



***The Early Life of James VI:
A Long Apprenticeship, 1566–1585***

By Steven J. Reid

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The Early Life of James VI: A Long Apprenticeship 1566–1585. By Steven J. Reid. Edinburgh: John Donald, 2023. ISBN 978-1-910900-18-5. xix + 347 pp. £100.



Steven J. Reid's *The Early Life of James VI: A Long Apprenticeship 1566–1585* is the first of two volumes, the second forthcoming, which explore James VI's (later James VI & I, 1567–1625) life and reign in Scotland prior to his ascension to the English throne on the death of Elizabeth I (1533–1603). The book expertly weaves the narrative together, incorporating a wide range of primary sources with historiographical discussions embedded throughout. Reid introduces key figures within James's early life, such as his regents, guardians, and councillors, re-examining them, charting their activities, influence, and the fluctuating power dynamics present in Scotland and to a lesser extent, England, over the twenty years examined within the book. The largely chronological approach of the publication allows it to act as a partial biography of James VI, and Reid skilfully links past and future activities together throughout, ensuring that the significance of appointments, relationships, and events is fully understood.

Reid's introduction clearly presents the themes and aims of the book and concisely reviews the pre-existing historiography. The types and locations of the sources used within this research are also outlined, demonstrating the breadth of Reid's archival work. His extensive use of written contemporary Scottish sources, as well as the inclusion of international sources, such as those commenting on James's young life from an English perspective, give Reid's work a distinctive tone and approach.

Following the introduction, Reid provides an excellent analysis of three birth poems which demonstrate the different and conflicting expectations placed on James and expressed by his contemporaries. Importantly, Reid highlights the significance of 'possessing' James's physical body and explores how his value was understood by those around him. James's parents, Mary Queen of Scots (1542–1587) and Henry, Lord Darnley (1546–1567), receive significant attention within the first two chapters, with their temporary united front demonstrated by the joint letter writing campaign they undertook to secure suitable godparents for their son. Chapter Two also explores how Mary later sought various routes to restoration, offering a balanced view of the Scottish queen whilst still recognising that she understood the value of her son as a political commodity.

The early chapters pay particular attention to the various regencies that presided over James during his young life, comprehensively exploring the rise and fall of each

government, as well as analysing the effectiveness and popularity of each. Despite limited sources related to James's own experiences in his early life, Chapter Three provides an account of the years 1573–1578, painting a detailed picture of his environments, the people around him, and some of his activities. This section aims to re-evaluate James's childhood, presenting a period of relative peace for the young king and avoiding a focus on some of his potentially traumatic experiences, which are often central to the narratives recounting James's early life.

Chapter Four covers two years from 1577–1579 and explores a transitional period where James was “now expected to think and act as a young man” (87). Here, Reid argues that whilst “historians have tended to treat the arrival of Esme Stuart [Lennox] ... in September 1579 as a decisive and transformative moment in Jacobean politics he thus actually arrived just as the first phase of James' adult rule came to fruition” (89). In this way Reid splits James's early life into distinct phases often with longer periods of development and transition than previously suggested. Thus, Reid aims to complicate the narrative of James's childhood further and at times challenge previous historiography.

Following this, Reid addresses the debate around the possible sexual nature of the relationship between James and Lennox (1542–1583), arguing that “[c]ontemporary accounts of the relationship between James and [Lennox] are few, and ambiguous enough to allow for considerable latitude of interpretation” (130). Analysing James's allegorical poem, *The Phoenix*, written upon Lennox's death, Reid argues that it shows his deep grief but that “the poem itself does not provide, as David Bergeron had strongly suggested, ‘compelling evidence’ of ‘homosexual desire’” (131). Reid concludes this summary by stating that “it is impossible to extrapolate from such a limited range of material, when viewed objectively whether this relationship can be categorised as familial, homosocial or sexual” before continuing to suggest that “it is arguably more useful to approach [Lennox] from the perspective of the services he provided the king” (132). He then dedicates the remainder of chapters five and six to exploring Lennox's services, activities, and removal from Scotland.

The later chapters explore James's movement towards his adult kingship with two of these focusing on the events and repercussions of the Ruthven Raid; Reid argues that they “[mark] an important shift in James's transition towards full adult rule,” with James becoming “keenly aware of the process of factional politics and how to play it” (215). The final chapter examines James's courtly interests between 1583–1585, highlighting a range of activities but suggesting that “none were as visible or as all-consuming as his focus on

hunting and writing” (239). Reid concludes by drawing the various chapters and themes together to argue that “1585 marked the end of any vestige of James’ domination by a single figure or faction, and was the completion of a process of emancipation that had been gathering momentum in earnest since his escape from the Ruthven Raiders” (300).

The work also incorporates the narratives of various women who played a significant role in James’s early life. These women include Annabella Murray (1536–1603), one of James’s guardians, and Annas Keith (c.1540–1588), who was first married to James Stewart, 1st Earl of Moray (c.1531–1570), and the later to Colin Campbell, 6th Earl of Argyll (1542–1584). Argyll and Keith were close to James, with Reid recounting how Argyll sent James dogs—a gift he would have appreciated given his interest in hunting. Whilst Argyll receives significant attention in the narrative, Keith is also examined: “[O]ften criticised for taking the lead in court politics over her husband” (93), Keith had been close to Mary and maintained a close connection with James throughout the remainder of her life.

Throughout the book, a detailed and engaging narrative is presented which fills a substantial void in the historiography of early modern Scotland. The focus on James’s early life decentralises the English perspective without losing sight of the significance of Anglo-Scottish relations or James’s own ideas regarding his right to inherit from Elizabeth. As outlined above, Reid challenges previous historiography and provides a richly detailed examination of those around the young James, their political manoeuvrings, and James’s ascendancy towards his adult kingship. Reid’s work stands firmly and impressively on its own but will doubtless provide a strong foundation for the second volume, which aims to complete the re-evaluation of James’s Scottish kingship up until 1603.

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