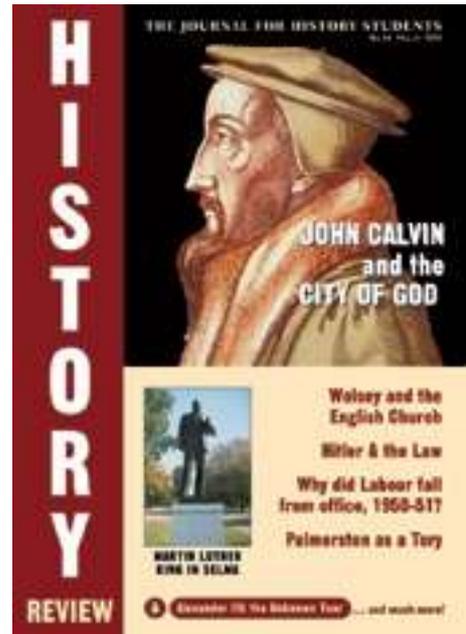


James VI and I



James VI and I

(as copied from <http://www.questia.com/googleScholar.qst?docId=5001822679> ,
History Review September 1999 | Issue: 34 | Page 8-13 | Words: 3275 | Author: Lockyer, Roger
Strangely enough Lockyer fails to mention the publication of the King James Bible in 1611.)

by Roger Lockyer

***Roger Lockyer takes a fresh look at the much-maligned James VI of Scotland,
who became the first Stuart king of England.***

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James VI of Scotland and I of England has had a bad press. It began with Sir Anthony Weldon, who held a minor post in the royal administration until he was sacked for writing a scurrilous tract about Scotland, the King's native land. Weldon took his revenge by producing *the Court and Character of King James I*, a piece of sensational journalism which would never have seen the light of day but for the breakdown of censorship in the 1640s. This became a best-seller, and James was thereafter regarded as little better than a buffoon, unworthily spanning the gap between the glorious Virgin Queen and the tragic royal martyr. This traditional view survived well into the 20th century. Only in the 1970s did historians start looking afresh at the surviving evidence of James's reign in both Scotland and England. As they did so, they became aware that there was a great deal to be said in his favour.

Divine Right

James is often dismissed as the proponent of an absurd theory of 'divine-right monarchy', but his ideas on the subject were in fact common currency throughout Europe, where it was taken as axiomatic that kings were appointed by God to rule His people. The nature of royal authority became a hotly disputed issue in the

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second half of the 16th century, when France was torn apart by wars of religion in which both protestants and catholics claimed that kings could be called to account for their actions, and even put to death. In practice, this was a recipe for perpetual anarchy, and the only way out seemed to be that of asserting the absolute authority of the monarch and insisting that he must be obeyed.

The role of monarchy in Scotland

James knew from his own experience how the absence of effective royal rule could open the way to violence and disorder. He was a mere 13 months old when the enforced abdication of his mother, Mary, Queen of Scots, set him on the throne, and for many years he was used as a pawn in the power struggles of the Scottish nobility. Not only this. He was placed under the tutorship of George Buchanan, who had a poor opinion of monarchy and maintained that tyrannicide was justified when kings ruled badly. If James had been as feeble a creature as tradition has it, he would have been crushed by the circumstances of his upbringing. But he used the education which his formidable tutor gave him to develop his own opinions. In 1598 he produced *The True Law of Free Monarchies*, in which he argued that kings, being appointed by God, were responsible to Him alone and not to 'the people' or any other human institution.

Buchanan's low view of monarchy was widely shared in 16th-century Scotland. The protestant church, or Kirk, had only been able to establish itself by supporting a revolt against James's catholic mother, Mary, Queen of Scots, and its leaders never doubted that God spoke through them rather than any secular ruler. One of the most forceful of these leaders was Andrew Melville, who told James to his face that he was merely 'God's silly [i.e. simple] vassal' and informed him that 'there is two kingdoms in Scotland. There is Christ Jesus the King, and his kingdom the Kirk, whose subject King James the Sixth is, and of whose kingdom not a king, nor a lord, nor a head, but a member'.⁽¹⁾ James, who was well practised in concealing his private thoughts, preserved an outward calm, but when, a year or two later, he set to work on the *Basilicon Doron* -- a philosophical treatise written for the guidance of his son and heir, Prince Henry -- he warned him to be on his guard against 'some fiery-spirited men in the ministry' who 'fed themselves with the hope to become Tribuni plebis [tribunes of the people]: and so, in a popular government, by leading the people by the nose, to bear the sway of all the rule'.⁽²⁾

Anglo-Scottish unity?

James had shown great skill, as well as courage, in manoeuvring between the Scottish factions, and by the time he ascended the English throne he had reduced the nobility to obedience and tamed the presbyterian Kirk. He had every reason to assume that his success in Scotland would be replicated in England, but the two countries were dissimilar. Scottish law, based upon the imperial law of ancient Rome, was significantly different from English common law. The Scottish Parliament, which met for only a few days at a time and was under the control of royal councillors, bore no more than a fleeting resemblance to its English counterpart. The presbyterian Church of Scotland, even with the bishops imposed upon it by James, was far removed in its doctrine and practices from the Church of England. Moreover, the two nations were old enemies, and suspicions were entrenched on both sides. James took it for granted that God had chosen him to combine Scotland and England into the single entity of Great Britain, but when he called upon the English Parliament to create a union of states he was rebuffed. English nationalism was a potent force, and the very fact that their new sovereign was a Scot, unfamiliar with English ways, added to the determination of members of the Commons to preserve the rights and liberties won for the English by their ancestors.

There was nothing fatuous or shameful about James's desire to unite his two kingdoms. Moreover, the record of debates in the House of Commons makes it plain that members were not solely motivated by the desire to preserve their rights.

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Prejudice, bigotry and ignorance were also powerfully at work. It is to James's credit that he rose above these, but his far-sightedness was not matched by his subjects. The noble objective of creating Great Britain was sacrificed on the altar of Little Englanderism.

Finance and friction

Mutual suspicion between King and Parliament contributed to mutual misunderstanding, and this was increased by the financial pressures on the crown. Galloping inflation during the 16th century had eroded the royal revenue, and by 1603 it no longer covered the costs of government. Either Parliament must re-endow the crown, or prerogative sources of income would have to be expanded. Members of Parliament, however, had to take into consideration the views of their constituents, who were opposed to taxation, especially after James brought to an end the costly war with Spain. They could take refuge from reality by arguing that royal extravagance rather than inherent weaknesses was the cause of the crown's poverty.

James was undoubtedly extravagant. After his abrupt transition from the poverty of Scotland to the apparently limitless wealth of England he gave away capital sums and pensions as though there were no tomorrow. What made matters worse in the eyes of his English subjects was that most of James's largesse was directed towards his fellow Scots. Since the majority of offices in the new 'British' administration were reserved for the English, it was only fair that the Scots should receive a higher proportion of the financial benefits. English taxpayers, however, were not interested in fairness. They regarded the Scots as sponges upon the English state, and James himself as an improvident dispenser of the royal revenues. Rather than re-endow the crown, they urged him to put his house in order.

James in fact did so. The change became apparent after Lionel Cranfield, a future Lord Treasurer, entered the royal service in 1618, but as early as 1610 James had assured members of Parliament that 'that vastness of my expence is past which I used [in] the first two or three years after my coming hither ... That Christmas and open-tide is ended'.⁽³⁾ If members had taken him at his word they might have made a more positive response to Robert Cecil's far-sighted proposal for a Great Contract, whereby the crown would surrender wardship, purveyance, and a number of minor revenues in return for regular and permanent taxation. The Commons, to give them credit, were not entirely negative, but they drove so hard a bargain that even if the proposal had been carried through it would have left the crown little better off. However, after consulting their constituents during the summer recess in 1610, the Commons declined to put into effect the provisional agreement they had earlier accepted, and the project collapsed.

The Commons might have been more receptive to Cecil's proposal if he had not already expanded the crown's resources by enlarging the number and range of Impositions. These were taxes on trade levied by virtue of the royal prerogative, and although they were confirmed as legal by the judgement in Bate's Case in 1606 they remained a bone of contention down to the eve of the Civil War. Impositions brought in some 70,000 [pounds sterling] a year, which was as much as a parliamentary subsidy, but they were capable of indefinite expansion. Indeed, by the closing years of Charles I's reign they were worth a quarter of a million pounds annually. Members of Parliament were understandably apprehensive that if James could raise the equivalent of a subsidy every year without the hassle of holding a parliamentary session, he would follow the example of many of his fellow rulers and dispense with representative assemblies altogether. This was not James's intention, and he never gave up hope of establishing harmonious relations with his parliaments. To this end, he was prepared to make concessions. **He offered to accept a statute which would deprive the crown of the right to levy any more Impositions, unless these were authorised by Parliament.** He also promised to give up existing Impositions if Parliament provided an acceptable alternative. However, the Commons

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were unwilling to compensate the King for what they continued to regard as illegal taxation. Moreover, they demanded that Impositions should be clearly and definitively abandoned before they committed themselves to the Great Contract or any similar proposals. In other words, they wanted James to trust them to fulfil their side of the bargain, while refusing to show the same trust in him.

Religion and resistance

Money -- or the lack of it -- was not the only cause of disharmony between the King and the political nation. Religion was another. There could be no doubting James's commitment to protestantism, and this went down well with his new subjects. But they were unclear about his exact attitude, and differed in their responses. Many of the bishops feared that James would be too inclined towards presbyterianism, and sought reassurance on this point. Puritans, on the other hand, hoped he would permit a greater degree of diversity for those ministers who regarded the wearing of distinctive vestments and participating in ceremonies such as signing with the cross in baptism and using the ring in the marriage service as ungodly; James, who was always at heart a reconciler, summoned a conference of bishops and puritan leaders to Hampton Court at the very outset of his reign, to try to find a common position on disputed issues. In many respects the Conference was a success, but although a number of concessions were made to the puritans, James demonstrated his commitment to the established Church and his determination to enforce conformity to its doctrines and practice. These were defined by the Canons drawn up by Convocation in 1604 and promulgated by James in his capacity as supreme governor of the Church. Most ministers, even if they were of puritan inclination, found it possible to reconcile their consciences with the canonical requirements, but there remained a small group for whom compromise was out of the question. James initially took a hard line against these non-conformers, assuming that English puritans, like their Scottish counterparts, were tainted with republicanism. But as he moved around southern England on hunting expeditions, meeting the principal landowners, he came to realise that his fears were unfounded, and he moderated his approach. In the end, about 80 ministers -- less than one per cent of the total -- were ejected from their livings.

Parliament took up the cause of the 'deprived ministers', but James would not yield on this issue. He believed, with good reason, that the Church needed stability above all things and that the toleration of non-conformity would weaken it internally. James was also unimpressed by the Commons' criticism of the episcopate. Unlike Elizabeth, he took great care over the appointment of bishops and made sure they reflected the diversity of attitudes and opinions within the Church.

Following the death of Whitgift, he chose the Bishop of London, Richard Bancroft, as Archbishop of Canterbury. Bancroft, formerly Whitgift's chaplain, was a disciplinarian who had played the principal part in drawing up the 1604 Canons. Under him, the Church continued on the course that Whitgift had laid down. In 1610, however, Bancroft died, and many people assumed that James would appoint his favourite preacher, the high-church Lancelot Andrewes, as the new Archbishop. But Bancroft had recommended as his successor a conforming puritan, George Abbot, and James went along with this. He was already familiar with Abbot, who had been chaplain to his close friend and servant, the Scottish Earl of Dunbar, and in 1608 had played a key role in reconciling the Scottish Kirk to episcopacy. Abbot was far more acceptable to the broad range of ministers within the established Church in England than Andrewes would have been, and James's choice of him as Archbishop led to a marked decline in puritan agitation.

It was no mean achievement on James's part to hold the Church of England together and make it, in fact as well as theory, the Church of the English people. This balancing act became more difficult in the closing years of the reign, when the outbreak of religious war on the continent polarised opinion within the political nation. James was determined to keep Britain out of the conflict while he pursued

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diplomatic initiatives designed to restore peace in Europe. He was supported in this aim by the high-church or Arminian faction among the clergy, who, knowing their general unpopularity, looked to the King to protect them, and offered him unquestioning loyalty in return. The anti-Arminians, on the other hand, who were the vast majority, demanded that James should take the lead in uniting the protestant states of Europe in a crusade against Spain and the Papacy. James did his best to dampen down controversy by forbidding the public discussion of thorny issues, but control of events was slipping out of his hands. Fortunately for him, he died in 1625, before the Jacobean consensus had completely broken down.

While James's commitment to the protestant Church won general support, his reluctance to persecute Roman Catholics was widely condemned. James regarded the fragmentation of Christianity which had come about as a consequence of the 16th-century Reformation as a tragedy, and he longed to restore unity to Christendom by means of interlocking marriage alliances. He arranged for his daughter, Elizabeth, to marry Frederick, Elector Palatine, one of the principal protestant princes in Germany. At the same time he was negotiating to arrange a match between his son and a daughter of the King of Spain, regarded in England as the archetypal catholic sovereign. While the first part of his strategy was successfully accomplished, the Spanish match was never achieved. Yet in the hope of promoting it, James relaxed the enforcement of the penal laws against English catholics. This alarmed his protestant subjects and led to the bitter break-up of the 1621 Parliament.

James's relative tolerance towards English catholics, and his willingness to accept limited diversity within the established Church so long as outward conformity was maintained, make him a far more attractive figure to us than the bigoted fundamentalists who were prominent in the Commons and reflected public opinion in the country at large. Yet rulers take a considerable risk if they pursue policies which are too far out of line with those which their people favour. James was adept at obscuring his aims, and the divergence between his rhetoric and his actions played a key role in this. Yet in his defence of monarchy and his pursuit of the middle way in religion he showed not only a tenaciousness but a courage which belie the conventional view of him as a timid coward.

Royal favourites

In Jacobean Britain, James was the ruler, and this remained the case even where his notorious favourites were concerned. There is no doubt that he chose his male favourites on account of their looks and sexual appeal, but while they may have dominated him emotionally they never did so politically. Robert Kerr, whom James created Earl of Somerset, was of little or no political significance. George Villiers, who ended up as Duke of Buckingham, was far more important in this respect, but during James's reign he never attained the Prime-Ministerial position he occupied under Charles I. His initial appointment, as Lord Admiral, gave him responsibility for the navy, which he took seriously -- reforming naval finances and administration, and initiating a programme of regular ship-building. In the broader sphere he acted as James's agent, not least in negotiating with Count Gondomar, the Spanish ambassador. By using him in this way, James deflected a great deal of the hostility aroused by unpopular policies towards Buckingham rather than himself.

There are indications that by 1621 Buckingham was beginning to question some of the King's assumptions. But not until 1623, when he accompanied Prince Charles on the journey to Madrid which was supposed to clear the last hurdles in the way of the Spanish Match, did he become aware of the true nature of the power struggle in Europe. He returned home determined that Britain should take the lead in forming an anti-Habsburg alliance, but he could not bring this about unless James agreed, and the King clung to his pacifist convictions. Although James allowed himself to be pushed into taking a bellicose stance, his cautious nature held him back from a full commitment. This was in many ways unfortunate, and there is a case for the

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argument that Charles I's reign would have got off to a better start if James had died in early 1624 rather than a year later. But there is no case for asserting that in the closing years of his reign James was clay in Buckingham's hands.

Conclusion

James's achievements can be summed up in a few words. He defended the role of monarchy while never attempting to subvert the law or established rights; he maintained the established Church; and he kept his nations at peace at a time when many other states were convulsed by war. He was not a heroic figure, nor did he ever become an icon, as Elizabeth had done. But his long reign of 58 years in Scotland and 22 years in England and Ireland was far more than an inglorious interlude.

Timecheck on James VI & I

1566	
(June)	birth of James in Edinburgh
1567	
(July)	abdication of Mary, Queen of Scots; James crowned King of Scotland
1578	end of regency: James assumes power
1587	execution of Mary, Queen of Scots
1603	
(Mar)	death of Queen Elizabeth: James VI of Scotland becomes James I of England
1604	
(Jan)	Hampton Court Conference
(Oct)	James proclaims himself King of Great Britain
(Dec)	Bancroft becomes Archbishop of Canterbury
1606	
(Nov)	Bate's Case in Court of Exchequer
1610	
(June)	negotiations over proposed Great Contract
1611	
(April)	George Abbot becomes Archbishop of Canterbury
1612	
(May)	death of Robert Cecil, Earl of Salisbury
1617	George Villiers created Earl of Buckingham
1619	Buckingham appointed Lord Admiral
1623	
(Mar-Sept)	Prince Charles and Buckingham in Spain
(May)	Buckingham created Duke
1624	
(March)	James breaks off negotiations with Spain

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1625
(March) Death of James I

Notes

(1.) *The Autobiography and Diary of Mr James Melville*, ed. Robert Pitcairn, Wodrow Society (Edinburg, 1842), pp. 369-70.

(2.) *King James VI and I: Political writings*, ed. Johann P. Sommerville (Cambridge, 1994), p. 26.

(3.) *political Writings*, p. 197.

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Roger Lockyer is Emeritus Reader in History in the University of London. His most recent book is *The Early Stuarts* (Longman, 2nd edition, 1999)³