



***James VI, Brittanic Prince:
King of Scots and Elizabeth's Heir,
1566-1603***

By Alexander Courtney

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Reviewed by: Megan Shaw



James VI, Britannic Prince: King of Scots and Elizabeth's Heir, 1566-1603. By Alexander Courtney. Routledge, 2024. ISBN 978-1-138-60626-5. xxii + 296 pp. \$86.99.

It is exactly 400 years since the death of King James VI & I (1566-1625). He became James VI of Scotland in July 1567 and James I as King of England and Ireland in 1603. His reign as King of Scotland is the longest of any Scottish monarch. The quatercentenary of his death proffers an invitation to look more closely at studies of James and undertake new ones. This timely biography by Alexander Courtney preceded a series of academic conferences and a significant exhibition, *The World of King James the VI and I*, opening at the National Galleries of Scotland in April 2025. Forthcoming publications also include a biography by Clare Jackson; a special issue *Reframing King James VI and I in British Art Studies*; and an edited collection *James VI and I: Kingship, Government and Religion* by Alexander Courtney and Michael Questier.

In Courtney's present book his emphasis is on James's dynastic significance as claimant to the English throne and position as prince and king of Scotland. Over forty years have passed since the publication of Jenny Wormald's seminal 1983 article "Two Kings or One?" which outlined the significance of James's reign in Scotland within discussions focused on his English kingship. Despite interest in the political culture of post-reformation Scotland and of its "cradle king" (p. 19), there is still no single volume academic study of James's whole life. Yet, the present book does not seek to fill this gap and is instead the first of a two-volume biography. Courtney's text was completed before the release of Stephen Reid's *The Early Life of James VI: A Long Apprenticeship, 1566-1585* (2023), also the first in a two-volume political biography. While it is unfortunate that the texts are not in direct conversation (although key citations are present), they each provide long-overdue acknowledgement of James's Scottish reign, and Reid is a contributor to Courtney's forthcoming edited collection.

Courtney's key aim is to demonstrate the maturity and skill of James's kingship, raised and honed in Scotland over 25 years and his active role in the politics and diplomacy of the Elizabethan succession. Courtney deftly integrates a narrative of James's political life with analyses of his writings, from letters to published works as well as more neglected manuscripts and visual sources including portraits and coinage that exemplified and performed his style of kingship. Courtney's detailed assessment is grounded in fresh research from over fifteen archives, using underutilized and untapped material from James's oratory, the Treasurer of Scotland's household accounts in the Exchequer, and the newly deciphered letters of Mary Queen of Scots.

The book's chapters move chronologically from James's birth in 1566 as a Scottish prince, coronation in 1567, through to his accession to the English throne in 1603. The first two chapters establish the deeply unsettled religious and political conditions that James was born into, but also revises conclusions about the oppressive childhood and education he received. Courtney's exploration of household accounts is particularly compelling in illustrating the comfort and liveliness of James's upbringing and household family from 1567 to 1579. Furthermore, James's early inclination towards social and cultural politics, especially through hunting, writing and close personal relationships, is made clear. Chapters four and five on universal kingship and the rising of the Catholic earls span 1583 to 1592, during which period James also married Anna of Denmark in 1589. Courtney's acknowledgement of recent scholarly attention on Anna—especially her cultural contributions—is particularly welcome, noting that further research should consider her political significance along with James's more seriously (115). The latter chapters analyse crisis, rebellion and the survival of the Scottish throne, and the defence of free monarchy in the 1590s. In the final chapter, Courtney turns to the story of securing the English throne as heir of Elizabeth I for, in James's words, "God has joynned the right of both the kingdoms in my persoun" (239).

A particular strength of Courtney's book is his flair for narrative and accessible storytelling. Although he acknowledges his style of writing, much like James's self-proclaimed own style as "historicall then logicall, quiche ye maye be as sore wearies in reading as I was in writing," his prose is lively more than it is "wearisome" (x). Courtney's delivery is open and at times entertaining, describing for example James's *Basilikon Doron* as dissimulation repackaged "as a form of spiritual self-help!" (208).

This book is a welcome and timely contribution to Jacobean studies which leads us, better acquainted with the young Britannic Prince, into a growing field of study determined to celebrate the complexities, nuances and competency of James's reign(s) in this anniversary year. It is complemented by recent work by Michael Questier, Malcolm Smuts, Stephen J. Reid, and Sabrina July Garzon, among others. Courtney's book is the most rigorous and detailed narrative of James's Scottish rule to date and makes a significant contribution to Scottish and English history but also the tumult of Europe in this period.

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