



*James II,  
The Last Catholic King*

**David Womersley**

London: Penguin, 2015

**Review by: Hannah Thomas**

*James II: The Last Catholic King*. By David Womersley. London, Penguin, 2015. ISBN 978-0-1419-7706-5. vii + 112 pp. £10.99.

This volume is part of a series of mini biographies commissioned by Penguin since 2014, covering the monarchs of England from Aethalstan (r.893–939) to Elizabeth II (r.1952–present). Forty-five volumes are planned in total for the series, twenty-six of which were published by December 2016. The volumes are grouped into their relevant royal houses, and Womersley's is the fifth volume in the House of Stuart sub-series, which also includes a volume on Oliver Cromwell (expected February 2017). The volume under review seeks to examine the short and turbulent reign of James II (r.1685–88), and aims to move beyond the somewhat reductive description of James's short reign as one of the most catastrophic in British history.

Although the volume is a compact, pocket-sized biography of the monarch, it is dense with historical facts and information, providing an excellent starting point to a deeper study of the life and times of James II. Womersley's work is well argued and concisely written, and the author presents a nuanced and detailed picture of James's politics, religion, and career, leaving the reader with a clear sense of the impact of this short reign upon British history and the British monarchy. Divided into four chapters, Womersley takes a thematic approach, beginning with a historiographical introduction to the period, followed by studies of James's career as the Duke of York, his time as the King of England, Scotland, and Ireland, and finally, his exile and death. The book is also graced with twelve beautiful colour plates (between 72–3), which include portraits of James at various stages in his life, as well as allegorical illustrations of key events of the period, a commemorative medal on the centenary of his abdication, and an image of the beautifully sculpted post-mortem repository for James's brain in Paris.

A particular strength of the book is the author's careful treatment of the historiographical context of the reign in question and the period within which it was rooted. The opening chapter sets the historiographical framework from which the rest of the book takes its cue: the impact of James's reign as "one of the great pivots of English constitutional history" (3), the transformation of Parliament and the mechanisms of governance during his reign, and the raging debates and interpretations of this reign that have persisted from the nineteenth century onwards. These are concisely summarised by Womersley, who describes James's short reign as "challenging campaigning territory over which historians of various stripes still engage with one another" (4). The author concludes his historiographical survey with a key

question for the volume: did James, stupidly and maliciously, attempt the impossible? Or, were the religious and political objectives of his reign not only feasible, but also in fact very nearly achieved? (7–8).

The volume also draws attention to lesser-studied elements of James's political career, such as his successful and influential period as the Duke of York, after whom New York is named. Womersley also highlights the impact of the so-called 'Popish Plot' of the late 1670s, which, when combined with the lack of an heir to Charles II, and revelations of James's secret conversion to Catholicism, created a political crisis of such magnitude that it changed the British monarchy forever. The resulting Exclusion Crisis, which "challenged entrenched beliefs about the nature of society, its ends and government" (47), was ultimately unsuccessful, but did introduce new political tactics. These were wholly disciplined and coordinated in comparison to previous methods, and laid the foundations for modern campaigns for votes: "The lesson of the Exclusion Crisis was clear: control over the boroughs was the prerequisite of effective control over Parliament" (49).

The book draws upon a range of published sources, all of which are well known and much used by other historians of the period. Surprisingly, there is something of a lack of primary source material in this volume. Where primary sources are referred to, such as the diaries of Pepys and Evelyn, only modern published and edited editions are used. This criticism is perhaps a little unfair given the aims of the series within which Womersley's volume appears, but is worth noting in light of the fact that John Miller's authoritative biography of James II was first published nearly forty years ago, in 1978.

Womersley's volume is well referenced; and as well as footnotes, the author has also included a brief but informative 'Bibliographical Essay' (107–09), which will be a useful starting point for those looking for reading material for a more in-depth analysis of James's reign. The bibliographical summary also provides something of a bookend to the opening historiographical survey (as discussed above), and is a particularly useful research tool to students of this period in British history. The volume also hints at the importance of the English Roman Catholic communities in exile, drawing attention to their central role in English politics and religion in this period, whether as shelter for James's royal court at St Germain after 1688, or as a final resting place for the mortal remains of the deposed King James II at the English Benedictine College in Paris. Overall, the volume will be of interest to a wide range of readers, particularly historians of the late seventeenth century, as well as historians of post-Reformation Catholicism in the British Isles.

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