

King James VI and I: political writings, Johann P. Sommerville, ed. (Cambridge University Press, 1994, Cambridge, ISBN 0 521 44729 1)

Review by Thomas J. Radcliffe

What is this creature, a king? It is difficult for the modern reader to believe the answer to this question, as provided by one of the last true kings in English history.

James VI of Scotland and James I of England was the son of the unfortunate Mary Queen of Scots. Mother abdicated in favor of son when he was one year old, in 1567. He was educated by Protestant reformers who tried to inculcate him with the notion that kings were answerable to the people they ruled. It did not work. In 1603 James VI succeeded Elizabeth I to the English throne, where he ruled until his death in 1625. His son, Charles I, tried to carry on in the tradition of royal absolutism that King James had favored, and was ultimately tried and executed by Parliamentary forces after the first Civil War. Reading James' work, one cannot help feel that the son received the punishment that the father deserved.

"King James VI and I: political writings" is part of the series Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought. It covers James' most important political works from "Basilicon Doron" in 1598 to "His Maiesties Declaration, Touching his proceedings in the late Assemblie and Conuention of Parliament" published after the dissolution of the House in 1622. From start to finish James touches on a wealth of topics, from conservation of natural resources to law reform to the role of church in the state and - ad nauseam - to the divine right, power and absolute authority of kings. The book is well put together and clearly and thoroughly annotated, with a concise introduction by the editor. Readers unfamiliar with the European political and religious landscape of Jacobean times would do well to read an historical survey before plunging in, but those who do so will be well rewarded by the bizarre view presented through the king's own eyes.

The book includes a number of theoretical treatises. "Basilicon Doron," which is a collection of advice to James' then son and heir Henry, lays down rules for how a king should deal with God, his rather stupid and ape-like subjects, and various other things. In "The Trew Law of Free Monarchies," James purports to justify royal absolutism on the basis of regal violence and Christian mythology. "Triplici Nodo" is James' response to the views of the Pope and Cardinal Bellarmine (he who persecuted Gallileo) on the role of the church in the state, and "A Mediation Vpon the 27. 28. 29. Verses of the XXVII Chapter of Saint Matthew" is an attempt to - ever so piously - show how the King is a Christ-figure who suffers for his people.

In a more practical vein there are a number of speeches before Parliament. One from 1604 is on the Act of Union between England and Scotland (which was not finally achieved until a hundred years later). One from 1605 was given four days after the discovery of the Gunpowder Plot, which one cannot help wishing had succeeded. The most interesting of James' speeches to Parliament was given in 1609 on diverse subjects, some of them awfully familiar to the modern ear. Also included is a speech to the Star Chamber from 1616, which again gives one the feeling that some issues are not going to ever be resolved, in this case the question of the role of the judiciary in making rather than interpreting law.

The final work is as much theory as practice, in that it is a justification for James' dissolution of a fractious Parliament, which can be seen as a significant escalation of the hostilities between Crown and Parliament that would eventually lead to civil war, the Protectorate and finally a restored but much reduced English monarchy.

An examination of James' theoretical stance on the absolute power of kings reveals a truly utopian vision. Kings, according to James, have absolute power over their subjects for two reasons. The first is that God ordained it thus, as can be seen from generalizing to all kings the creation of Saul as King of Israel as described in 1 Samuel 7-10. The second is that by their command of armed force kings, such as William the Conqueror, make law. From this:

...it followes of necessitie, that the kings were the authors and makers of the Lawes, and not the Lawes of the kings.

And the natural conclusion is clearly stated: "...the King is aboue the law..."

What makes this a utopian vision is James' belief that a good king will despite his absolute power "...not only delight to rule his subjects by the lawe, but euen will conforme himselfe in his owne actions thervnto..." Now, utopia is a political condition in which a state of substantial social, political and/or economic disequilibrium is maintained indefinitely. This describes James' notion of a "free monarchie" precisely (the "free" refers to the monarch, not the subject, of course). For reasons entirely mysterious, this creature who has the power of life and death over all his subjects, who has in his power to act without consequence, should still rule wisely and conscientiously. In the real world, where neither kings nor anyone else is exempt from the consequences of their actions, there are sound, practical, moral reasons for doing this. In James' world of divinely ordained kings there are not. Trying to practice Jacobean utopianism in the real world cost Charles I his crown and his life.

Despite James' contention that kings have absolute power (and his windy prefaces to many speeches that do nothing but remind his listeners of this contention) his practical politics often reveal that there are some problems that not even absolute power can solve. His pleas to Parliament to write down the Common Law in plain English find many echoes still today. His demands that the judiciary stop making law could have come from many modern political commentators. His arguments for conservation of natural resources are no less naive than the arguments of many environmentalists today, in that they fail to account for the possibility of advances in technology. And his justification of his spending practices as necessary to maintaining the pomp and dignity of the king completes the Jacobean caricature of modern woes.

For all that James ruled relatively well, as kings go, one cannot help agreeing with Kipling, that:

Whatsoever, for any cause,  
 Seeketh to take or give  
 Power above or beyond the Laws,  
 Suffer it not to live!

So let it be with kings.