



*William III.*

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**Abstract:** Review of Tony Claydon, *William III*, (Routledge, 2024).



**William III.** By Tony Claydon. Routledge, 2024. ISBN 9781032212777. 189 pp. £38.99.



ritten with characteristic elegance, Tony Claydon's biography of William III makes a welcome contribution to our knowledge of a king and stadtholder whose life leaves us with more questions than answers.

It is indeed no small paradox that the figure of William III should loom so large in the history of late seventeenth-century Europe whilst remaining largely unknown outside Britain and the Netherlands. Even in the Netherlands, people will more readily think of William III as referring to the nineteenth-century monarch who reigned between 1849 and 1890 than to the stadtholder-king. The liberal monarchy established in 1815 remains more popular than the Golden Age and, with the notable exception of Northern Ireland, the prince of Orange turned king of England, Ireland, and Scotland in 1689 elicits little passion outside his connection with the Glorious Revolution and the unresolved issue of his sexual orientation.

Tony Claydon is right: writing a biography of William III remains a challenge that only a handful of scholars have been prepared to take up in the past fifty years. Even the great Robert Fruin, long professor of Dutch history at the University of Leiden (1860–1894), stopped short of writing a proper biography of a prince about whom he had extensively written. Speaking of a curse would be going too far, but, as several otherwise eminent scholars have experienced, a kind of magnetic force seems to deflate the best of biographical intentions, leaving William III to his well-kept secrets.

Stephen Baxter's thoroughly researched biography (1966) is over half a century old, carrying forward a Cold War bias that tainted the picture of William's struggle against France as a battle between good and evil. On the Dutch side, Wout Troost wrote a sound narrative of William's life labelled "political biography" (2001 for the English version). Surprisingly enough, however, the rich publication output born out of the tercentenary celebrations of the Glorious Revolution (1989–1990) left a biographical void that called for further work on William himself. Mary was finally drawn out of an ancillary role as co-sovereign, but neither William nor William and Mary, as a couple, became the subjects of the full-fledged biographies they seemed to be calling for. It is difficult to ascertain why, but the contrast with Louis XIV and his wider entourage could not be greater. Whereas, in the past twenty-five years or so, only two biographies of William have been published (including the one under review), Louis XIV has been the subject of over ten biographies

in several languages (French, English and German). And Versailles clearly continues to sell better than Het Loo or Hampton Court.

It is Tony Claydon's argument, in reference to William III, that "we cannot get to the heart of this man" (8). A persisting enigma, in other words, is believed to attract less attention than a Sun King whose bright star lit up the sky of Europe for over half a century. But why so? And how does Claydon write the story of William's life despite the persisting hurdle of an unfathomable personality?

Claydon's work is described by the publisher as "a political biography of William III," a similar label to Troost's work. The book is meant for specialists as well as non-specialists, and it will indeed appeal to more general audiences interested in the history of late Stuart Britain. Claydon is at his best when unpacking particularly complex issues in the field of religion and politics, and there are many of them! Apparently simple explanations require considerable skill and scholarship to avoid lapsing into sweeping generalisations. Claydon sometimes pulls together over three decades of hard work into a couple of pages and this should be readily acknowledged by all readers (126–127, on the conflict between Whigs and Tories, for example). William III lived in a complex and shifting world across several cultures, and Claydon does a very good job of clarifying what can be obscure or confusing to lay readers, if not to specialists.

By nature, biography-writing calls for some choices. Not everything can be said or explained, especially in a collection with an aim at concision. If there is one book on William III regular commuters with an appetite for history should buy before boarding their next train, this is it! Claydon cleverly chooses to centre every chapter around a key date (1650, 1672, 1688, etc., for a total of eight chapters), unwinding the thread of his narrative through a toing-and-froing between contextual reminders and more granular analyses of a significant event in William's life. The specific case of Ireland is for instance handled in chapter 5, on the battle of the Boyne (1690). Chapter 6 takes the siege of Namur (1695) as its starting point to tell a story about William and the Nine Years' War (1689–1698).

Despite William's "notorious disregard of Scottish affairs" (156), Scotland is not forgotten by the author, from the king's Union project to the infamous Glencoe massacre of 1692, and the failed Darien scheme. Claydon is a little weaker when it comes to continental affairs. The Dutch Republic tends to disappear for good from the author's radar at the turn of the 1670s–1680s, but this pro-British bias can be explained by the otherwise understandable choice to devote one chapter to 1688, followed by a different chapter on

1689. Also missing from the picture are the two main Catholic European powers (France and Spain) but, given the format of the book, these gaps are largely compensated by a compelling treatment of other long-forgotten themes such as William's masculinity (41, 107, 112). Claydon convincingly argues that William, despite an all-but-Herculean physique plagued by poor health, "led from the front" (50), navigating people and circumstances with consummated flair. "Battlefield courage" (69) combined with "a profound self-belief" (32, 35) explain how he came to be seen as an unflinching Protestant hero. As always, the life of a great man (or woman) rests on an uneasy balance between force of destiny and force of the will. William was no exception.

To sum up, Claydon's book is far more than a political biography, venturing into broader territories than the constitutional stadtholder-king that long held pride of place in the literature. But much remains to be done on William III. The foundation years of his life especially call for further investigation. The life of William III can also be written from the peripheries. The principality of Orange, to which he owed his sole title of sovereignty prior to 1689, was one of them, if not the most important one. Louis XIV knew exactly how and where to hurt William: by repeatedly denying him the right to style himself king of England in lieu of James II after 1689, of course, but also to remain the ruler of the principality of Orange. The latter deserves more than an incidental reference (76).

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