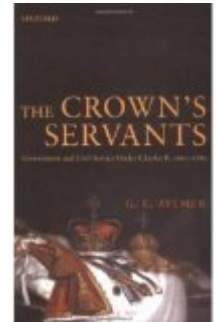


G. E. Aylmer. *The Crown's Servants: Government and Civil Service under Charles II, 1660-1685.* Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. xvi + 303 pp. \$65.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-820826-6.



Reviewed by Tim Harris

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One cannot help but feel a tinge of sadness when reviewing this book. Gerard Aylmer spent some fifty years of his life, off and on, working on government office-holders in seventeenth-century England, first on royal officials under Charles I between 1625 and 1642, then on office-holders under the Commonwealth and Protectorate between 1649 and 1660; *The Crown's Servants* is the last volume in the trilogy and is intended to be Aylmer's farewell to this subject.[1] After delivering the completed text to the publishers, and barely a few days after writing the preface, Aylmer died suddenly in Oxford at the relatively young age of 74. His widow, Ursula, saw the book through the final stages of publication, in particular being responsible for the selection of the twenty-four illustrations. *The Crown's Servants* is therefore both testimony to a life-time's work and the final legacy of a great historian who remained dedicated to scholarship until the very end.

As such, it is a book that, by predisposition, one wants to like. It is certainly well researched, well organized, and packed with useful information. A brief introduction is followed by an ex-

tended overview of the structure of government--both institutions and personnel--to establish the appropriate context. The following two chapters form the core of the book, in turn looking at the terms and conditions of service and then at the kind of men who served (the latter offering three successive collective portraits of those who held office in 1663, 1673, and 1683). An extended conclusion seeks not only to draw out some of the main themes but also to raise broader questions about the nature of state power in Restoration England, the successes and failures of Charles's government, and how the English system of government compared with the types of state system that existed on the continent. Being the sound empiricist that he was, Aylmer never overreaches his evidence, but is at pains to recognize the limitations of his data; he is thus cautious about drawing definitive conclusions and always careful to make the appropriate qualifications. Nevertheless, certain general trends do emerge. Charles II's servants were, by and large, more upper class, less puritan, less self-made, and less committed to the ideals of public service than had been those of 1649-60. In this regard, they were more like those

of the pre-civil war period. Indeed, the Restoration was in many respects a successful counter-revolution: not only were the same sorts of men brought back, but so too were many of the old practices (for example, the attempts to restrict or even abolish the taking of fees and gratuities that had been made in the 1640s and 50s were abandoned after 1660). As always, the way to get on was through patronage and connection. Not that it was possible to return exactly to the way things had been; the commitment to a maritime empire and the continued shift away from household government constituted the main positive legacy of the Interregnum. Nor did the men who ran things comprise a completely closed elite: the number of office-holders increased over time (as indeed, therefore, did the overall burden of the state), and it did prove possible for some below the level of the gentry to enter the crown's service. Despite a trend towards higher salaries, however, incomes remained relatively modest, especially compared to those of the greater merchants, financiers, or landowners; office-holding was a more important factor in enhancing people's status than it was in making them significantly richer (though this was true for the periods 1625-42 and 1649-60 as well). Overall, Charles was probably better served than he either realized or deserved to be. Nevertheless, it is difficult to generalize about the caliber of the men who worked in the crown's civil service: some did a good job, others a bad one; some were well rewarded for what they did, others did not receive the remuneration they deserved, whilst there were those who did a lousy job and still got highly compensated, often because they were favored courtiers, cronies, or political allies (thank goodness that's a thing of the past!).

Aylmer writes in a relaxed, almost colloquial style. What might otherwise be somewhat dry and dreary material is thus presented in a highly accessible manner. Nevertheless, the book at times reads like research notes, a tendency enhanced by the fact that Aylmer is so upfront about his methodology and given to making personal

asides--such as lamenting the fact that neither Kenneth Haley nor John Kenyon are still alive for him to pick their brains about the Earl of Shaftesbury or the Earl of Sunderland. A similar reference to the late E. P. Thompson sadly reminds us that Aylmer belongs to a cohort of inspirational scholars that we are now losing. More than that, one might say, for this book really belongs to a generation of scholarly enquiry that has now long since passed. Aylmer initially took up his investigations into the state's servants as his contribution to the storm over the gentry that was raging in the 1950s, and in particular as a way to test Trevor-Roper's thesis that office-holding and court connection were crucial in helping to sustain the fortunes of the landed gentry on the eve of the civil war. Yet the gentry debate has long since ceased to be central to civil war historiography, whereas it had never really been relevant to the Restoration period. Indeed, one cannot help but feel that as a contribution to Restoration studies, *The Crown's Servants* will have limited impact. This is just not where the debate is "at" at this moment, as Aylmer himself seems to recognize by his tentative--though ultimately unsatisfactory--attempts in the conclusion to look at the question of state power from alternative perspectives. There is a sadness, then, that comes with the realization that this is a work that is ultimately likely to disappoint. Fortunately, such has been Aylmer's contribution to the field of seventeenth-century studies, that we have many other things to remember him by.

Note

[1]. See *The King's Servants: The Civil Service of Charles I, 1625-1642* (1961); and *The State's Servants: The Civil Service of the English Republic, 1649-1660* (1973).

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