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Benjamin Woolley. *The King's Assassin: The Secret Plot to Murder King James I.* New York: St. Martin's Press, 2018. 368 pp. $27.99, cloth, ISBN 978-1-250-12503-3.

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Commissioned by Jeffrey R. Wigelsworth (Red Deer College)

In *The King's Assassin: The Secret Plot to Murder King James I,* Benjamin Woolley explores the personal tribulations of the Divine Right Monarch, and England's first Stuart king, James I. Wooley's book centers on an enveloping course of events to examine whether James I was killed by his "favorite," the enigmatic Duke of Buckingham, George Villiers. From 1615 to 1625, Villiers was at the king's side. However, as Wooley contends, this proximity was not just in a political capacity at court or even on state occasions, but also in bed. Upon the king's death in March 1625, the charming Villiers attracted many enemies who accused the favorite of poisoning the king. Shortly thereafter, he was impeached before the House of Lords in 1626, slanderous pamphlets proliferated in the public sphere, and equally acerbic ballads circulated through London's streets. The charges thrown at Villiers amounted to nothing, relegating the enthralling events to mere historical footnotes. Wooley, in response, seeks to not only resurrect the accounts of a probable regicide but also to promote the story to its appropriate position: topic sentence and center stage.

Dividing his narrative into four acts, Wooley charts the life of George Villiers, from his early familial struggles to his ascension to the English court where he would meet James I, whom he regarded as his "wife." He explores the diplomatic environment of the unfolding Thirty Years' War and balancing England between France and the Hapsburgs, and James's dysfunctional ties to his wife and children. The king's death from malaria was always thought to be natural, but Woolley posits that the future Duke of Buckingham colluded with James's heir, the future King Charles I, to displace the king. The manner they chose was a conventional Jacobean favorite—poison.

In act 1, "Christ Had His John and I Have my George," Wooley examines Villiers's rise above his impoverished familial status to become James's confidante and lover, establishing a fortune and a litany of titles in a remarkably brief period of time. James, it must be noted, made no secret of his homoerotic and credible sexual pleasure in the company of handsome and intelligent young men. Moreover, he exuded a weakness for favorites, beginning in his youth with his cousin Esmé Stuart. Robert Carr also enjoyed James's favor until the king took notice of a young cupbearer, George Villiers. Villiers was the son of Sir George, a Leicestershire MP and landowner, who had died suddenly in 1606 when the younger George was thirteen years old. He left behind crippling debts, six children by a first marriage, and a further four by Mary, George the younger's mother. Sir George had not left a will, further exacerbating problems in the Villiers household.

Act 2, "Two Venturous Knights," delves into the diplomatic, political, and religious struggles encompassing the Protestant Stuart monarch and its relationship with Catholic Spain. Just as the Anglo-Spanish rivalry amplified, so did the multifaceted relationship between the heir to the throne, Charles, and the king's favorite, Villiers. James had gifted many positions, lands, and titles to Villiers. As James's son, Charles, grew to adulthood, the rivalry between him and George appeared confrontational, but it was the king who ended up the loser in that relationship. Indeed, it was Villiers who accompanied Charles on his secret adventure to entice the Spanish princess. The match of Catholic Spain to a strongly Protestant England was unpopular. The Spanish support for its allies seizing the Palatinate from James's son was enough to incite war. The adventure failed, though, as Charles was discovered. The wedding never took place, but the ties between George and Charles were fixed. Wooley portrays how the pair excluded the king, who ignored his duties and became resentful, suspicious, hostile, and awkward toward them. However, as both men returned home, James appeared to revel at having the pair back with him. "'Welcome home', is still the only business at Court," a councilor noted impatiently. The world "had to wait as the king clutched possessively to his two sweet boys" (p. 140). Despite his seemingly joyful facade, James's loyal servant Thomas Erskine revealed to his kinsman, the Earl of Mar, that the king's health was waning, "both of his gout and I think, as many other so, of his mind likewise" (p. 141).

In act 3, "The Greatest Villain in the World," Woolley narrates the course of events from the return of Villiers and Charles in 1621, culminating in the accession of Charles to the English throne on March 27, 1625. As the diplomatic wrangling ensued, James's health continued to deteriorate. February 12, 1624, was the day of the official opening of the new Parliament, but royal command postponed it. Four days later, news broke that Ludovick Stuart had died unexpectedly that morning of a fit of apoplexy. Stuart was the king's cousin and son of Esme Stuart, the first royal favorite, and one of the few survivors of the Scottish retinue that had accompanied James to England in 1603. He had remained a loyal and constant presence in the royal household. On February 19, the ceremonies finally went ahead, but not without complications. Lionel Cranfield, the Lord Treasurer, was making welcoming remarks when a large section of plaster fell from the ceiling. Memories of the Gunpowder Plot to destroy James's first Parliament were still fresh enough to prompt cries of "Treason!" and "Traitors!," sending MPs scrambling for the door and spreading such confusion that cloaks, hats, and weapons were abandoned (p. 154). Upon the restoration of order, the king arrived, looking tired and ill, and delivered a rambling address of labored similes and convoluted language. Woolley then recounts the night of March 21, 1625, when the king was "forced to take a plaster on his stomach, and a scurvy drink inwards" (p. 204). Villiers had provided the medicines and failed to inform any of the doctors of his actions, "though 8 were in the house" (p. 205). On March 27, James died, trying and failing to speak to Charles, and with Villiers holding his hand.

Act 4, "We the Commons," depicts how the mood of England became disorientated after James's death. The realm had undergone what one of Charles's servants called a "great earthquake." "In his reverence to so good a Father," the newly appointed King Charles I had confirmed all the late king's acts "and in his favour to his ministers all his choices" (p. 228). Members of the government were told that for the time being their jobs were safe. However, it soon became clear that changes were afoot. Officials were put on probation. With a steely resolve few had expected, Charles told one astonished minister, a prominent Spanish supporter, to conform to the new regime's anti-Spanish stance or lose his office, "sooner than you are aware" (p. 247). Villiers, for his part, was made first gentleman of the royal

bedchamber, receiving the golden key, "the emblem of his office, so that he can, whenever he pleases and at any hour, enter that chamber as well as any other part of the palace occupied by His Majesty" (p. 256). Concurrent to internal matters relating to policy change, a scandalous pamphlet appeared in the public sphere accusing Villiers of having killed James with the plaster and syrup that he had supplied for the king. The contents of this pamphlet were soon echoed in the London press and reverberated on the streets. The April pamphlet of 1626 was, in fact, Habsburg black propaganda. Woolley concludes his narrative by addressing the question of whether Villiers was guilty of regicide. He sees as Villiers's true motive for murder a desire to clear the way for a "more majestic, stately conception of monarchy" (p. 294). The author supports his conclusion on the assertion that toxicologist John Henry examined James I's death, insinuating that the king was poisoned with aconite, derived from a genus of plant known as wolfsbane.

In sum, Wooley's examination of a fatal affair between a king and his courtier is an exceptionally well-framed narrative and well-executed popular history. The book, however, is without the rigor that an academic historian would provide, and his attention to cultural and religious historicizing lacks on some fronts. His depiction of the creation of the King James Bible, for instance, as a hobby of the king is tenuous, as the English translation of the Christian Bible was a cornerstone of Reformed Protestantism in the nation. Furthermore, the sexual relationship between Villiers and James is only tentatively established, without careful survey of the cultural and linguistic context of the period. Indeed, friendship in the early modern era was often articulated in passionate, romantic terms that seem undeniably sexual to the modern eye, but which were not at the time. Wooley's thesis would have been served well with such a cultural treatment, thus making the tale much more convincing. Finally, the author asserts that compelling evidence exists to suggest that Villiers, overcome by ambition and frustrated by James's passive approach to government, poisoned him. Although the book is informed by primary evidence from the likes of pamphlets and letters, the author does not reveal the precise contents of this "compelling evidence." Moreover, the author does not fully engage with the vast literature concerning the troubled Stuart king, most notably Alastair Bellany and Thomas Cogswell's excellent ***The Murder of King James I*** (2015). Nevertheless, despite such setbacks, ***The King's Assassin: The Secret Plot to Murder King James I*** is a lively biography that will undoubtedly entertain readers who seek immersion in England's rich, and often scandalous, monarchial affairs.

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