

**Alastair James Bellany, Thomas Cogswell.** *The Murder of King James I.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015. 656 pp. \$65.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-300-21496-3.



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“What’s with the title?” the reader is bound to ask. James I, surely, died of natural causes--on March 27, 1625, at his country seat of Theobalds, clutching the hand of his favorite, George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham. It might not be quite accurate to say James died peacefully in his bed: having succumbed to what contemporaries called a “tertian ague” (a malaria fever that causes fits), he suffered a stroke about three days before his death and was in the end carried off in a “violent dysentery,” his bed filled with his own excrement. The bishop of Gloucester, Dr. Godfrey Goodman, was later to ascribe James’s sickness to the king’s having eaten too much fruit. In 1626, however, a medical practitioner named George Eglisham stunned Britain and Europe by publishing a book alleging that Buckingham had poisoned the king.

Buckingham had given grounds for suspicion. As James went into decline, the duke had applied a specially prepared “plaister” to the king’s body, which seemed only to add to the king’s torment, and also given James a potion to drink--both without the approval of the royal physicians. But

Eglisham was a man with a grudge. A Scot and Catholic convert who by the late 1610s had risen to be a royal physician (so he claimed) and master of the Goldbeaters Company, his fortunes had recently taken a dramatic turn for the worse. In 1621 Parliament had induced the king to revoke the Goldbeaters’ patent, as part of its drive to reduce the influence of the Villiers clan and to remedy the abuses of monopolists, pushing Eglisham into serious financial difficulty. Then in early March 1625 Eglisham’s patron James Hamilton, 2nd Marquis of Hamilton, suddenly fell ill and died, with rumors flying that Hamilton had been poisoned by Catholics and that Eglisham had engineered a deathbed conversion. Given the stridently anti-Catholic mood of the country at the time, which had reached fever pitch following the failure of the Spanish Match--with Buckingham and the heir to the throne Prince Charles now spearheading a campaign for war with Spain--Eglisham thought it best to go into hiding. He fled to Brussels, convinced that Buckingham was to blame for all his misfortunes.

Bellany and Cogswell's study is essentially a history of the book that Eglisham produced--*The Forerunner of Revenge. Upon the Duke of Buckingham, for the Poysoning of ... King James ... and the Lord Marquis of Hamilton*, which appeared in Latin and English in the spring of 1626 (with a Frankfurt imprint, though printed in Brussels), soon followed by a German version published in Augsburg. It is impeccably well researched, Bellany and Cogswell having left no stone unturned in their quest for evidence and clues about Eglisham, his work, and its impact. Indicative of the sophistication of the scholarship is the authors' examination of the typography of the two extant Latin versions of 1626, as they endeavor to identify the printer (pp. 152-153), although this level of in-depth research and careful close analysis typifies the study as a whole. And what a history Eglisham's book had. The Spanish tried to exploit the allegation that Buckingham had murdered James I in an effort to destabilize domestic politics in England during the Anglo-Spanish war, Eglisham's tract being one of many paper bullets unleashed from Flemish and other Habsburg presses against the English in 1625-26--which (Bellany and Cogswell stress) reminds us of the importance of seeing Britain as very much part of Europe at this time, since this story only makes sense in a transnational European context. Yet Eglisham's central claim that kings had a duty to uphold justice and punish crime--"It is justice that maketh Kings, justice that maintaineth Kings" (p. 166)--was also exploited by various groups who were critical of the monarchy under Charles I, from 1626 through to the regicide of 1649. The book's reception, and the uses to which it was put, thus sheds valuable new insight on "the ideological and cultural fault lines that destroyed the Stuart monarchy," to quote the dust jacket. It is a bold claim, with far-reaching implications for early Stuart historiography.

Eglisham's allegations helped fuel the flames of hostility towards Buckingham in the 1626 parliament. *The Forerunner* first appeared in Eng-

land in April of that year, just as (or maybe just before) Parliament decided to launch an investigation into James's death, and the charge that Buckingham had administered "plaisters" and a potion that proved detrimental to the king's health was added to the articles of impeachment against the duke. Charles's decision to stick by Buckingham led to suspicions of a cover-up. Some came to believe that Charles was violating his kingly obligation to promote justice by protecting Buckingham and that England would be better off if it became a free state (that is, a republic). John Felton, the disgruntled soldier who assassinated Buckingham in 1628, claimed to have been inspired to act in part by Eglisham's book. The Scots, upset by the Act of Resumption of 1625, appropriated Eglisham's secret history for their own purposes, demanding an investigation into Hamilton's death. Thomas Scott of Canterbury (not to be confused with the Puritan pamphleteer of the same name) concluded that Charles's protection of Buckingham proved the king had been complicit in his father's murder. Skeptical of divine right theory, and deeply critical of the bishops and the House of Lords, Scott had by 1628 come to contemplate "godly revolution," evoking the power of subordinate magistrates to hold wicked kings accountable, and drawing explicitly on the French Calvinist resistance tract, *Vindiciae contra Tyrannos* of 1579. For Scott, Charles was a "despicable and base Tyrant" (p. 357), and the people of God had the right to "Revolt from Jehoram and take up Arms" (p. 359). Scott may have confined his meditations to the privacy of his own manuscripts. Yet his writings show what had become possible to imagine by 1628. They reveal that radicalism predated the Civil War, and was not simply a product of it (as revisionist historians once contended).

Muted but not forgotten in the 1630s, Eglisham's secret history was revived with a vengeance in the 1640s, co-opted by parliamentary hardliners during the Civil War to bolster their arguments for armed resistance to Charles I, and later by radicals in the army and in Parlia-

ment to support the case for the king's trial and execution in 1648-49. This provoked a powerful response from royalist writers, who insisted that the allegations that James had been poisoned were nonsense, first suggested by an infamous papist (Eglisham) and then unscrupulously seized upon by Buckingham's enemies in 1626 and by traitors during the 1640s. Eglisham is thus important not only to understanding radical critiques of the monarchy, but also the rise of counterrevolutionary sentiment in 1648. Solicitor general Sir John Cook was planning on making references to James's death when Charles was brought to trial in January 1649, had the king entered a plea. Following the overthrow of the monarchy, defenders of the English Commonwealth appealed to Eglisham's secret history in 1650-51 in their propaganda offensive against the Scots, who had declared for Charles II. John Milton made use of it in his defense of the regicide. Royalists once again engaged with the secret history in the mid- and later 1650s as they sought to discredit regicidal and republican accounts of James's murder. The allegation that James had been murdered even reemerged briefly during the Exclusion Crisis of 1678-81 and in radical Whig discourse of the 1690s, although Eglisham's *Forerunner* was by now largely absent from such retellings, as there was no reprinting for nearly a hundred years after the abridged edition of 1648, and copies of the text were becoming scarce.

Bellany and Cogswell have produced an important book that repays close reading--and careful thought about the implications of the authors' findings. Their work could have benefited from some editing: it is too long, there is some repetition, particularly in the early chapters (perhaps a reflection of the joint authorship), and it takes a long time to get to the real meat of the argument: the impact of Eglisham's tract on the politics of 1626, for example, is not discussed until p. 191. It is a book I would want my undergraduates to read, though I do not see how I could easily assign it. For it transforms our understanding of the ear-

ly Stuart period. As Bellany and Cogswell explain in their conclusion, their "expansive view" has allowed them "to discover new things." They have found "ideological contestation and radical thought where scholars once insisted there was none," and shown that "ordinary people, whom scholars once assumed were politically uninformed and detached, deeply engaged in the politics of court, Parliament and nation" (p. 534). In short, although "*The Forerunner* did not cause the English Revolution ... its strange history helps us better understand the forces that did" (p. 536).

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