



James I: The Phoenix King

Thomas Cogswell

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Review by: Joseph Massey



James I: The Phoenix King. By Thomas Cogswell. London: Allen Lane, 2017. ISBN 978-0-141-98041-6. xiii + 109 pp. £12.99.

With the publication of Penguin's new English monarchs series, we must ask: does it offer anything that has not been done before? Clearly, there has been no overall goal behind it, as the books vary wildly in quality and focus. However, out of them all, Thomas Cogswell's *James I: The Phoenix King* is by far the best (so far), and adopts an approach that I wish the others had done as well. Cogswell states in the introduction that, due to the limited word count, he has "tried to let James tell his own story," focusing "as much on his personal as his public life" (x). He has certainly succeeded in this. The abundant contemporary quotes are threaded together with Cogswell's amusing prose to leave the reader with a firm impression of who James was as an individual. Anecdotes abound, demonstrating through memorable and engaging examples James's personal style of rule and his private interests: above all, we learn how much he adored hunting.

Each chapter is structured around a portrait of James at different stages of his life (and ascending to heaven after death), which integrates the obligatory illustration section into the work proper, and adds a splash of colourful visual analysis to the text. Another structural success is the balance Cogswell provides between James's time first in Scotland, and then in England, where he moved after his accession to the English throne in 1603. Most writers focus on either one or the other period of James's life, while those who attempt to cover both often falter. Thankfully, Cogswell does an excellent job of summarising the complex politics of James's life in Scotland. James's English rule is the book's major focus, which is understandable in a series on *England's* monarchs—this volume is only titled *James I*, after all—but Cogswell's coverage of James's Scottish years is fully integrated into the wider narrative and provides clear insight into the formation of his personality and policies, thereby allowing us to understand his behaviour after coming to the English throne.

A book of this length cannot cover all aspects of James's life, or go into great depth. However, there are two areas that I think deserved more attention. The thing that distinguishes James from any other English monarch was his brilliant mind: a monarch versed in classical and religious literature, James sought to make his mark on the international stage by publishing his own works. Yet, it seems that these works have been condemned, ironically, as unquotable. Cogswell does point out that James overcame objections from politicians and clerics by reciting biblical and scholarly precedents, which shows how central his learning was to his style of rule. However, James's

ideological views on the nature of monarchy and government, clearly expressed in *The True Law of Free Monarchies* (1598) and *Basilikon Doron* (1599), are not discussed at all, with the explanation being that they only apply in the Scottish context. Perhaps James's intellectual career is not deemed interesting enough for a biography aimed at a general audience; perhaps it does not offer as many humorous anecdotes as the tales of his hunting escapades do. However, I still think this was a missed opportunity for Cogswell to provide excellent summaries of James's works and their reception, as he does in his discussion of the Oath of Allegiance controversy.

The second area that I think deserved more attention is James's involvement in international politics. Following the existing historiographical pattern, there is ample discussion of the pursuit of a Catholic Spanish bride for James's son, Prince Charles. Yet, James's one and only journey outside the British Isles is barely commented on, except for its comical value. In 1589 James set sail for Oslo to 'rescue' his bride, Anne of Denmark, who had been stranded there by bad weather. James and Anne travelled back to Denmark, where they joined the court of Anne's brother, Christian IV, for a few months. What does James's decision to undertake this journey say about him, and did it have any long-term impact? There is no analysis of why James chose this dynastic alliance with one of Europe's few Protestant monarchies. Equally, there is no discussion of why James arranged the marriage of his daughter Elizabeth to Frederick V, Elector Palatine, another Protestant. James saw himself as a mediator in the conflict between Europe's Catholics and Protestants, and the marriage alliances he chose for himself and his family were part of this self-perception. It would not take many words to point this out, and it would tell us a great deal about James's outlook beyond the hunting lodge Cogswell so often places him in.

Cogswell concludes the biography by comparing James to a phoenix, a metaphor that is also used in the book's title. However, the book itself does not explain how it applies to James. What were the ashes that James gloriously arose from? The metaphor could work: for example, one could argue that James rose from the ashes of his mother's failure. While Mary, Queen of Scots was deposed by her subjects and could not control the Scottish kirk, James overcame the chaos of Scottish politics and the resistance of the Scottish clergy to become an effective ruler. Mary was executed in England and her claim to the English throne was always debated; James succeeded to the English throne and died in his own bed. But Cogswell does not give it this meaning.

When trying to concisely summarise someone's personality, there is always the risk of being reductive. Cogswell explains that James was a complex, and at times contradictory, person. Yet the intense focus on James's

love of hunting feels overplayed, especially when it is at the expense of discussion of other aspects of his personality that made him unique, such as his intellectual ambitions and international outlook. But Cogswell does succeed in his aim to give a clear impression of James as an individual, and is to be highly commended for it. This biography is entertaining and well researched, brimming with enlightening quotes from James and his contemporaries, and, if you are interested in early modern history, it certainly deserves a place on your bookshelf.

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