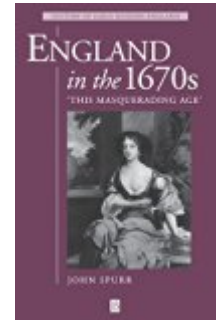


John Spurr. *England in the 1670s: This Masquerading Age.* Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001. 400 \$115.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-631-19256-5.



Reviewed by Andrew Walkling

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In 1934, when David Ogg first published *England in the Reign of Charles II*, he introduced his comprehensive survey of Restoration politics, society, economy, administration, and culture as "an attempt to depict, as it were in cross-section, one of the most formative stages in the growth of English civilization" (p. v). While Ogg's book still stands as a significant achievement and remains a useful tool for scholars and students of the period, recent advances in Restoration studies have created a need for more up-to-date treatments of English, and British, history in the later seventeenth century. In response to this perceived need, Blackwell Publishers have inaugurated a series of volumes under the general editorship of John Morrill, covering early modern English history by decade. John Spurr's *England in the 1670s* is the first of the Restoration-era volumes to appear (Neil Keeble's volume on the 1660s is currently in preparation).

Of the three decades that encompass the reigns of Charles II and James II, the 1670s are easily the least understood by historians, and often receive short shrift in surveys of the Restora-

tion era. For that reason alone, Spurr's careful study of the period is a welcome contribution. In seeking "to restore the richness and complexity of a crucial period of England's history" (p. x), Spurr follows Ogg's model in presenting both diachronic and synchronic chapters, so as to fulfill the series' requirement that constituent volumes "convey something of how this decade of English history was experienced" (p. xii). Of the book's ten chapters, five (1-3 and 9-10) provide a traditional chronological survey of high politics through the period. These are complemented by five thematic chapters (4-8) that explore a variety of social, cultural, and technological aspects of English life during this decade, including heroism and wit; agriculture, trade, and technology; mapping, travel, and the dissemination of news; sex and love; and politics and religion.

Spurr's brief is not an easy one: not only are the 1670s an underappreciated period within the larger Restoration era, but they lack the kind of neatly defined boundaries that the events of 1660 and 1688-89 provide for those writing on the entire period or on the neighboring decades. Spurr

attempts to cope with this in part by extending his ambit: the book picks up the thread of events in late 1669 and concludes with the end of the Oxford Parliament in March 1681, thereby covering a "decade" of approximately eleven and a half years. This widening of chronological scope allows Spurr to deal with the battle over Exclusion in its entirety, in the process adding a nice, meaty crisis to the often convoluted and inconclusive political machinations that prevailed throughout most of his chosen period. There is, however, a potentially twofold problem with this approach: first, it serves to underscore the traditional view of the 1670s as ephemeral or comparatively less important. Those who write on the neighboring decades, it seems to suggest, have plenty to occupy themselves, even with a year or two shaved off, while Spurr is left to provide the "fill" as comprehensively as he can. Second, while Spurr initially seeks (pp. x-xi) to distance himself from any "master narrative" centering on Exclusion, his choices regarding the organization and pacing of the volume ultimately conspire to reinscribe that familiar teleology. Upon finishing the book, one has the nagging feeling that Spurr has concluded that the crisis of 1678-81 really did form the culmination of all that had gone before.

Part of the problem is Spurr's emphasis on traditional political history, which seems little changed from Ogg's approach of sixty-five years ago. The five narrative chapters center largely on high politics: events in parliament, ministerial and diplomatic maneuverings, electoral and partisan machinations, and certain prominent events such as wars, plots, and the activities of leading political figures flash by in rapid succession. Spurr's writing is admirably clear as he follows the complex weave of events; he even shows a certain narrative flair, for example as he builds up to Sir Thomas Osborne's appointment as Lord Treasurer (pp. 42, 4-8). But apart from the acknowledged (p. xiii) influence of Mark Knights on his understanding of the crisis of 1678-81, his account seems largely to follow the time-honored

contours laid out by previous generations of historians.

Spurr's use of sources is similarly traditional in its approach, showing a heavy reliance on a small body of canonical diaries and collections of letters. Chief among these are the letters to Williamson (for 1673-74), the Essex Papers (covering 1672-77), the Savile Correspondence (which picks up steam around 1677), and the Ormonde papers (for the latter part of the 1670s, especially through Ormonde's letters from Sir Robert Southwell in vol. 4, and the years of political crisis up to 1681). Other "standby" sources include Marvell's letters (until his death in 1678), the diaries of Der- ing, and the Verney Papers. Josselin, Evelyn, Reresby (which becomes more detailed around the middle of the decade), and the Bulstrode Papers are used more sparingly, while the Morrice MSS, the Calendar of State Papers--Venetian, and Wood's diary see more occasional employment. To be sure, Spurr draws upon plenty of other source material, both printed and manuscript, but one wonders what new insights can be derived from so much dependence on such well known material as the sources listed above. Perhaps if Spurr had been able to consult the Venetian "state papers" for the period after 1675, when the printed calendars cease, or had trawled more thoroughly through the HMC reports looking for odd letters or other documents, this book might represent more of an advance over earlier accounts, even without some bold new perspective on the events of the decade.

The greater contribution of this book lies in the five thematic chapters. Here, Spurr not only synthesizes a variety of interesting themes, but also provides a testament to the broad intellectual and cultural vitality of England in this period. Of particular note here are his excellent, comprehensive survey of sex, marriage, and pornography (pp. 179-213) and his nice formulation of the religious problem (p. 240), a subject on which Spurr, through his previous work on Anglicanism, is ex-

pert. Spurr is careful to acknowledge (pp. xii-xiii) the limitations of his study, both thematic and geographical, and so it would be unfair to lament the absence of science, gender, and other significant topics from the book. At the same time, one might have wished for more thorough consideration of the culture and activities of the court, and, perhaps more importantly, of the *mentalité* of the late seventeenth century, particularly with respect to the strategies of dissimulation and habits of reading given prominence in Spurr's otherwise well-chosen subtitle, "This Masquerading Age."

Though *England in the 1670s* is, at its most basic level, an engaging and well organized book, we would be remiss not at least to consider questions of audience, specifically, for whom this book was written and how the author and publishers intend that it be used. Is this a work meant for scholars in the field? Certainly, it presumes a certain level of competence in and understanding of the Restoration context, but it serves primarily as a survey of the period and does little to advance new scholarly interpretations. Moreover, it is not particularly useful as a quick-reference work, given its dense texture and the multiple threads and connections that make up its narrative fabric. Is it, then, designed for students, and if so, at what level? An entire book devoted to the 1670s seems an unlikely candidate for use in even the most advanced undergraduate course, though beginning graduate students might in some cases benefit from its introduction to the period. And yet the constant parade of names, events, and technical terms (e.g. "addresses of abhorrence", introduced without explanation on p. 292), particularly in the narrative chapters, would seem potentially daunting to any novice reader. Couple these considerations with the deplorable decay of British studies in the United States, and one is left wondering to whom Blackwell intended to market the volume. This should not, of course, be a damning consideration for an otherwise well executed study of an important if underestimated decade, and indeed it may find a broader acceptance at British uni-

versities, where English history remains a vital subject. In any event, John Spurr has provided us with a compelling record of the coming-of-age of the Restoration state and monarchy, and his book can nonetheless be regarded as a significant and worthy achievement.

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