



Charles I and the People of England,

David Cressy

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Review by: Sarah Betts

Charles I and the People of England. By David Cressy. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. ISBN 978-0-19-870829-2. 464 pp. £30.

In discussing biographical writing, historian C. V. Wedgwood, famously wrote that “the individual – stupendous and beautiful paradox – is at once infinitesimal dust and the cause of all things”. The individual actions and character of Charles Stuart (1600-1649), the most well-known of Wedgwood’s own subjects, has been a frequent and contested subject for biographers, popular and scholarly alike, from the moment the axe curtailed his reign on a cold January day in 1649. *Charles I and the People of England* is an important and innovative addition to the field, attempting to re-contextualise the increasingly specialized studies of the first half of the Seventeenth Century through a “wider-ranging account... [that] reconnects the social, political, cultural and religious histories”(10-11). Stories and documentation of a wide range of the “ordinary” individuals who made up the vast majority of Charles’s People are interesting and original contributions to knowledge of life in the period.

Cressy’s style is articulate and engaging, and his examples are well-positioned within a “familiar narrative” which should make the book accessible to new students of the monarch as well as more seasoned scholars. Presenting this kind of research within a thematic rather than using a strictly chronological structure is definitely one of the study’s strengths and it is an approach which should trail-blaze a resurgence in wider-ranging cultural studies of the past, allowing the reader to consider the causes of the Civil War and the Regicide through immersion in the milieu of Caroline England instead of a linear model of cause and effect. Cressy’s approach and various array of case studies is effective in constructing a real sense of the “accumulation” of England’s troubles which he ultimately argues were the key to Charles’s downfall.

Whilst this study presents an original and rich discussion of written primary sources, direct engagement with the historiography is comparatively fleeting. There is little analysis of key works in the field to which this volume would seem to be offering a complementary, if alternative, perspective, such as the studies of Kevin Sharpe (*The Personal Rule of Charles I*.1992), Richard Cust (*Charles I: A Political Life*.2005), and John Adamson (*The Noble Revolt: The Overthrow of Charles I*.2007). Indeed for a project with ambitions of such wide-ranging scope the book feels short and in many places excellent points seem underdeveloped. Though the hardback is a sizeable volume, one third of the pages are taken up with footnotes leaving just three hundred pages for analysis. Glimpses of riveting material leave the reader wanting more. It would also be nice to see more discussion of visual and material sources.

Although Cressy acknowledges the limitations of the study of the people of England in the context of Charles's other kingdoms, the specifically *English* context is not directly explored beyond that it was "the most populous and prosperous of the Stuart Kingdoms" (7). Most especially the relationship between the still newly incumbent Scottish dynasty and their English subjects could have been further investigated, and the relationship between Charles's sister Elizabeth of Bohemia and the English is definitely an avenue for future research. Another frequent, but rather peripheral appearance in this text is Charles's wife, Queen Henrietta Maria. Cressy does mention her unpopularity with Charles's subjects, and the anxieties caused by her religion, it even crops up in the very first case study he presents in the prologue. However, the picture of the Monarchy could have been more complete with closer consideration of the royal couple as a politically charged unit. More could have been made, for example, of her significant impact on his public image and reputation as demonstrated by Michelle White (*Henrietta Maria and the English Civil Wars*, 2006) – a notable omission from the bibliography.

This lively and non-chronological account does much to flesh out the tensions and popular discontents of the 1620s and 1630s. By contrast, however, the vital war years of the 1640s are neglected. In discussing Charles I and his people, the statistics, motivations and levels of commitment of those recruited to the Royalist cause and army could have been much more central, and could have tapped into and engaged with the blossoming in studies of Royalism in recent scholarship. In the same vein, it is also to be lamented that Cressy's interesting analysis does not extended beyond Charles's death in 1649. The people of England did not end their lives on the scaffold with Charles I, and Andrew Lacey (*The Cult of King Charles the Martyr*, 2003) demonstrates that their difficult relationship with the king continued to resonate in the following decades and centuries. Nevertheless, this work, ambitious, well-researched, and original in approach, can offer inspiration to scholars of monarchy open to biographing the full body politic of both sovereign and subject.

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