

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

John Callow. *The Making of James II: The Formative Years of a Fallen King.* Phoenix Mill and Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing, 2000. ix + 373 pp. \$32.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7509-2398-9.



Reviewed by Margaret Sankey (Department of History, Auburn University)

Published on H-Albion (July, 2001)

James II presents a riddle to biographers and students of the restoration: how did the energetic, brave, loyal, efficient Duke of York turn out to be the king who lost his throne to William III? In 1948 F.C. Turner went so far as to suggest that James II suffered from degenerative syphilis which reduced him to the tyrannical despot of Whig propaganda, while many Whigs attributed the shift in character to the corrosive long-term effects of Roman Catholicism. In this new work, John Callow suggests that this was not a process of change, but instead a man who was flawed from the beginning. While James possessed admirable qualities, an inability to change and adapt to new roles and tune in to public opinion ultimately doomed him to be a “fallen king.” Perceptively, Callow points out that much of the material used by biographers comes from James, who refined, edited and re-wrote memoirs that selectively commemorated his good times, producing a valuable reference James volunteered to contemporaries as a source to use when producing their own autobiographies and histories. These volumes were lost in the French Revolution, but Callow does an admirable job of reconstruction, giving him a keen insight into what James thought he was doing.

Several themes emerge as lifetime patterns for James. Perhaps the most damaging was his inability to appreciate shades of disagreement or support. Callow attributes

this partially to James’ experiences in the Civil War, when he was captured and held by Parliament. Over time, this developed into a “for me or against me” attitude that ignored the differences in motivation amongst royalist supporters, highland and lowland Scots, and ultimately, amongst his own supporters in 1688. Such was his perception that he supported an assassination planned for Cromwell, without appreciating the consequences for English royalists and Catholics. In matters of religion, this was also a problem, as James could never accept that another person would not be convinced by his arguments, and when this failed, blamed the person’s own stupidity or obstinate behavior.

James was similarly unwilling to accept that he lived in the public eye. In the matter of his second marriage, to the Italian Catholic princess Maria Beatrice of Modena, James insisted that it was a private matter, not a public one. It was also his personal business to educate his two daughters, not as heirs, who would be trained in matters of state, but as gentlewomen. While in European service with the Spanish, James outraged his commanders by battlefield fraternization with the French, his former comrades, but once again defended his actions as personal, not matters of state.

This kind of defiance of public opinion, when coupled with his conversion, led the public to a willingness

to attribute almost anything to James, including plots and malevolent plans for autocracy. Callow does a very interesting job discussing James and Anne Hyde's conversion to Catholicism, placing it in the context of the conversion of Marshal Turenne, James's former military superior, and long-time correspondent. Tracing the process by which James and his wife convinced themselves of the illegitimacy of the English Reformation (from books meant to promote the opposite idea!), Callow provides valuable insight into the decision that was, for the public, the most objectionable of James's life, while showing why James believed it to be personal, not state business.

While James's Catholicism in many ways leant him a great deal of dignity, it was the stubborn adherence to a self-image of "warrior-prince" combined with Roman Catholicism that really offended and frightened many English people. Named Lord High Admiral as a child, James consistently associated himself with the military, having himself portrayed in armor and with martial props long after it had become ridiculous and stylized to the point of absurdity. While Charles II used the role of warrior judiciously, James seemed unable to make the shift to statesman, and his continued insistence on the role alienated more likely and effective candidates, like the Duke of Monmouth. Thoughtfully, Callow provides illustrations of the portraits discussed, allowing an interesting study in iconography, and suggests that part of James's attraction to the Jesuit order stemmed from their own military background.

The military career of James II seems to be one of the more puzzling aspects of his life: how could a man who served under Turenne, gloried in action and hand-to-hand combat, or kept a steady head when Berkeley's sailed past him after being hit by a cannonball, be so thoroughly inept later on? The answer seems to be, according to Callow, that James was an outstanding junior officer, who was temperamentally suited to scouting, small unit action and closely-watched subordinate duties, which was what he did for the increasingly blind Turenne, but abysmal as an executive. This was further complicated by a kind of glee in bloodshed and action, discovered early by James as he watched the fighting at Edgehill, associating the deaths with glory, not with the loss of valuable family supporters. It is true that James did a great deal to professionalize the English navy, making it a respectable profession for the elite, but at the same time, crippled it with placement and clients. To illustrate this tendency at work, Callow examines the Battle of Lowensoft, where James bloodily defeated the Dutch, only to go to bed without ordering pursuit and rendered

his victory indecisive, and the disastrous grounding of the *Gloucester*.

James also gets a great deal of credit as a father of empire, because of his association with the exploration and trade companies. While this is technically true, Callow further examines ground touched on by Stephen Saunders Webb, to show that James invested, not out of a grand sense of empire, but for necessary financial gain, and frequently bent the bounds of propriety to do so, in one case outraging public opinion by using a Royal Navy ship in a manner consistent with piracy off the coast of Africa. James was a promoter of the slave trade, slaves being one of the most valuable commodities produced by Africa, and his administration of the Royal African Company coincided with the change in terminology used to refer to slaves, from "servants" to "pieces (of merchandise)." These trade companies, however, alienated plantation owners, colonial merchants and English investors, who frequently saw their profits go to James and his friends, not the shareholders. James's great colonial venture was, of course, New York, seized from the Dutch in 1664, but promptly crippled by James's gift of New Jersey to Carteret, a move which created a rival economic force and hindered natural expansion. Further chaos resulted from his unwillingness to grant any sort of assembly and the linking of New York merchants to the Africa Company's slave trading. After this examination, the result of the 1688 Revolution in New York under Leisler is not at all a surprise.

James II is a figure of startling contrasts, a man whose cruelty in slandering Anne Hyde in an attempt to get out of their marriage is stunning, but who was also capable of incredible tact, as when he dined with the London Artillery Company amidst virulent and rude exclusion posters. He could be petty to gentry petitioners, once forcing a country gentleman to chase him around the park to present a request, but unstintingly loyal to the most incompetent friends. Without veering into speculative psychohistory, Callow delivers a reasonable explanation, showing trends that extended from childhood to accession, ending his study in 1685. This is not a book for the uninitiated, as many essential events are left unexplained. A student without a thorough knowledge of the Dutch wars, the Test Act, or the Oates Plot is likely to get lost in the thematic organization, which demands prior understanding of late seventeenth century England and certainly would be helped by a biographical study of James II, like John Miller's *James II: A Study in Kingship* (1989, 1991).

Copyright 2001 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publica-

tion, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-albion>

Citation: Margaret Sankey. Review of Callow, John, *The Making of James II: The Formative Years of a Fallen King*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. July, 2001.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=5272>

Copyright © 2001 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.