story not only of divine right kingship, but of such kingship asserted in print, by the people, when the king himself is safely dead.

Andrew Lacey tells – persuasively, clearly, and thoughtfully – the story of the conservative martyr. But he also gestures toward an alternative story of the power of print, propaganda, and political debate in an emergent public sphere. This is a more radical story and one about which there is much more to tell. If, as in the Dickens novel with which we began, the head of Charles I continues to trouble – and inspire – works as scholarly, insightful, and thought-provoking as Lacey’s ground-breaking study, the world of early Stuart scholarship will only be the richer.

Notes

1. Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield*, ed. George Ford (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1958), p. 161.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Conrad Russell, *The Causes of the English Civil War* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. See, for instance, Richard Cust, *The Forced Loan and English Politics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987); L. J. Reeve, *Charles I and the Road to Personal Rule* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Nicholas Tyacke, *Anti-Calvinists: The Rise of English Arminianism c. 1590-1640* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987); and Julian Davies, *The Caroline Captivity of the Church* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Kevin Sharpe, *The Personal Rule of Charles I* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Kevin Sharpe, *Criticism and Compliment: The Politics of Literature in the England of Charles I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), and Sharpe, *Personal Rule*, pp. 222-35; Judith Richards, “‘His Nowe Majestie’”, and the English monarchy: the kingship of Charles I before 1640’, *Past and Present*, 113 (1986), 70-96, on p. 74.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Thomas N. Corns, ed., *The Royal Image: Representations of Charles I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. For instance, Sean Kelsey, ‘The Death of Charles I’, *Historical Journal*, 45: 4 (2002), 727-54; and Kelsey, ‘The Trial of Charles I’, *English Historical Review*, 118 (2003), 585-616.[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. Elizabeth Skerpan Wheeler, ‘Eikon Basilike and the rhetoric of self-representation’, in Corns, ed., *The Royal Image*, pp. 122-40.[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. Kevin Sharpe, ‘So hard a text? Images of Charles I, 1612-1700’, *Historical Journal*, 43: 2 (2000), 383-405, on pp. 393, 394, and 385.[Back to \(9\)](#)

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