

Richard Cust. *Charles I: A political life (Profiles in Power (London, England)).* Harlow, England: Pearson Longman, 2005. xii + 488 pp. \$38.60, cloth, ISBN 978-0-582-07034-9.



Reviewed by Pauline Croft

Published on H-Albion (April, 2006)

Charles I (1600-1649), King of England, Scotland and Ireland, has always been a problematic monarch for historians. Upright, well educated, deeply religious, monogamous and profoundly conscious of his duty, Charles Stuart in many ways seemed to possess all the qualities of an ideal ruler. Yet his misguided policies triggered a disastrous civil war in each of his three kingdoms and he remains the only British king to have been tried and publicly executed by a court claiming to act in the name of his people. In this outstanding new study, Richard Cust makes better sense of Charles, as a human being, politician, and monarch, than any previous biographer has done. The author of a distinguished monograph on the Forced Loan of 1626-28, Cust deploys an extensive knowledge of primary sources as well as a shrewd insight into the politics and personalities of the period. The book provides a fluent, highly readable account of the king's childhood and youth, particularly the formative years when he linked up with his father James I's favorite, the flamboyant duke of Buckingham. It analyzes the political problems of the late 1620s, when Charles proved unable to carry his parliaments with him in the

expensive wars he attempted to wage against both Spain and France, and the years of Personal Rule without parliaments between 1629 and 1640. Cust gives a lucid account of the religious and political problems of each of Charles' three kingdoms and provides a nuanced narrative of the complex civil wars that broke out between 1642 and 1649. His final chapter concludes with the king's trial and execution, in which Charles displayed remarkable political acumen and bravery. Skillfully depicting himself as a constitutional monarch, committed to a mixed and balanced constitution in opposition to an army tyranny, which he devastatingly described as "all laws changed according to the power of the sword," Charles made such an impact that he probably did more than any other individual to ensure the return of the monarchy in 1660, in the person of his son Charles II.

What are the distinctive features of Cust's portrayal of the king? He generously acknowledges that his approach has been profoundly influenced by the work of his supervisor, the late Conrad Russell, "a dialogue ... going on for thirty

years" (p. ix). However, Cust has read and absorbed the work of many other scholars including Charles Carlton, Peter Donald, and Kevin Sharpe. He emphasizes that Charles revered his father, James I, as a model king, and carefully studied his works, particularly *Basilicon Doron*. Yet his youthful experience of politics was limited; he lacked self-confidence and was dangerously prone to categorize any criticism, however loyally meant, as opposition. In particular, his concept of the proper role of parliament was very narrow. As early as 1625 Charles viewed his relationship with the Commons in starkly polarized terms, and by 1626 he was talking of "new counsels" which would bypass parliaments. These attitudes were colored by the king's loathing of puritanism (which he regarded as little better than rebellion) and he mostly assumed that grievances voiced in the Commons were the work of "some few vipers" (p. 119), who did not represent the people as a whole. Such assumptions lay behind the eleven years of personal rule, in which the king achieved a considerable amount (not least the rebuilding of the fleet) but at a high price. The court, far from being an Eltonian "point of contact" was increasingly self-absorbed, its masques and other entertainments wholly ignoring matters of political concern to the wider populace. On matters of ecclesiastical policy, however, Cust sees Archbishop Laud, not the king, as the driving force behind anti Calvinism, at least in England. In Scotland, after 1633 Charles insisted on a "British" church that was decidedly Anglo-centric in its churchmanship, and when opposition broke out he once again proved unable to distinguish between genuine grievances and factious proto-rebellion.

Cust describes Charles' failure to give battle at Kelso in June 1639 as a crucial turning point. Outwitted by Leslie, the king overestimated Scottish numbers and threw away his one chance of defeating the Covenanters. Yet as civil war continued, Charles gradually improved as supreme commander. "He was a better soldier than many monarchs and his efforts kept the royalists in the war

longer than might otherwise have been the case" (p. 415). Charles was far from being a hopeless incompetent; if he had been, the war would have been unnecessary since he could have been deposed or transformed into a powerless figurehead. Instead, he astutely rallied his supporters, and his negotiating skills frequently allowed him to divide his opponents. His limitations were his excessive political sensitivity and his frequent lack of judgment about what was feasible and realistic. Like Russell, Cust considers that a civil war without Charles is almost impossible to imagine, so a crucial role must be assigned to the king himself.

This is a very persuasive argument, but occasionally there are glimpses of a deeper structural problem. Was the "British monarchy" created in 1603 really stable enough to survive in the long term? How viable was the political situation Charles inherited? The disastrous French treaty of 1624, concluded in misguided haste by James I after the collapse of the Spanish match, is rightly blamed for much of the incoherence of Charles' early foreign policy. But there were several other unhappy aspects of the Jacobean legacy. Recent work by Julian Goodare and Alan MacDonald has emphasized the highly destabilizing effects of James' Five Articles of Perth: the bitter divisions in the Scottish parliament of 1621 exactly foreshadow those of 1637, and far from being willing to accept a token submission to the Articles (as previous historians have assumed) James was pressing for their full implementation almost up to his death. To the Covenanters, the first "great rent in the kirk" was the work of James, not Charles.[1] Similarly, James can be blamed for the absence of any policymaking mechanisms which might have tackled "British" issues. After the failure by 1607 of his overambitious program for a constitutional Union between England and Scotland (which proved unacceptable to both nations), James made little further effort; as Cust observes, in the absence of a British council, on the model of the Spanish councils of the Indies or Italy, the

monarch alone was responsible for coordinating British policy. Even at the family level, James did not prepare his son for British rule, refusing to take Charles to Scotland with him on his only return visit there, in 1617. In these circumstances, historians might heed the warning of Jonathan Scott, that it is perhaps too easy to use Charles' "pilot error" as the key explanatory device for the out break of the British civil wars.

These are large issues on which at the moment there is little consensus. One of the great merits of Cust's biography is that it immediately raises the debate to a much higher level. His portrait of Charles I is more subtle, scholarly, and penetrating than anything we have had before, and historians working on the reign in future must start here.

Note

[1]. Alan R. MacDonald, *The Jacobean Kirk, 1567-1625: Sovereignty, Polity and Liturgy* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998), pp. 186-187.

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

Citation: Pauline Croft. Review of Cust, Richard. *Charles I: A political life (Profiles in Power (London, England))*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. April, 2006.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11633>



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