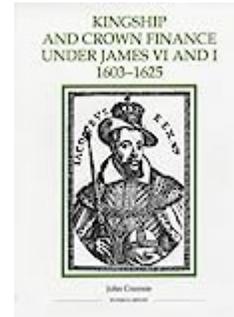


John Cramsie. *Kingship and Crown Finance under James VI and I, 1603-1625.* Woodbridge and Rochester: Boydell Press, 2002. xi + 242 pp. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-86193-259-7.



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“The canker of want,” as the king memorably called it, shaped much of the political history of James VI and I’s reign: money and how to get it lay at the root of many of the king’s most uncomfortable clashes with his Parliaments; money and its lack dictated many of the king’s foreign policy choices; and money problems have been at the center of many historians’ interpretations of the conflicts and failures of the reign. John Cramsie’s useful new study adds significantly to our understanding of the Jacobean “canker of want.” His central contentions are set out clearly in the beginning of the book. To understand the failings of Jacobean crown finance, Cramsie argues, we must examine the performance of James’s kingship, “how he operated as a political actor, the principles and mindset from which he did so and the manner in which he ruled” (p. 1). Rejecting the argument that the structural weakness of the early Stuart state made workable crown finance impossible, Cramsie argues that “the ultimate ‘failure’ of crown finance under James lay in an inability to fashion a stable and lasting settlement of the crown in England, a failure which was overwhelmingly political rather than institutional” (p. 1). If he had made different political choices and played the games of political negotiation with more aplomb, James might have created a workable and profitable crown finance policy: “Britain and Ireland,” Cramsie writes, “were manifestly not too poor to support the Jacobean regime” (p. 1).

To argue this case, Cramsie takes a multi-layered approach to the making, implementation, and political consequences of Jacobean fiscal policy. In the book’s freshest and most compelling chapter, he excavates the “principles and mindset” that shaped the approach James and his advisers took to financial questions. Cramsie explores the classical and humanist writings that educated the king and his councillors in the art of governance: in these works, crown finance was not an economic or institutional problem but a testing ground for political virtue. Money questions were inevitably moral questions—and morality was the essence of good kingship. A good king, as opposed to a tyrant, was a king who could show appropriately bountiful liberality toward the right people without indulging the vice of prodigality that would necessitate imposing oppressive exactions upon his subjects. A good king should also be able to privilege public good over private gain. To meet these moral and political mandates and to satisfy the demands of the patronage culture, Cramsie argues, James and his advisers leaned heavily, and ultimately mistakenly, on financial “projects,” public-private partnership schemes that would in principle generate the excess revenue necessary for the king to be a model of royal liberality. According to Cramsie, the “projecting mentality” became central to James’s approach to fiscal politics: “Projects were pervasive instruments of policy and no facet of finance was untouched

by them” (p. 35). Projects appealed to James not because they were fiscal expedients for a cash-strapped monarchy, but because they satisfied his ideological concerns: projects “were meant to pair public good and private gain and serve the course of true liberality without moving the king to tyrannical exactions” (p. 39). In practice, of course, reliance on projects was a gamble. Not only were the financial results uncertain, but also the balance between “public good” and “private gain” was a delicate one. It was all too easy for a project to be credibly attacked as a scheme to enrich private individuals at the public’s expense.

Having sketched out the humanistic and projecting mindsets that shaped royal financial policy, Cramsie then turns to the nuts and bolts of policy-making. He presents James formulating fiscal policy within a fluid and open system of counsel. James was not the lazy, extravagant monarch of popular repute; nor did his Bedchamber servants effectively monopolize access and counsel. James was no “administrator-king” (p. 48), but he was an energetic ruler, open to a broad array of opinion on financial policy, and served by a diverse group of advisers, both in and outside the Privy Council. Many of these royal servants invested a great deal of effort in producing and vetting financial schemes, collecting information, drafting memoranda, and communicating consistently and effectively with each other and with the king.

These opening thematic chapters give way in the rest of Cramsie’s book to a chronological survey of the fiscal politics of James’s reign, a survey that focuses primarily on the formation, presentation, and debate over financial policies—taxation, retrenchment plans, projects—in court and in Parliament. A chapter on the early years of the reign takes the story up to the summer of 1609, tracking Robert Cecil’s early dealings with Parliament on financial matters and James’s growing interest in projects, especially the enhancement of the customs revenue, as he became increasingly disgruntled with the Commons. This is followed by an important discussion of the construction, parliamentary discussion, and ultimate collapse of the Great Contract, Cecil’s scheme to fundamentally reform royal finances. This refoundation, Cramsie notes, was to be based primarily not on projects—although these were to remain an important element of financial policy—but on retrenchment, a tempering of royal bounty, and, most significantly, a deal with Parliament to surrender expendable parts of the royal prerogative in return for an annual financial supply. Cramsie offers an interesting new assessment of why the Contract scheme failed. Instead of looking at factional opposition at court or

at material grumbling in the localities, Cramsie focuses on many MPs’ constitutional anxieties about whether the king could surrender any part of his prerogative by statute and on their fears that this king, who persisted in levying impositions that many MPs considered illegal, could not be trusted to stick to his side of the bargain. A third chapter examines the aftermath of Great Contract’s collapse and the shift in financial policy following Cecil’s death in 1612. With the king reluctant to recall a Parliament that he felt had assaulted his honor, projects once more dominated financial reform schemes. The period from 1611-17, Cramsie argues, witnessed the nadir of James’s financial stewardship: Somerset’s rise lowered the efficiency of counsel, the king lost interest in fundamental financial reform, and under Suffolk “the treasurer-ship as a focus for fiscal policy and governance slipped into near-total abeyance” (p. 141).

Cramsie’s survey concludes with two chapters on fiscal policy in the wake of the 1617 budget crisis and George Villiers’s ascent from bedchamber favorite to *alter rex*. From 1617-21, Villiers presided over a financial policy that married genuine cost-cutting reformism with an intensified use of those projects that, as Cramsie notes, appealed to the favorite as a means “to construct and patronise his own affinity” (p. 164). Fiscal reform gave James a potentially powerful negotiating tool with Parliament, but Villiers’s projects generated damaging controversy when the Commons met in 1621. Projects also had enemies at court—Lord Treasurer Lionel Cranfield, who had worked closely with Northampton, Suffolk, and Villiers, also wished to radically decrease the place of projects in royal fiscal policy. In fact, Cramsie argues, Cranfield attempted to undo many of the working principles of Jacobean financial policy—the projecting mentality, the patronage culture that supported it, and government by *alter rex*—and to “hold James and Villiers accountable to an abstract public good” (p. 180). Even if the 1624 blessed revolution in English foreign policy had not isolated and destroyed him, Cranfield’s position at court and his policy of retrenchment could not have survived for long: his vision, Cramsie suggests, was simply too radical a break with the norms of Jacobean kingship.

These chapters all offer interesting interventions in a variety of debates about court, parliamentary, and fiscal politics, and they will be necessary reading for all students of Jacobean political history. Perhaps Cramsie’s sharpest historiographical contributions come in his critiques of Conrad Russell’s revisionist analysis of Jacobean parliamentary politics. Cramsie argues repeatedly that the financial problems and quarrels of the reign

should not be attributed solely to the inevitable effects of structural weakness in the state—James could have won Parliamentary support and supply if had made different political choices. Cramsie also creatively diverts historians' attention back to questions of political ideology and principle. Not only does he reconstruct the essentially ideological forces that shaped James's financial policy, but he also refuses to reduce MPs' complaints about royal financial policy and demands to merely miserly localist grumbling. Instead, he tracks MPs' concern with legal and constitutional principle and with the same moral questions about the balance of public good and private gain that troubled the humanist commentators on good kingship.

A few problems of argument and presentation weaken the book's overall impact. In a number of places, Cramsie's commendable ambition to cover the financial politics of the whole reign in a relatively short study renders his analyses thin and rushed, and throughout the book, we are left with a lingering sense that Cramsie's

story needs further exploration. If projects are the key to understanding Jacobean finance, we need more information on their workings in practice, if only to sketch out the impact of some schemes on the everyday lives of the people the MPs purportedly represented. And, while Cramsie does persuasively modify the structural weakness thesis, we need a much more considered reassessment of the institutional and interpersonal mechanisms of fiscal extraction as they worked in the localities, as well as some detailed consideration of the problems of war finance that were to be triggered by the events of 1624. Nevertheless, like Linda Levy Peck's pathbreaking work on Jacobean patronage and corruption, John Cramsie's book is a genuinely significant attempt to reposition the "canker of want" in its appropriate cultural and political contexts.[1]

Note

[1]. Linda Levy Peck, *Court Patronage and Corruption in Early Stuart England* (London: Routledge, 1990).

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