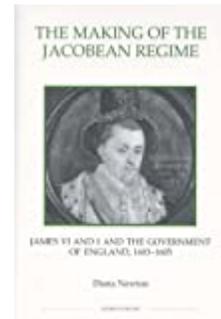




Diana Newton. *The Making of the Jacobean Regime: James VI and I and the Government of England, 1603-1605.* Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2005. x + 164 pp. \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-86193-272-6.



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The Shrewdest King in Christendom

My first book was a biography of Sir John Coke. In 1603, when King James ascended to the English throne, Coke was deputy treasurer of the navy working under his patron, Sir Fulke Greville, who was treasurer. Coke and Greville had made plans to reform the navy at the end of Elizabeth's reign. But in 1604, those plans were scotched. Coke and Greville were abruptly dismissed from office due to the sudden increased influence of the Earls of Suffolk and Nottingham, who promptly installed a crook, Sir Robert Mansell, as the new treasurer of the navy. The historian Julian Corbett wrote that Mansell "stands without a rival in our naval history for malversation in his office."^[1] Was this episode indicative of an overall change in personnel and character from the Elizabethan to the Jacobean regime? Was there a perceptible shift away from solid ability to fickle royal favor, from probity to rapaciousness, or not? Judging from the title and subtitle of Diana Newton's book, I expected it to answer these questions. But it turns out that this book is not really about the making of the Jacobean regime or King James's involvement in the government of England between 1603 and 1605 in any inclusive sense of those words. Newton's real subject is the Northamptonshire petition of 1605, the

challenge it presented to James's religious policy, and his handling of the matter.

Newton's book illuminates the making of the Jacobean religious settlement much more than the Jacobean political regime. Her work complements the work of Kenneth Fincham which established that James has to be taken seriously as a patron and leader of the Church.^[2] And she vastly expands on the early attention given to the Northamptonshire petition by Brian Quintrell.^[3] Newton skillfully analyzes the events leading up to and surrounding the petition. She demonstrates a deep familiarity with the manuscript sources, which she quotes from frequently, thereby enriching her telling of the story. She does an especially good job explaining how James's position was paradoxically made more difficult by two of his greatest virtues, his aversion to war and his religious tolerance. James's open friendliness toward Catholics, his disinclination to persecute them, and his pursuit of peace with Spain encouraged English Catholics to expect better treatment than they had received under Elizabeth. But James's conciliatory attitude toward Catholics and pacific foreign pol-

icy were viewed with increasing dismay by English Puritans. Years of war against Catholic Spain and government propaganda supporting the war had enflamed anti-Catholic sentiment in England. Now James seemed surprisingly soft on Catholicism. Thus the very same events and policies which emboldened Catholics to hope for better lives under James had the opposite effect of alarming Puritans. Newton is at her best dissecting these tensions and explaining how James's quick effort to terminate the war with Spain complicated his relations with his English subjects. As she writes, "It looked as if he was ready to relax conditions for English Catholics to secure favourable terms from the treaty with Spain" (p. 44).

At the same time James appeared friendly toward English Catholics, he seemed hostile toward his most ardently Protestant subjects. In particular, his effort to enforce the canons drawn up by Convocation in 1604 to weed out nonconforming Puritan ministers seemed intended to "harry the Puritan ministry." From a Puritan point of view, coercing godly ministers into conformity "seemed to be of far greater concern to the government than the proper subjugation of the arrogant and brazen Catholics" (p. 46). Supporters of the Puritan ministry failed to prevail in James's first session of Parliament. Then in July of 1604 James issued a proclamation demanding that the nonconforming ministers subscribe to the canons or lose their livings. "Sooner or later," as Newton explains, there was going to be "a showdown" (p. 57).

The showdown came in the form of the Northamptonshire petition in February of 1605 in which the signatories expressed "their consternation at the prospect of their godly ministers losing their livings for their failure to submit" to the canons. This event "was to be one of the most serious challenges to James's authority and his reaction would be a measure of his political abilities" (p. 79). Newton uses this episode to highlight those abilities. She writes that James now showed he was able to "think clearly and act fast" (p. 79). He "eloquently demonstrated the way in which he could react coolly and effectively under pressure" (p. 91). He showed "circumspection, consideration and pragmatism, and his commitment to rule by the art of the possible" (p. 110). He cracked down on Catholic and Puritan extremists alike, marginalizing them as he had done in Scotland, and he tightened control of the countryside, all of which turned the episode to his advantage and energized local government. James "emerged from the episode as a king of real political sagacity" (p. 119).

Newton argues that these events in 1605 constituted

"a watershed" in James's reign that has been obscured by the tendency of historians to concentrate excessively on the Gunpowder Plot (p. 98). She further argues that James's response to these events "set the tone for the whole of his reign" (p. 141). It is only when Newton tries to draw these larger conclusions from her smaller topic that doubts arise. For example, while she devotes considerable attention to the effort to energize local government, her evidence for this effort comes mostly from orders or instructions sent out to the localities, and she herself admits that the actual results were disappointing. Most doubtful is her effort to connect these events to the making of the Jacobean regime. Only on a few pages does Newton discuss the personnel of that regime. Given the abbreviated length of this book, she can only sketch the role of Robert Cecil, for example. And her emphasis on religious policy limits her survey of James's relations with the countryside, Scotland, and Parliament. For the most part, what her argument about the making of the Jacobean regime boils down to is a leap of faith, extrapolating the splendid qualities James is supposed to have exhibited in 1605 to the balance of his reign.

Like so many recent works about James, this book is a partisan defense. In Newton's effort to rescue James from what she repeatedly calls the "traditional" view, she is merely following what we might now call the "conventional" view—that James was maligned by earlier historians like David H. Willson and deserves to have his reputation enhanced. But the project to rescue James's reputation that began with the works of Jenny Wormald and Maurice Lee Jr. has been going on for more than two decades, and the argument is wearing thin.^[4] The traditional view of James was epitomized in the title of William McElwee's book, *The Wisest Fool in Christendom* (1958). But nobody takes the biographies of Willson and McElwee seriously anymore. And James's defenders seem bent on substituting an equally one-sided "shrewdest king in Christendom."

The fact is that James's response to the Northamptonshire petition could not possibly have "set the tone" for the Jacobean regime because there was no one tone. James's regime was polyphonic. Granted that James was a sometimes shrewd and effective ruler, he was also complex, and so was his regime. Newton concludes her book by declaring, "it is only by taking a holistic view of James's early years, and considering all the aspects of his first years in England simultaneously, that it is possible to get closer to an understanding of his English reign" (p. 146). I agree. In the same years covered by Newton's book, while James was dealing effectively with the

Northamptonshire petition, he raised his first English favorite, Philip Herbert, to the peerage as Earl of Montgomery. The attractive young man was well known for his love of horses, dogs, hunting, and gambling. At this time, too, the French Ambassador reported that Queen Anne feared the king would drink himself into an early grave and that he was an object of ridicule on the public stage. Most famously during this period, some members of the House of Commons were so disturbed by the new king's political style that they drafted an "Apology," and James ended his first session with a speech that was tactless and scolding. These events, too, foreshadowed the variegated Jacobean regime, where some officials were conscientious and others derelict in their duty, honesty existed side by side with colossal thievery, and the fortunes of courtiers rose and fell, depending on the tenuous affections of a king whose judgment was not as consistently shrewd as his admirers would have us believe. Before pronouncing final judgment on James's regime, historians will have to learn how to incorporate the bad along with the good.[5]

In the penultimate sentence of her book, Newton concludes that James's "legacy was political and religious stability" (p. 146). That may be true of the Jacobean religious settlement but hardly the Jacobean political regime. The example provided at the outset of this review illustrates how unstable, how topsy-turvy, the Jacobean regime was. Amazingly, in 1614 Fulke Greville returned to office as Chancellor of the Exchequer, and John Coke soon followed. Yet during these same years that appear to herald reform and renewal, Robert Mansell escaped punishment and continued to find public employment expressly because he continued to enjoy the king's favor. On the one hand, Coke got a belated opportunity to reform the navy because the favorite-of-the-day, the Duke of Buckingham, replaced Nottingham as Lord Admiral and supported the project. But on the other hand, within a few years' time, naval reform was ruined by the very same favorite's reckless rush to war. James never established a working relationship with Parliament. He boasted that he had "broken the necks" of three Parliaments in a row. And the political legacy he left behind, far from being stable, was a volatile mess. We need to move beyond partisan defenses of James, do justice to the remarkably complex and contradictory man he was, and appreciate the Jacobean regime in all its wonderful color and unpredictability. Apart from the fundamental issue of accuracy, it simply makes a much more interesting story.

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Notes

[1]. Julian S. Corbett, *England in the Mediterranean* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1904), 1: 70. For Coke, see my *Servility and Service: The Life and Work of Sir John Coke* (London: The Royal Historical Society, 1986).

[2]. Kenneth Fincham, *Prelate as Pastor* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); and Kenneth Fincham and Peter Lake, "The Ecclesiastical Policy of King James I," *Journal of British Studies* 24 (April 1985): 169-207.

[3]. Brian Quintrell, "The Royal Hunt and the Puritans, 1604-1605," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 31, no. 1 (1980): 41-58.

[4]. Jenny Wormald's seminal article was "James VI and I: Two Kings or One?," *History* 68 (1983): 187-290. She has followed it with a steady stream of works to the same effect. Maurice Lee Jr. has written several books presenting a favorable view of James, including *Great Britain's Solomon: James VI and I in his Three Kingdoms* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990). [On Lee, see Alec Ryrie, "Review of Maurice Lee Jr, *The 'Inevitable' Union and Other Essays on Early Modern Scotland*," H-Albion, H-Net Reviews, September, 2006 (<http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=26081160759413>).]

[5]. The best effort to date is Pauline Croft, *King James* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003). [See Arthur Williamson, "Review of Pauline Croft, *King James*," H-Albion, H-Net Reviews, January, 2004 (<http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=159911077082692>).]

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