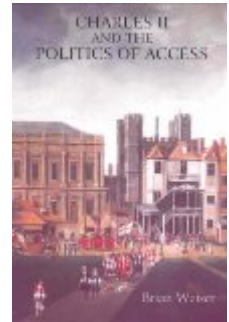


**Brian Weiser.** *Charles II and the Politics of Access.* Woodbridge and Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2003. xii + 208 pp. \$90.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-84383-020-7.



**Reviewed by** Robert Bucholz

**Published on** H-Albion (April, 2006)

One of the most remarkable revelations to emerge from the Clinton-Lewinsky-Starr Scandal of 1998 was the role of Betty Currie, the president's secretary, in regulating access to the most powerful man in the world. According to *Time*, her duties included "answering Clinton's phones, opening his mail, greeting his visitors, gauging his mood for nervous guests, correcting his spelling, telling him when he's behind schedule and bringing him all sorts of other news, good and bad"--and, of course, granting or forbidding access to the Oval Office to a host of characters, including a certain intern.[1]

Courtiers and their historians have long understood the importance of access. Its careful regulation can empower a leader with knowledge or keep him a prisoner of his servants, while elevating those sometimes quite menial attendants to positions of central importance in any administration. But all credit is due to Brian Weiser for devoting the first full-length scholarly book to the topic. If his book's reach sometimes exceeds its grasp, that is to be expected of the first such work in the field.

The prologue, introduction, and first chapter provide useful discussions of the "meanings, ideology, and symbolism of access," building on the work of David Starkey and others. Weiser contrasts the popular desire for access to the ruler with the view of most contemporary theorists in favor of formality, but he also suggests that a simple dichotomy between a politics of participation and one of distance may be too stark. He notes that even kings as formal as Philip II of Spain and Louis XIV of France could set etiquette aside as it suited their purposes. The prologue provides an interesting and useful analysis of *incognito* kings on stage and their relation to two more well-known early modern tropes: the evil counselor and the growth of the state. At the same time, Weiser's discussion of the work of Ernst Kantorowicz on the king's two bodies would benefit from incorporating the more subtle analysis in the first chapters of Paul Monod, *The Power of Kings: Monarchy and Religion in Europe 1589 1715* (1999). The section on "A Too Public Monarch?: Sex and Access" is compelling with regards to how Charles II's sexual proclivities harmed his reputation because of contemporary

associations of unbridled lustfulness with luxury, effeminacy, Popery, and arbitrary government. At the same time, the relative absence of gender analysis in a book on court access is surprising.

Chapters 2-3 contain the heart of the book, on palace architecture and the politics of access. In these chapters, Weiser argues that Charles II's escape from Worcester and subsequent *incognito* travails, a story the King delighted in telling, gave him an appreciation for his ordinary subjects and a besetting desire to make contact with them. This was reflected in the relatively open access accorded them in the first few years after the Restoration. Unfortunately, according to Weiser, the King's desire often conflicted with political necessity, resulting in a continuing oscillation over the course of the reign between open and restricted access, depending upon the political circumstances and advisors of the day. Thus, Charles retreated into formality at the end of 1662, reverting to relative openness again under the CABAL, 1667-72. Following the disasters of the Stop of the Exchequer, the Third Dutch War, and the Test Act of 1672-73, under Lord Treasurer Danby's guidance, the King revised his Bedchamber Ordinances and imposed a policy of closed access again to all but Danby's Anglican proto-Tory court party. According to Weiser, after Danby's fall in 1679, the King returned briefly to a policy of open access, but the Tory Revenge of 1681-85 put pay to that. In support of this chronology, Weiser deploys an admirable command of the details of Household Ordinances and palace architecture, making the point that if the latter always reflected the King's wishes, the former grew more precise as the reign wore on. These chapters well convey the tumultuousness of Restoration court government, but one would like to know more about the individual aspirations, specializations and effectiveness of such courtiers as Ladies Portsmouth and Castlemaine, and Lords Ashley, Arlington, Bath, Buckingham, Lauderdale, and Ormonde, as well as William Coventry, William Legge, Edward

Progers, and the Duke of York, among many others.

Two more serious difficulties present themselves to the critical reader. The first concerns precisely what is meant by "access." Sometimes, as when we read that Charles II liked Newmarket "because the relaxed formality of the extended hunting trip allowed him to interact more intimately with his subjects" (p. 36), it means the possibility of personal contact with the King. Sometimes, as when Catholics were banned from Whitehall in 1674, it means access to the court generally, as opposed to the Bedchamber and Closet. And sometimes, it means royal favor or appointment to the ministry. For example, the King's return to "open access" after Danby's fall in 1678-79 (pp. 81, 113) seems mostly to be about appointing a mixed ministry rather than access to the person of the King. Admittedly, Weiser asserts a corresponding appointment of Whig personal attendants during this period, but he offers only one example, a gentleman of the Privy Chamber named Richard Newdigate. In fact, this post was by the 1670s an honorary one entailing nearly no attendance--and certainly no personal attendance--on the sovereign. There is no evidence of a significant influx of Whigs into the royal household at this time.[2] Weiser argues that the outcome of the first Exclusion election was a referendum on "Danby's policy of closed access"; however, his supporting quotation from Mark Knights, that "the dominant issue was not exclusion, but the undesirability of choosing courtiers and pensioners of the court," suggests that the matter in question was not access to the sovereign, but access to legislative and executive power (p. 81).

Weiser's argument runs into more serious trouble in attributing motivations and sentiments to the King for which there is simply no evidence. Admittedly, determining the inner motives of such a protean character as Charles II, constrained as he was by politics, finances and his own circumspection, is not easy. One possible way

"in" might be the stories the King and others told about him, such as the above-noted tale of *incognito* escape after Worcester. As we have seen, Weiser extrapolates from this a sovereign who wanted to be king of all his people: "Charles's experiences as a commoner attuned him to the importance his subjects placed upon accessibility to their ruler." This is highly plausible, but nothing Charles ever said—certainly nothing quoted in this book—indicates that he was so attuned. The passage continues, "Upon his restoration, he strove to be open and to trumpet his affability, because he comprehended that accessibility would allow him to be everybody's king, would aid him in uniting his strife-torn nation, and thereby secure his throne" (p. 3, see additional similar assertions, pp. 54-55). Unfortunately, apart from the Earl of Clarendon's politic assertions to parliament of the King's desire for greater intimacy, the author offers little proof of such trumpeting or comprehension. We are told that the King chose to live at Whitehall because it was accessible, but no evidence is offered of the King's thoughts on the subject. In fact, it would have been a supreme act of audacity in the midst of a *restoration* to move the seat of the English court from its traditional site since the 1530s. Along similar lines, do we actually know that the positive reaction to the King's firefighting efforts in 1666 "re-educated Charles as to the power of his person and the importance of being seen by his subjects" (p. 66)?

In the end, Weiser sees Charles II as a nice guy: "Unlike his father, Charles II did not restrict access in order to use distance as a tool to inspire awe" (p. 64). But surely that is exactly what he was doing in redesigning his Bedchamber and revising his Bedchamber Ordinances in the 1670s and 80s. The most recent scholar to have examined the topic, Anna Keay, notes the Worcester episode, but tells another story in her dissertation. [3] She points out that, even before his restoration, Charles II maintained royal ceremonial no matter how shabby his physical surroundings. She provides ample evidence that Charles II was a

stickler for ceremony, and that the point of his more open court was to expose more people to his ceremonial and propaganda program: "The rituals of monarchy flourished at the Restoration court, promoted, overseen and shaped by the king himself." [4] Certainly, this King could lay ceremony aside, "easily combining magnificence and stateliness in his performance of court ceremony with exuberance and joviality in his personal dealings with his subjects." [5] But this need not have been a matter of either kindness or spontaneity, for it served the King's purposes. As royal ceremonies moved from the public rooms of the Chamber to the Bedchamber (ambassadorial audiences, some knightings and kissing hands, even some meetings of the Privy Council) they may have *seemed* to acquire an element of spontaneity. But they remained *ceremonies*, and by taking them out of the public view, their planners actually reduced access and added to the mystery of monarchy. Keay believes that to attribute the King's use of the Bedchamber to his affability "is fundamentally to misunderstand the inherent formality of these occasions." [6]

If Weiser's Charles II is a nice guy, seeking easy and frequent contact with his subjects, he is also seemingly a weak one who could be browbeaten by his advisors into formality. Thus, "even in the mid-1670s, Charles may have been uncomfortable with restricting access, for he appears to have needed constant encouragement from Danby and his allies" (pp. 74-75). Much is made of this hesitation in the next few pages. But the attached note gives no evidence of royal hesitation or ministerial encouragement. Rather, it deals with the far narrower possibility of allowing Shaftesbury back into favor in 1675. Unlike the picture presented by Weiser of a vacillating Charles II knuckling under to his advisors, Keay's King is always in control: attendance in the Bedchamber always had to be requested and granted. According to Keay, the less favored the individual or group, the more public the room and the more formal his manner. Though Charles II famously admitted a

wide range of people into his presence, very few had a *right* of access, and, as both Weiser and Keay stress, those rights were restricted as the reign wore on. Keay believes that this seeming flexibility augmented the King's power—he was always the center of the dance—even as it also undermined the King's Bedchamber staff and perpetuated inconsistency of protocol. Though even Keay admits that Charles II had trouble saying "no" to importunate courtiers, her overall view of the King as perfectly capable of tightening or loosening access as it suited his particular political and social agendas is consistent with the picture painted in most recent biographies.

Questions of definition and interpretation apart, there is much here of great value. Chapter 4 offers a useful analysis of how individual localities maintained contact with the King. Demonstrably loyal cities had multiple agents or conduits of information and supplication to the sovereign. Exeter employed an array of "access-brokers" such as the Earl of Bath, Speaker Seymour, Sir James Smith, Secretary Coventry, etc. Towns previously associated with rebellion were allowed but one conduit, usually a great patron whose own loyalty to the Crown was not suspect. Finally, the most radical localities had no conduit at all, with dire consequences.

Weiser argues for a diminishment in the power of lords lieutenants at the expense of Deputy Lieutenants during the Restoration period. He also attacks Victor Stater's position that the Restoration lieutenancy was filled on the basis of political loyalty, arguing instead that lords lieutenant were chosen for their local connections—and so their ability to facilitate open access: "While Charles wanted the Lord Lieutenants to carry out his dictates, he also wanted them to be aware of and responsive to local concerns" (p. 90, again providing no direct evidence for the King's attitude). He concludes: "In his appointments to the Lieutenancy Charles promoted open access by increasing the number of conduits to the king,

making those conduits more open to people in the localities, and by eschewing any political bias in his choice of Lord Lieutenants and Deputy Lieutenants" (p. 91). Against this, Stater's work, with its extensive prosopography across the whole population of lieutenants and potential lieutenants as well as many detailed examples of Charles's chosen lieutenants acting to defend the center against local interests, argues otherwise: Stater's King was in control and not about to place the localities into potentially disloyal hands.[7]

Chapter 5, about access and the financier/mercantile classes, is based upon Weiser's doctoral dissertation. It is the most effective part of the book, demonstrating a sure command of the politics of commerce. Because mercantilism, protectionism, and monopolism were still at the heart of English trade, the King was at the center of a hierarchical economic system. Weiser does an admirable job of explaining the ways in which the great companies (the East India, especially) used their access to the King to maintain their monopolies and how interlopers and independent merchants tried to break them. Here the King's oscillation between open and closed access is most convincingly presented, and the story Weiser tells of how these interest groups finagled their way into the royal attention (if not often into the royal presence) is both important and convincing. Merchants could, of course, petition the king, but this was difficult and costly: the East India Company maintained a slush fund, offered exotic gifts and loans, and was especially successful at securing powerful patrons.

This chapter is enriched by prosopographical material from Weiser's dissertation on successive Councils of Trade, which demonstrates a clear progression from inclusiveness to exclusivity. After 1681, politics trumped economics entirely, as the King not only remodeled his own councils and commissions as well as local corporations, but also dozens of city companies, using the process of *quo warranto* to purge Whig leadership in fa-

vor of Tories. This really was a narrowing of access: "Merchants could no longer select who represented their interests; the king, not liverymen, chose who would serve as conduits for requests, advice, and communication" (p. 164). But once a company submitted to the King, he generally supported its monopoly. One regrets that the author was not encouraged to publish his original dissertation, for this part of the book illuminates the importance and nature of access at the court of Charles II most compellingly.

The production of the book is handsome, but there are some jarring errors of fact (as noted above, page 4 n. 12 and page 34 n. 39 misspells Hugh Murray "Baille," which should read "Bailie"; page 35 refers to Sidney as "Master of the Robe" instead of master of the "Robes"; page 80 refers to "the *Duchess* of Castlemaine"). On the other hand, there are some very helpful tables, including one delineating how the King split time between Whitehall and other palaces.

Perhaps Charles II really was a nice guy. Perhaps historians of Britain have been too cynical in interpreting the actions of a man who, some biographers have claimed, took little delight in revenging himself on his enemies. Perhaps ... but I do not think so. Kings are not like us. Power and authority demand a degree of cold calculation that Charles II, more than most, seems to have understood. Weiser is correct that a few early examples of accessibility sustained the King's reputation for openness throughout the reign; that his vacillation gave him the additional reputation of being a "wily king" and that his apparent openness mollified political opposition, but also obscured the King's real agenda. He concludes that, overall, Charles II managed access well, "but perhaps his intense concentration on the political effects of access caused the king to overlook the social and economic ramifications of his policies of access" (p. 177). The King's move towards restricted access at the end of the reign rendered the court a less inviting and attractive place, a point

made by this reviewer in 1993.[8] Weiser is surely right that the move to Winchester would have exacerbated this. Charles may have preferred order and seclusion to intellectual, political, or economic vitality, but it is hard to imagine that a nation and capital in the throes of commercial, financial, and scientific revolutions would have allowed him to get away with it as the French allowed Louis XIV. The recreation of the court at Winchester, far from enhancing the power and majesty of the baroque monarchy would only have hastened its decline.

#### Notes

[1]. Nancy Gibbs et al., "The Currie Riddle," *Time* 151, no. 16 (27 April 1998).

[2]. See *Officials of the Royal Household*, comp. J. C. Sainty and R. O. Bucholz, 2 vols. (1997-98).

[3]. Anna Keay, "The Ceremonies of Charles II's Court" (Ph.D. diss., University of London, 2004), pp. 35-36, 43-44.

[4]. Ibid., pp. 20-21 and *passim*.

[5]. Ibid., p. 22.

[6]. Ibid., p. 49.

[7]. Victor L. Stater, *Noble Government: The Stuart Lord Lieutenancy and the Transformation of English Politics* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1994), chs. 3-5, esp. p. 81.

[8]. *The Augustan Court: Queen Anne and the Decline of Court Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), p. 19.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at  
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-albion>

**Citation:** Robert Bucholz. Review of Weiser, Brian. *Charles II and the Politics of Access*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. April, 2006.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11617>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.