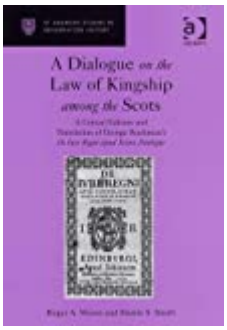
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Roger A. Mason, Martin S. Smith, eds. *A Dialogue on the Law of Kingship among the Scots: A Critical Edition and Translation of George Buchanan's De Iure Regni apud Scotos Dialogus.* Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004. 304 pp. $99.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-85928-408-7.

Reviewed by Alec Ryrie (Centre for Reformation and Early Modern Studies, University of Birmingham)

Published on H-Albion (May, 2005)

George Buchanan's *De Iure Regni*, first published posthumously in 1579, is one of the key texts of radical politics in the sixteenth century. It stands out amongst its contemporaries both for the sweeping, almost revolutionary nature of its argument, and for its remarkably secular tone. It was steadily reprinted through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries from Frankfurt and Amsterdam to Philadelphia, and was publicly burned in England as late as 1683. It is therefore astonishing that this should be the first modern scholarly edition (the editors dismiss two problematic mid-twentieth-century translations). It has, however, been worth waiting for. Roger Mason, a well-established historian of early modern Scottish political thought, and his classicist colleague, Martin Smith, have produced an edition which will prove definitive.

Buchanan's brief text is here accompanied by enough material to produce a monograph-length study. The heart of it is a parallel-text edition of the *De Iure Regni*, bolstered by fifty pages of notes and commentary, all executed with the meticulous care which we have come to expect from Ashgate's St. Andrews Studies in Reformation History. Much of the worth of the volume, however, comes from its lengthy introduction, which draws heavily on three earlier articles by Mason on Buchanan's life and work. The result is a synthesis which not only introduces Buchanan's text, but also provides one of the best and most accessible introductions to Buchanan himself now in print.

Mason's Buchanan is an itinerant jobbing scholar, a man who did not lack principles but whose insecure livelihood did not always permit him to indulge them. In the 1560s, after twenty years on the Continent, he served in Mary Queen of Scots's household–only to become, after her downfall, one of her most vocal critics. The *De Iure Regni*'s most immediate political purpose was to justify her deposition after the fact, and Mason argues vigorously that it was complete in all its essentials by the end of 1567. Mason wishes to trace this uncharacteristically ferocious political stance in part to Buchanan's Protestantism; a religious stance which was probably genuine enough, although more coolly Erasmian than fierily Knoxian in its flavor. Less generous readings are also possible. Buchanan's kin ties to the Lennox Stewarts–the family of Henry, Lord Darnley–certainly made him welcome the royal marriage of 1565; the royal murder of 1567 may have alienated him from the queen as profoundly as it did many others. Moreover, as Mason points out, in 1566-67, Buchanan was finding a place as a client of James Stewart, earl of Moray, who eventually ousted the queen and became regent. No doubt, as Mason argues, Buchanan's extraordinary attack

on his former mistress was sincere, but he was a man whose sincerity was usually kept on a tight leash by his interests.

Mason and Smith are concerned to separate the argument of the *De Iure Regni* from the "classic" Calvinist resistance theories of Knox and the French monarchomachs, not least because Buchanan adhered so lightly to the Calvinism that he formally professed. Buchanan emerges here as a latter-day humanist who is led by circumstances (and by Scotland's peculiar political traditions) "to fuse his Ciceronian ideal of citizenship with a radically populist conception of sovereignty" (p. l). While he remains a confirmed monarchist, his suspicion of tyranny leads him to strip monarchs of almost all real power; his ideal monarch is a symbol whose authority is moral rather than legal or coercive. Authority, by contrast, lay with the "people," although he was never explicit as to what this meant. Mason and Smith consider the possibility–raised and then rejected by J. H. Burns, and since taken up by others–that Buchanan actually envisaged something akin to classical democracy. They reserve judgment on this point, but the radicalism of Buchanan's doctrine of popular sovereignty is unmistakable; for at the end he does explicitly endorse the right of private individuals to assassinate tyrants, whether or not such assassination has been legitimized by anyone with a claim to authority.

As a political blueprint, this is, as Mason and Smith point out, shot through with contradictions. Buchanan is at once utterly cynical about monarchs, and wildly optimistic about their potential moral authority (a circle which this tutor of kings hoped to square through education–it is hardly surprising that his pupil James VI grew up to loathe his memory); his doctrine of tyrannicide is manifestly a call to anarchy, a conclusion from which he tried ineffectually to distance himself. It is not, however, as a constitutional engineer that Mason and Smith would present Buchanan: rather as a philosopher in the Stoic mold contemplating the ethics of government. His surpassing concern was political virtue, rather than realism. It is a plausible approach, although it perhaps reflects suspiciously well on Buchanan. Yet he is the kind of urbane radical who has inspired affection from historians in the way that Knox (for example) rarely has. To understand why, this book, especially its introduction, deserves to be read.

Citation: Alec Ryrie. Review of Mason, Roger A.; Smith, Martin S., eds., *A Dialogue on the Law of Kingship among the Scots: A Critical Edition and Translation of George Buchanan's De Iure Regni apud Scotos Dialogus.* H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. May, 2005.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10492