

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

John Wroughton. *The Longman Companion to the Stuart Age 1603-1714*. London and New York: Longman, 1997. viii + 340 pp. \$120.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-582-25776-4.

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As E. H. Carr (quoting A. E. Housman) reminded us in his famous Trevelyan Lectures of 1961, “accuracy is a duty, not a virtue.” Historians analyze and interpret the past in order to try to understand it; they are interested in meaning and significance, rather than just documenting what went on. Before they can proceed, however, they need to make sure they have their facts right. All of us, at some time during our busy schedule—whether grading papers, composing a scholarly article, or writing a book review—have faced the problem of needing to check a piece of information, or a date, or the meaning of a term, quickly and efficiently. Yet sometimes finding the answer to a seemingly simple question—such as, when exactly did this happen?—can absorb considerable amounts of time, if we do not have a relevant work of reference at our fingertips.

The Longman Companions to History series is designed to be the answer to all our woes. Each volume is intended to provide, in a cheap and easily accessible form, all the basic facts and pieces of information about a particular period of history. The volumes should be of use to high-school students, undergraduates, graduate students, teachers, professional researchers, and amateur scholars alike.

John Wroughton’s volume, as its title makes clear, is on the Stuart century from 1603 to 1714. It is sensibly divided into manageable units. Section One offers chronologies of domestic affairs (further subdivided into political events, religious change, military events, and cultural developments). Section Two provides chronologies of foreign and colonial affairs (and, importantly, given recent historiographical trends, includes lengthy sections on Scotland and Ireland). Section Three lists major offices of state, while the following three sections pro-

vide a glossary of terms, biographies, and a useful critical bibliography. Section Seven contains genealogies and maps, and finally there is a very serviceable index. We have it all there—or so it seems. The ideal, all-purpose reference book—and in just 340 pages! Some will no doubt quibble about the sub-divisions, and these are necessarily, to some extent, arbitrary. How do we easily distinguish politics from religion, or even politics from warfare? But to my mind, it makes sense to sub-divide the chronologies, otherwise they would have been too long, and although there is some overlap between the categories, it is generally fairly easy to find the information one is looking for.

John Wroughton, therefore, is to be applauded for trying to provide such a useful public service. Moreover, it is a brave soul who takes on any such project as this. One needs to get all one’s facts exactly right or the point of the whole exercise is defeated. We are all fallible, of course, and the occasional slip can perhaps be forgiven. However, even on a preliminary flick through, I found too many errors for comfort. To give some examples: the first Conventicle Act was passed in May 1664, not April (p. 18); it is misleading/wrong to say the second Conventicle Act (1670) “increased fines for offenders” (p. 40)—in fact, it reduced them considerably for those who were merely present at a conventicle, though it did impose stiffer fines (for the first and second offenses) for preachers and for those who owned the house where the conventicle was kept; the Exclusion Bill did not pass both the Commons and the Lords in the Oxford Parliament 1681 (pp. 22, 41); the Test Act of 1673 did not apply to Ireland (1673), but merely England, Wales, Berwick-upon-Tweed, and the Channel Islands. I have not undertaken an exhaustive search for factual errors—this would be equivalent to re-writing the book myself—and it might

be that my eye unfortunately immediately caught those very few errors that this book contains. It would certainly be wrong to give the impression that the work full of mistakes; overall, it appears to be fairly accurate. The trouble is, one needs a book like this for when one does not know the facts oneself. If the book gets wrong (some of) the things one does know, then how can one feel confident that this is the place to look up those things one does not know?

We are also entitled to ask whether Wroughton's volume gives us the type of factual information we need. In particular, I question the wisdom of listing events simply under the month in which they happened, rather than giving precise dates. Often, when we are looking up a date—say, for when James II acceded to the throne—we want to know the exact day, whether it was the 5th or 6th February (it was the 6th), not just that it was sometime in February. It does not help that much to be told that the Oxford Parliament sat in March 1681 when we know it sat for just one week; we need to know which week. The Gunpowder Plot, we are informed, happened in November 1605. But since English people continue to celebrate the anniversary of the Plot (or, rather, deliverance from it) to this day, surely it is important for any compendium on the Stuart Age to establish the date of the anniversary.

Finally, let me touch on the bibliography. This is well-organized, contains references to most of the important works in the field, and offers the author's insights into the usefulness or relevance of the works listed. Yet given the pace of historical research, bibliographies are by def-

inition out of date by the time they are published. Search tools at most libraries and educational institutions are so sophisticated nowadays that students and scholars can easily find references to relevant works in the field via the computer; indeed, many libraries are removing their old bibliographical volumes from the open shelves and putting them into storage, since they are seldom needed by modern users. Stuart historians, indeed, appreciate how much easier it is to find seventeenth-century printed works now the STC is on the web than previously with the cumbersome Thomason and Wing catalogues. We can also easily locate the very latest scholarship, even that which has yet to find its way into published bibliographies. This is where I felt there was a certain irony in my reviewing a work like this on the internet; would anyone reading this review every need to use Wroughton's bibliography? We have not yet reached the stage when the sort of factual information presented in Wroughton's book is most easily accessible via electronic media. Although we have encyclopedias and dictionaries on the web and on CD-ROM, for most of us it will still be much quicker to pull a volume like this one off the shelf to find the information we need than to go online. Yet for how much longer will that be the case? As we move into the twenty-first century, are books like Wroughton's going to continue to be useful, or are they destined to become relics of a by-gone age?

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