

# H-Net Reviews

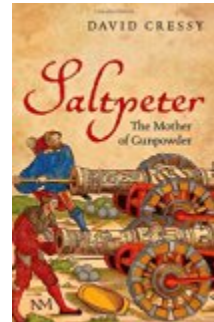
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

David Cressy. *Saltpeter: The Mother of Gunpowder*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. xii + 237 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-969575-1.

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Published on H-War (October, 2013)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey



David Cressy's work is an engaging analysis of the complex role that saltpeter played in early modern European life and society. While the precise humoral or elemental properties of the substance remained unclear to European scholars, its military uses and subsequent necessity for national security quickly became apparent. The huge demand for the good, coupled with uncertainty surrounding the best practices for saltpeter production, meant that numerous Englishmen advanced proposals to meet royal needs. Nevertheless, the only truly reliable approach entailed its collection from human and animal excrement. This process increasingly created contentious juridical issues as saltpermen intruded on and damaged personal property in order to gather the material. It is this tale that forms the core of the work, the English quest to become saltpeter independent through the authorization of local production and the elimination of the need to import the good.

The book is arranged roughly chronologically, focusing largely on the reigns of the Tudor and Stuart monarchs. The first chapter details Europeans' hazy understanding of saltpeter, the many uses to which it was put, and the eventual discovery of its full military usefulness. This is followed by an analysis of Henry VIII's "gunpowder kingship" as the warrior monarch attempted to create a domestic saltpeter industry (p. 36). Elizabeth then pursued her own "Quest for Infinite Security" as she authorized a network of saltpermen to dig wherever necessary to secure the vital war material (p. 48). During the peaceful kingship of James I, some saltpeter was sold on the international market, but he did little to halt saltpermen from encroaching on his subject's liberties. Like so many other conflicts during Charles I's turbulent reign, the issue of saltpeter extraction came to center on debates

over royal prerogative as he continually gave support to saltpermen despite the fact that their activities often damaged dwellings, farms, and pigeon houses. Chapter 6 demonstrates how Parliament struggled to eliminate local saltpeter collection until it was able to tap the abundant supply from coming in from the East India Company. The remaining two chapters compare the English example with French and American experiences.

The majority of Cressy's sources come from the legal battles centering on saltpermen's rights to collect from individual farms, churches, and homes. While he does well supplementing these core sources with a variety of other published primary sources, at times his sources seem stretched and he is repetitive with his examples. For instance, in the early part of the work he mentions several times that the ideal ratio for creating gunpowder from saltpeter, sulphur, and carbon was 6:1:1. Furthermore, each chapter begins with a vignette, but later on in the chapter this same example is recited, usually in the same context. To be fair, Cressy is the first historian to attempt a comprehensive study of saltpeter, although a quick look at the bibliography shows an ample number of works on gunpowder.

Cressy's conclusions are more tentative than concrete. In the introduction he states, "The chapters that follow explore the science and technology of saltpeter, and its social, military, and administrative history" (p. 4). He does well delineating the complex role that saltpeter played in early modern society, noting the intrusiveness of the collection process but also the necessity of the substance to national security. Unfortunately, while he successfully demonstrates the centrality of saltpeter, he often fails to directly state the implications. This is

most obvious with the “military revolution.” Throughout the work, he hints that saltpeter collection became more systematic and centralized. He notes, “England’s saltpeter enterprise tested royal authority against individual rights and hastened the formation of a centralized power” (p. 174). Nevertheless, even at the height of domestic saltpeter production under Charles I, it only raised “from one-third to occasionally as much as two-thirds of the kingdom’s needs” (p. 120). Moreover, the difficulties of acquiring enough saltpeter were resolved through importation of huge amounts from India, a process that began under James I. This situation leaves unanswered the central notion of the military revolution, namely, the creation of a larger and more powerful state because of

the military situation. If the domestic production was small and the importation rather large, to what degree was state centralization actually a result of saltpeter policies? Cressy never fully answers this question, and leaves it to the reader to determine his/her own conclusion.

These critiques should not diminish what is overall a thought-provoking and engaging book. It is clear that this work is an indispensable introductory foray into an understudied subject which will hopefully yield future research. The fact that Cressy made his work so accessible with his clear prose and engaging style will, one hopes, lead to future research from other scholars.

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**Citation:** Robert Tiegs. Review of Cressy, David, *Saltpeter: The Mother of Gunpowder*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. October, 2013.

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